Chapter 2
My (School) Life Is Expendable: Radicalizing the Discourse Against the Miseries of the School System

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Abstract The purpose of this chapter is to promote open reflection and discussion on inclusive education as a matter, among other considerations, of and for social justice. To support this task, we draw on the mass of theoretical, experiential and practical knowledge that has accumulated on this topic, at an almost exponential rate, since the 1990s, and that has enabled for significant progress. But certain questions have also been raised that need to be considered if we are to avoid repeating errors of the past and to rethink future steps as well as we can. In this context, this chapter does not intend to assemble the available knowledge, which is extremely difficult given that the development of a more inclusive education involves all the elements of an education system. Rather, its aim is to generate a debate around some aspects that are emerging as significant, particularly those related to the opportunity, or not, to converge with perspectives and proposals such as those of education for social justice, equality and global citizenship. Its purpose is to highlight the way in which systems of oppression intersect and constitute each other, as well as ways to confront them through education in order to build fairer societies. Perspectives and paths that undoubtedly share common denominators that should enable important synergies for the much-needed and urgent transformation of education, but also differential aspects that, from their unique nature should nonetheless contribute to the recognition of the equal dignity and rights of all learners, without exclusions, to an education of quality.

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Introduction

In March 2020, *The New York Times* published an article in which Elliot Kukla reflected on the measures that some countries such as Italy had taken following the strong initial outbreak of COVID-19 and the resulting oversaturation of health systems. These measures consisted in not saving the lives of people considered disabled, chronically ill or elderly with COVID-19, sending to the world the message that there are lives that are worth less or are more expendable. The text showed something that, while it may seem grotesque, exaggerated or tremendously stark, reveals a part of our reality and our relationships: yes, there are lives that we have shamelessly called "invalid" (not valid), and that in moments of collective fear such as that generated by the pandemic suffered the most terrible consequences. In Spain, the Bioethics Working Group of the Spanish Society of Intensive and Critical Care Medicine and Coronary Units prioritized ICU admission according to "disability-free survival" (Rubio et al., 2020). It was something simple: in the case of choosing between one life and another, those of us who hold power even decide which lives are worth more or less, thus restricting humanity and human rights (United Nations, 1948).

Undoubtedly, the pandemic also brought out the most positive part of humanity when, faced with the crisis, multiple support strategies were organized and many people did everything possible to help their fellow citizens; but at the same time, it uncovered and accentuated inequalities and injustices not only related to health but also to education systems and schools (Cabrera, 2020; COTEC, 2020). Once more, the influence of the socio-economic and cultural capital of families emerged as a factor that reduces learning opportunities (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Bonal & González, 2021), a reality that has been established for many years in education systems and schools (Fernández-Enguita, 2017; Jacovkis & Tarabini, 2021; Tarabini, 2020).

In *schools* (using the word *school* in its broad sense) there are also lives that are more expendable than others. A *Save the Children* report, based on official sources from PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and the Spanish Ministry of Education, provides a profile of them: low-income, immigrant, Roma, disabled students (Sastre & Escorial, 2016). An obvious way of seeing this expendability of certain students is school segregation, either for economic/residential reasons or racial reasons (Murillo & Martínez-Garrido, 2020; Waitoller, 2020a), or for health/disability reasons, as is the case of students enrolled in Special Education Schools and in specific classrooms, all of which is against the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006). This segregation also occurs frequently through the habitual practices of many schools, which separate students into classrooms or itineraries based on national origin, ethnicity,

socioeconomic status and/or capacity. This is denounced in the "Alliance for an inclusive education and against school segregation",[1] which shows how schools continue to maintain certain categorizations that sustain social inequalities.

It could be said that the above shows some of the many faces of *educational exclusion* that, as we well know, is the dark pole of a dialectic whose luminous pole is inclusion. Thus, this chapter aims to analyse and denounce exclusion and some of its drivers, while at the same time seeking to invite deep reflection and debate in order to try to move towards an education that is more inclusive and fairer.

