

Chapter 6

Strategies for Improving Educational Practices in an Inclusive Direction: Collaborative Consultation and Participatory Research



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Abstract This chapter presents and discusses two converging strategies for constructing and improving educational practices in an inclusive direction: collaborative consultation for the improvement of teaching practices and participatory research. Both strategies are characterised by a collaborative approach and by understanding inclusion not only as an objective for the improvement of educational practices but also as the necessary issue of the improvement process itself. The conceptual references of both strategies are presented, and the basic criteria that govern the improvement processes in both cases are discussed and exemplified, as well as the main phases in which these processes are situated. The complementarity of both strategies is highlighted and pending issues and proposals to advance the design and development of improvement processes from that complementarity are discussed.

Keywords Collaborative consultation · Participatory research · Inclusion · Spain · Schools

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Introduction

The chapter presents and discusses two convergent strategies for the improvement and construction of educational practices in an inclusive direction: collaborative consultation for the improvement of teaching practices, and participatory inclusive research. Both strategies are characterized by a collaborative approach and by understanding inclusion not only as an objective for the improvement of educational practices but also the necessary core of the improvement process itself. To begin, we shall present each of these strategies, situating them contextually, listing some theoretical references, and outlining the basic criteria that govern the processes of improvement in each case. After this presentation, we shall assemble, in the manner of “lessons learned”, some basic principles from the use of both strategies which support the processes of change of educational practices and some key issues relevant to putting these processes into practice, which we believe will allow us to make greater progress towards inclusive teaching practices and inclusive educational institutions from a collaborative and participatory standpoint. We shall conclude by presenting some questions that remain to be addressed to continue the development of these processes of change and improvement.

A Collaborative Strategy for the Change and Improvement of Inclusive Practices

Since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a regulatory development in Spain that substantially affects the framework in which psycho-pedagogical intervention processes are carried out. An “educational-constructive model” of intervention (Martín & Solé, 1990) has been established to provide a conceptual framework. The model states that the basic purpose of the psycho-pedagogical intervention is to support the improvement of teaching practices in ordinary schools and classrooms in an inclusive direction.

This model was conceptually elaborated in some depth during the 1990s and 2000s (Solé & Martín, 2011). However, the reflection and formalization of specific consultation strategies according to the model has not been developed in the same detail. In this context, the Collaborative Strategy to support the Improvement of educational Practice in an inclusive direction (CSIP),¹ which we present in this section, has been developed, over the past two decades, as a tool for structuring processes of psycho-pedagogical consultation so that they can effectively support the change and the improvement of teaching practices in an inclusive direction. Its development has been based on systematic analysis and reflection on the practices of intervention professionals, through the constant interplay between practice,

¹In Spanish, “Estrategia Colaborativa para la Mejora de las Prácticas docentes en una dirección inclusiva” (ECMP).

academic knowledge and research on education and educational psychology. In its current formulation, as presented in this chapter, CSIP is configured as a general strategy to support the processes of change and improvement of teaching practices in an inclusive direction. So, in line with the Global Inclusive Education (GIE) perspective, CSIP is purposely addressed to attain interrelationship and coherence between, on the one hand, innovation and improvement of teaching practices and, on the other hand, development of more inclusive practices, policies and cultures at the school level.

Conceptually, CSIP is based on a socio-cultural perspective on teaching and learning processes. From this framework, and in line with GIE, it adopts a systemic view of educational institutions, and a decidedly social and cultural (versus technical), and therefore complex, conception of change and improvement in teaching practices and educational institutions. The development of more inclusive practices is, for CSIP, both the fundamental objective of the improvement processes and the axis around which those processes develop. It is understood that inclusion must be developed in an inclusive way itself, incorporating the different voices of teachers and the educational community, considering and respecting the diversity of teachers and schools, and anchoring change in the context of the existing practices of teachers and schools. Therefore, for CSIP, it is essential that the processes of change and improvement are supported by the creation and development of a genuinely collaborative relationship between the participants, that is, between the teachers (and the rest of the educational community) and those who support or coordinate the changes.