> Perhaps the politically correct discourse – but so far not very effective in our practices – of inclusion, should give way to the discourse of exclusion as a tool for change. […] In this way, the meanings and implications behind some educational practices classified as inclusive but that only perpetuate the status quo of the system and open new doors to marginalization could be analysed … (Parrilla, 2007, p. 15)

We fully agree with the words of Professor Angeles Parilla, and therefore in the following pages we will focus on evidence from different boys and girls that have experienced the pain of being excluded in their schools. This evidence comes mainly from an ongoing investigation,[2] led by one of the authors, and places in context and illustrates well some of the ideas that we will be presenting, which are the result of many years of research committed to reversing these exclusions. Since inclusion and exclusion are dialectic processes, interventions to improve inclusion will be so to the extent that exclusionary pressures are reduced and vice versa; that is, educational exclusion will increase to the same extent as the supposedly inclusive cultures, policies and practices (Echeita, 2016; Escudero et al., 2009; Osler, 2006) and the opportunities for redistribution, recognition and representation (Waitoller, 2020b) that guarantee a fair education diminish or become "weak". Further, and before deploying our arguments, it is worth remembering that the development of a more inclusive education is an undertaking that encompasses **every student**, without euphemisms or restrictions regarding the use of "every". Simply stated, as the UNESCO does in its latest report GEM (UNESCO, 2020a), "everyone means everyone".

The Many Faces of Discrimination and Exclusion in Schools

As we mentioned, in this section we would like to present some brief extracts that gather different faces of exclusion, discrimination and oppression, with the aim, primarily, of denouncing situations that those involved experience on a daily basis and that, therefore, shape their lives. Apart from the exclusion and oppression that

[1] https://www.savethechildren.es/sites/default/files/2020-06/AlianzaSegregacion.pdf

[2] Emerging Narratives about Inclusive Schools Based on the Social Model of Disability: Resistance, Resilience and Social Change (RTI2018-099218-A-I00), funded by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities. All the cases addressed will come from this investigation, as long as no other source is cited.

the different systems exert on millions of out-of-school children, there are also exclusionary and harmful dynamics and practices produced in many schools and parts of the education systems that children have to face daily (Francis & Mills, 2012). We therefore wish to denounce some of these situations in order to make them visible and give them names out of respect and support for those who suffer them most and to emphasize that no life should be considered less valuable.

Being together, feeling and being part of a group of equals that appreciates, sees and cares for you, and *learning something new and that you are valued every day* are the three key areas we need to focus our efforts and knowledge on, providing *the support* required to make this possible. But experience tells us, regrettably, that our education system is not inclusive,[3] because there are many children, adolescents and adults who are enrolled in "segregated" classrooms or schools, either for economic, social or personal reasons (health/disability status, ethnicity), some even having to leave their homes and move in order to exercise their right to education. And there are many others who live situations of marginalization and contempt daily, and also the most severe and hurtful mistreatment or abuse, and not always at the hands of their peers but also, sadly, on occasions, by the very teachers that should take care of their self-esteem and personal well-being. We also know that, in Spain for example, almost 25% of students that attended compulsory education "end it badly", without having obtained the corresponding diploma, and that even almost 20% of those that obtain the diploma give up their "desire to study", probably due, to a large degree, to the negative impact that a schooling that lacks this complex quality we call "inclusive education" has had on them (FESE, 2021).

There are numerous and diverse stories that could be collected here, but to capture the multiple faces of exclusion we will focus only on a few situations of injustice (Fraser, 2009), oppression (Young, 2000) and exclusion that the people selected here personally experienced.

Lucía's Story

One story is about Lucía's younger brother, Marcos. Lucía was about to finish primary education in a state school. In a public conversation within the framework of the aforementioned research project developed online during the COVID-19 lockdown (Calderón-Almendros & Rascón-Gómez, 2020), the following dialogue occurred:

> Marcos: [My school] for me is good, but for my sister not so much, […] because she feels alone in the playground. She's alone. Always.

[3] This statement is applicable to many other education systems in the world, as can be seen in multiple publications (e.g. Calderón et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020a, b). The Spanish education system that we analyse in this chapter can serve as a mirror for other countries, because if it violates human rights, "How many of the countries that ratified the Convention are systematically engaging in serious human rights violations in schools?" (Calderón-Almendros, 2018, p. 1670).