These benchmarks serve as a framework for some of the core principles that underlie the proposals and practices of CSIP: linking the processes of educational innovation and the processes of inclusion; making classrooms the core domain of improvement, and institutional change in schools as the necessary systemic context; ensuring that the character of the improvement processes is approachable and sustainable; making certain that improvement processes are processes of peer learning; ensuring that support for improvement acts to help build the collaboration between the participants; and addressing the necessity for a strategy of collaborative support to guide the processes of improvement.

From these points of reference and principles, CSIP has been elaborated and re-elaborated based on development, analysis and reflection on processes of support for the change and improvement of practices carried out in different contexts and with different participants. For example, CSIP has been used as a benchmark for a programme to incorporate cooperative learning practices into schools as a tool for cohesion, inclusion and equity (Lago & Naranjo, 2015). This programme has led to the development of a network of schools, the Khelidon network (<http://khelidon.org/es>), which comprises more than 50 primary and secondary schools. CSIP has also been used as a framework for the professional development of consultants and psycho-pedagogical consultation teams, who have been trained by implementing processes of change and improvement in different schools within diverse contexts, with differing subject contents and in the different stages of education. Likewise, it has been used as a strategy to help psycho-pedagogical consultation teams to build

a more consensual model of collaborative consultation for centres for inclusion (Lago & Onrubia, 2017).

From all this, CSIP has been establishing a set of proposals and criteria, which aim to be consistent and coordinated, both regarding the “what” and the “how” of the processes of change and improvement of teaching practices in an inclusive direction (Lago & Onrubia, 2008, 2011a, b). This set of proposals and criteria has been inspired by proposals such as those of Ainscow et al. (2001), Booth and Ainscow (2002), Campbell et al. (2021), Fullan (1991), Resnick et al. (2010), Schön (1983, 1987) and Timperley et al. (2014), among others.

As regards the “what” of these processes, CSIP points out the need to agree and define very clearly the “practices to be improved” that are aimed to be developed, that is, the changes that teachers are going to introduce in their practices and the way in which these changes are to be introduced across the whole of their teaching activities, and at the same time remodel and redefine these activities. It stresses, in this regard, that these changes must be negotiated and agreed on the basis of the needs and difficulties experienced by teachers in their practice, set out in a clear and limited manner, and must serve inclusive and conceptually grounded educational objectives, principles and values.

In terms of the “how”, CSIP raises the need to consider at least four planes, or dimensions, in the design, development, and analysis of the processes of change and improvement of practices in an inclusive direction: (i) the stages of these processes, (ii) the phases of each stage, (iii) the tasks that constitute phases, and (iv) the discursive resources that are used in the service of those tasks.

As for the first of these, according to CSIP the improvement processes are processes which take place over time, and which require various stages. From experience, CSIP identifies four main stages. The first is the improvement promotion stage, which is aimed at identifying the common difficulties and challenges of teachers and agreeing on a collaborative approach to these difficulties and challenges around specific “practices to be improved”. The second is the introduction stage, in which a few teachers implement some initial changes in their classroom practice; these changes are jointly constructed and agreed upon and are also jointly assessed in terms of their impact on student learning. The third is the generalization stage, in which these teachers extend the changes and improvements in their classroom practice, while supporting other teachers to extend the improvements to other class groups, to different parts of the curriculum and across different educational levels. In the fourth stage, that of consolidation, the aim is to sustain and systematize the improvements across the whole school, and to create a model of peer training and of permanent and autonomous improvement by the teaching staff and the school around the agreed “practices to be improved”.

Although each stage has specific peculiarities, the experience of CSIP suggests there is an advantage to organizing the development of each of one into five main phases, of which the three central ones are usually repeated cyclically. The first phase refers to the analysis and negotiation between the participants of the “practices to be improved” and the process of working together for improvement. The second phase focuses on the collection and joint analysis of present teaching

practices carried out by teachers, connecting them with theoretical elements and practical experiences regarding the practices to be improved. The third phase focuses on the collaborative and detailed design of the improvements to be incorporated. The fourth phase involves monitoring, assistance and collaboration in the process of putting into practice the improvements. The fifth phase is oriented to the collaborative evaluation of the improvement process and of the changes in practices and their impact on student learning, as well as joint decision-making regarding continuity.