Researcher: And how could that be fixed, Marcos? What comes to mind?
Marcos: Talking to her classmates. […] That they hang out with her.
Researcher: And why do you think that they don't hang out with her?
Marcos: Because she has autism. […]
Researcher: And before you said that the school was good for you. Why is it good for you?
Marcos: Because they give me things to do [tasks], I am with my friends, they hang out with me… (Marcos, primary school student)

Just the beginning of this very brief conversation illustrates the inequality that is generated and crystallized in many of our schools: they are good for some people and not for others. That is, they have philias and phobias. There are legitimate students and those that are there but shouldn't be. There are students that are always under suspicion, the subject of multiple evaluations and always under the sword of Damocles of a change in the modality of schooling (Echeita & Calderón, 2014; Simón et al., 2021). The warning is clear: those who do not submit to the rules of *normality* in the institution – its rhythms, its standardized material, its forms of competitive relationships, its forms of homogenous expression, and so forth – are segregated, marginalized or expelled. And this is done by using the fear, anxiety and impotence of the families, who are at a disadvantage in the face of the power of the school trying to defend their vulnerable child. Marco's distressing complaint about his own school shows what parents have to fear, and he describes it masterfully: it is a matter of presence ("I'm with my friends"), participation ("they hang out with me") and learning ("they give me things to do"). The school's inaction with respect to his sister Lucía makes her situation seem 'natural', but it is clearly not.

Can you imagine being Marcos and Lucía or their mother or father? Does this injustice not sicken you when it also happens in a country that has endorsed the *right* of all children with disabilities to an inclusive education? Should we resign ourselves to "luck" in a situation like this, or to the fact that nothing can be done or changed? What arguments and beliefs do education professionals that intervene in this situation hold? Why does a child see it and not education professionals? Why are there more and more children who cannot even be enrolled in the schools of their siblings and neighbours, even in the pre-compulsory stage? These are urgent questions that await urgent answers and an unequivocal, non-rhetorical commitment to inclusive education.

The Second Story Is that of Ismael

[…] [W]here I live […] [e]veryone […] is smarter than average. […] It's not that they're smarter as in more intelligent, but they're more street-wise, more in touch with the street. Street-smart, not education-smart; no lawyer or teacher or anything's gonna come out of that place … Only thugs come out of that place. (Ismael, secondary school student)[4]

[4]The story of Ismael and that of other friends is discussed at length in Calderón-Almendros (2011, 2015).

Ismael made this description of his neighbourhood from the reformatory where he was being held for drug trafficking. Like many of his friends, he had already dropped out of school. In his case, the failure was not attributable to an alleged lack of ability. Ismael and his friends possess the supposedly "adequate" characteristics to be good students, but they live in poverty and are of Romani ethnicity.

His deep analysis of his neighbourhood in so few words, provides us with some fundamental clues. Without any specialist having to explain it to him, Ismael understands that school intelligence is not what is required in his neighbourhood, that their cultures are completely separated, and that there is a crushing expectation on him and his neighbours that has led him right to the place where he was while telling it. School culture is a culture biased by social class and also ethnicity, which prevents challenging the destinies that these boys and girls have lived since childhood. For this to happen, we need to speak frankly: education systems continue to maintain class differences and exclude ethnic minorities (Sastre & Escorial, 2016), which is why they are constructed in a classist and racist way. Growing up assuming subordination and contempt for their own intelligence, something which also occurs in cases like Lucía's, involves irreparable damage to identity construction in people and groups. Schools should be places that support them and dismantle the tendentious constructions of a world that sustains enormous inequalities.

Childhood and Adolescence Oppressed

What has been explained so far does not occur in a vacuum, but in a situation that places childhood and adolescence in general in a complex situation. Maria Montessori, in her normocentric Pedagogical Anthropology, denounced a century ago that children had been hidden and overshadowed by the unconscious egoism of adults. Malaguzzi, for his part, argued that 99 of the 100 languages of children are stolen from them. Today, childhood and adolescence understood as a social group are still oppressed – something evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic – and subject to profound injustices as a consequence of the habitual processes of daily life in which presuppositions and cultural stereotypes, reactions with or without intention, structural aspects of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms come into play (Young, 2000).

Young groups together in five categories the facts and conditions that some radical social movements attribute to the term oppression to describe the injustices experienced: *exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism* and *violence*. All this encompasses, in our opinion, what many children and adolescents experience as oppressed social groups in education. As Young (2000) explains, power relations and inequality are determined to some degree by who does what, for whom and how work is rewarded. With regards to this, we are concerned about the situation of *exploitation* that some children and adolescents experience in schools when we find stories, stated in the aforementioned research project, such as that of Malena, a student in the fourth year of compulsory secondary education: "We also

have lives" (referring to the huge amount of homework they receive from teachers, which makes it impossible to "live" beyond the school demands); something that Jorge, in the third year of compulsory secondary education, qualified: "Our parents also have a life". Jorge's nuance shows the double discipline exercised by the school (on students and families) over the domain of normality as an organizer of school reality: the demand on the family increases as the student requires more support. Hence, many mothers (the vast majority) of students with disabilities end up abandoning their jobs and, in general, their "lives" in order to cope with the inequalities their children face. The students, of course, somatize all this demand. The WHO always places Spain in the top four of 42 countries with respect to the pressure students feel regarding schoolwork (Inchley et al., 2016). This feeling of *exploitation* is accentuated when students feel alienated, not finding meaning in the activity they carry out:

> You don't learn it for yourself. The knowledge you acquire at that moment is for you, but it's not really for you, it's for the exam. Because after taking the exam, a few days later I don't remember it. (Carmen, secondary school student)[5]

What is the significance of learning that is neither sought nor desired, but imposed and accepted? What vital learning is developed by subjecting the will for years to the 'economic' value of a qualification? What emotional implication does a mark or better country scores in the PISA reports have for students? What has happened to the idea of Giner de los Ríos, who said that the goal of teaching is education, and not mere instruction? This feeling of *exploitation*, on top of so many other factors, such as emotional ones or messages that "blame" students (Calderón-Almendros, 2011; Cuomo & Imola, 2008; Escudero et al., 2009; Osler, 2006), can lead to disengagement from school that, as we mentioned, open the doors to dropping out (Tarabini, 2020) and can transform many children and adolescents into a group excluded from learning and the motivation to learn. An abandonment and exclusion that also has a direct impact on adult life (Soler et al., 2021).

We began this chapter talking about *expendability*, and there are even groups whose lives run a greater risk of being eliminated: see the number of murders of women, and also the recent crimes committed in Spain allegedly for being homosexual and having disabilities. This last case is preceded by the scandalous increase of 69.2% in hate crimes against people with disabilities in Spain in 2020, and of 57.1% against Romani people (MIE, 2021).[6] There are many factors behind this reality, and we do not want to draw broad conclusions. But it is evident that a good part of socialization takes place at school, and there one learns to value or reject differences, and also to take a critical position vis-à-vis reality. Of course, many

[5] Carmen and Malena are part of the group "Students for Inclusion", that has been developing a challenging project that generates a new line: changes can be brought about by students, those who "bridge" power and emphasize the improvement of the lives of all students directly. Its first contribution is the guide "How to make your school inclusive", published in 2021 by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (VT).

[6] Beyond our borders, hate speech has uninhibitedly entered the international political landscape.

schools do an excellent job in promoting democratic citizens that a society that values diversity needs; but it is also true that in our education system the right to an inclusive education is still seriously and systematically violated (CRPD, 2018).

The obsession with international performance indicators, the segregation of our schools, the overload of work that students are not interested in and perceive as useless for their lives, the competitiveness that it entails and the school inequalities that all of this sustains, which illustrate well the student opinions quoted above, are not exactly a solution to the social problems we have, but rather a serious added problem in institutions entrusted with educating the new generations. Can we dispense with all these lives? We urgently need to understand the centrality of *school change* and the processes that facilitate, or hinder, it, so that inclusive education is not just a beautiful discourse but also a constructible and achievable reality.

Radicalizing a Discourse Against the Miseries of the School System

At this point, more questions arise: How is it possible that, with the numerous declarations, treaties, state and regional laws, guidelines, international objectives and a large body of research that show the benefits of inclusion, we continue to find so many different situations of injustice, exclusion and oppression? Why are these agreements, treaties and laws infringed?

The answers to these questions are undoubtedly multidimensional, due to the elasticity of the concept of exclusion (Escudero et al., 2009), the different ways of defining social justice (Francis et al., 2017), and the complex network of education systems and schools that, because they are different, would give us disparate answers. Even so, we would like to continue analysing some transversal elements that have been identified as drivers of exclusion and that might provide answers to these questions. Our purpose is not to discuss all of them or analyse them fully, but rather to suggest some debates around them. To do this, we will look at some of the ways in which systems of oppression intersect with each other at different levels, generating situations of discrimination and exclusion like the ones we have discussed.

Probably, at the base of the drivers and reasons why so many and such diverse situations of injustice, exclusion and oppression are still experienced, we would find the ideas that have historically existed around the functions of schools; given that, since the creation of modern education systems and industrial capitalist societies, one of the functions attributed to education systems has been selection (Tarabini, 2020). In fact, for example in Spain, while trying to hide its background under a more politically correct name, such as “Evaluación de Bachillerato para el Acceso a la Universidad” (University entrance exam), this is more popularly known as “Selectividad” (Selectivity). And this selective function of schools begins in the pre-compulsory stages, establishing a direct link between schools and the market, as

well as with the processes of exclusion of all those who, for different reasons, have been deprived of the opportunity of becoming an integral part of the social and educational system. This fact is fundamental because it is from social exclusion that capacities, well-being and freedom [that Amartya Sen (2000) discusses from his approach] are skewed.

The selection processes that schools develop, based on different policies and practices, are marked by a very limited conception of diversity and also by a strong presence of the concept of *normality* (opening the doors to the logic of *homogeneity* even in a broader sense than that proposed by Brown et al., 1987). This allows schools to determine which students should continue and which students are to become lost in the complex networks of the system; always under the hegemonic discourse that they will be better cared for or that the system can give them more opportunities in segregated environments since they are able to reach the same level as the rest (Muntaner, 2010). This allows the blame to be placed on the boy or girl, or their family, personalizing the problem/failure in them and not the system. Thus, a social problem (inequality) becomes an individual one (the qualification). But who is really responsible?

The analysis of Waitoller (2020b) introduces the concept of *selective inclusion*, stating that while situations of inclusion have improved with the increase in schooling rates in some countries, the inequities and exclusions have become more pronounced once within the system due to multiple forms of inequality and discrimination that favour the selection of those differences that cannot be adapted to the normative practices. Thus, we could also speak of *selective normality*, understanding that it is this construct of normality that enables us to legitimize and develop the processes of selection, exclusion, lack of recognition (Fraser, 2009) and cultural imperialism (Young, 2000) that those on the margins of this normality are subjected to. Neoliberalism, as a cultural project, gives a clear meaning to the concept of normality, understanding that people are (or are not) judged and normalized based on their ability to be part of the neoliberal ideal (Waitoller, 2020a) and their contribution to the economy. This is even more pronounced with people who are part of excluded groups, such as people with disabilities (Apple, 2010), or African Americans and Latinos (Waitoller et al., 2019). As Waitoller et al. (2019) highlight, neoliberalism is both a racist and ableist project. It seems, therefore, that the capitalization of education in favour of a free-market ideology has more weight than guaranteeing a fundamental right. In such a case, there is a risk of moving

> from education as a right to education as a commodity; from subjects with rights to informed consumers who invest in their future or in that of their children; from equal opportunities and democracy to competition and economic development; from the needs of a democratic society to the needs of the labour market; from the full development of the personality and participation in society to the production of flexible, qualified workers adapted to the needs of the market. (Lema, 2010, p. 38)

It is this market logic that is making us think that some school lives are less valuable or even expendable. Are we going to let this continue to happen?

The evolution of the system faces tradition and market forces. For example, Tomlinson (2012) denounces that an entire industry of Special Education Needs

(SEN) has been built, accepted by governments, that expands with the increase in demand for categorization by the families themselves to obtain resources that guarantee adequate care for their children. Tomlinson shows the increase in requests from middle-class families, who historically avoided categorizing their children. Thus, the virtue of segregated education versus inclusive education and the interests of the market versus international scientific evidence is installed within the shared ideals.

Faced with these enormous forces, the struggle to build an inclusive education system is present in official discourse and international agendas, but these do not end up being incorporated in schools, which continue to consolidate exclusive educational practices, as we have seen in this chapter. It is logical to think that the strategy employed contains errors, and that the strength of the status quo and the established powers are greater than many of us would have liked.

Even UNESCO, in its defence of inclusive education, uses justifications that are based on the logic to which it attempts to respond. It talks of the educational justification, since it develops ways of teaching that are beneficial to all children; the social justification, because it lays the foundations of a just and non-discriminatory society; and the economic justification, as it is less expensive than maintaining segregated systems (UNESCO, 2020b). Without questioning the veracity of this last point and understanding that it is responding to the fallacies that these other self-interested discourses – the SEN industry – make of this question, the systems do not need this justification to carry out a transformation that is a moral (and legal) imperative since it involves fundamental human rights. Nor should the evidence on the effectiveness of inclusive education in producing academic learning (Hehir et al., 2016) and emotional learning and social construction (EADSNE, 2018) be necessary.

Drawing on several authors, Mills (2018) brings together some important reflections regarding assumptions on the nature of a "good society". These assumptions underpin political frameworks, educational practices at every level, and also the way in which teachers and students view and construct themselves. They are assumptions that prevail despite what scientific evidence dictates, and that do not problematize aspects of capitalism, such as meritocracy or the fact of being "governed by numbers", but that, as Mills (2018) himself and Barton (2003) point out, do question social justice.

Given that not all students start in the same conditions, until when will we allow meritocracy to be the catapult towards exclusion in our schools? Will we let ourselves be governed by numbers? Numbers that not only mean injustice and exclusion, but also turn schools into harmful places (Francis & Mills, 2012). The concern for improving scores in academic tests and meeting international standards makes us forget the strengths of inclusive practices in schools, namely, the academic, social and personal growth of students (Pujolàs, 2008; Soldevila et al., 2017) and to adopt a firm commitment to inclusive values (Booth, 2011) which enable us to curb situations of oppression, overcome exclusion and promote social justice.

Again, these arguments are important to counteract all the fallacies that underpin the discourses that defend segregation. However, we should not remain ensconced

in them in order not to place the focus on productivity and obsession with efficiency that are so far removed from authentic, transformative and emancipatory educational processes (Freire, 1972). Further justifications should not be necessary. The absence of an equitable and inclusive context is an impediment to the harmonious and optimal development of people, and it prevents the necessary transformation of a social context that still today discriminates, painfully oppresses and flagrantly excludes. Placing the debate where the market wants it – in meritocracy, the ascension of the culture of striving and the fight for productivity under the false doctrine of "if you want, you can" – will never move us beyond the *status quo*. We need to generate spaces for discussion and renewal of policies and practices, from the Global Inclusive Education perspective, which need to receive input from those who have been excluded and are victims of everything we have denounced in this chapter. We need large-scale participatory processes, but also in each school and each classroom. Teachers can and should rebel against this bulldozer that ruthlessly crushes differences, and that has a prominent place in schools. We cannot wait any longer, and change has to gain momentum in those of us who know that this cannot continue like this: teachers and families who stand alongside students to transform reality. And that will not occur – more than a quarter of a century has passed since the Salamanca Statement! – with the politically correct discourse of "weak" inclusive education. All the children in our schools, who live in a world that is hostile to their own differences, cannot wait any longer. And what they have been waiting for is our unequivocal, awkward and emotionally exposed position to transcend politically correct discourses with actions against injustice, promoting a deep transformation of our education systems: their functions, what they consider legitimate and, finally, a broadening of the pedagogical imagination, which recognizes the political nature of education and our non-delegable role in history.

> Enemy of social inequality, I did not limit myself to lamenting its effects but wanted to combat its causes, certain that this way will positively lead to justice, that is, that desired equality that inspires all revolutionary quest. (Ferrer Guardia, 1978, p. 26)

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