In CSIP, each of the phases is defined as a coordinated sequence of tasks carried out by the various participants. These tasks combine individual periods and action, and periods of dialogue and joint action. At the heart of these tasks is a certain cycle of reflection and collaborative inquiry on the part of the teachers into their own practices, which involves the gathering of information and description of the practice, its interpretation and reflective analysis, and the elaboration of viable proposals for change and improvement.

Finally, and in accordance with its sociocultural foundation, CSIP highlights the importance of considering, as a fourth level of the analysis and design of these processes, the use and promotion of certain discursive resources or modes of using language among participants. These resources and ways of using language are essential for tasks to be properly developed in collaborative terms. At the same time, these resources allow the progressive development of “teacher collaborative discourse” (Lefstein et al., 2020), which can promote the learning and professional development of participants.

Participatory and Inclusive Research with the Goal of Improvement

The origin and context of the participatory and inclusive research that we propose here has been built up gradually. Several research projects funded by the Spanish National Research Plan,² as well as the work developed in the National Research Network CIES, from 2008 to the present, form an essential reference when explaining the type of understanding and assuming research by the CIES-UVigo group. In these projects the need to promote an alternative view on the approach to educational inclusion and the way to investigate it became evident. At a time when research was mostly involved in so-called studies on inclusion, we seriously wondered and questioned whether inclusion had simply become an object of study

²Parrilla, A. and Susinos, T. (Dirs.) (2005). The construction of the process of social exclusion in young women: origin, forms, consequences and training implications. Research Report (Project R & D funded by the Women’s Institute). http://www.mtas.es/mujer/mujeres/estud_inves/666.pdf; Parrilla, A and Susinos, T. (Dirs.) The construction of the process of exclusion among young people: a guide for the detection and evaluation of exclusive processes (Cantabria y Sevilla) (Project R&D 2004–2007 by the Ministry of Education and Science).

(exploring its characteristics; its participants, its scope and its limitations) and, if not, whether we should move towards a more dynamic, process-based and participatory way of approaching it, taking it from being considered an object of study to subject to be studied.

The most common research carried out at the time was not enough to reverse the existing exclusionary educational trends and, above all, was not enough to explore and search for new modes of thought and action that could contribute to inclusion and the improvement of educational processes using research. The awareness of this situation provoked a process of self-reflection and questioning in the CIES-UVigo research team and instigated the search for new methods of research and action which would be more effective at reducing inequality and exclusion in schools and society.

At that time, we published a paper in which we wondered if research on inclusion was genuinely inclusive (Parrilla, 2009), and we also drew from the CIES Network some of the lines of investigation that would serve as to guide us on the path we proposed (Parrilla, 2013). This change led us to move towards an increasingly participatory research model, which broadened its focus of analysis moving towards a socio-educational and community approach. All this involved a reconceptualisation of inclusion and the way to approach it, so that we focussed on it in a more determined way, acting with the environment, rather than with individuals, and in synergy with diverse local participants. This reconceptualization is fully aligned with the systemic, in-built and ethical view of GIE. These approaches originated with four key areas that we reflected on regarding the research we were developing, and which can be considered the foundations of the approach we adopted.

From the beginning we were faced with the need to take a strong stand on exclusion. Although time has led to a greater awareness of educational exclusion and its negative effects on individuals, communities and educational systems, often in the studies and interactions that we developed, barriers emerged, sometimes clear and sometimes implicit, that tried to limit and reduce possibilities of inclusion and even the groups who might be susceptible to it. In this way, exclusion actually became naturalised through studies on inclusion. This therefore led to the need to adopt a more critical attitude towards research, assuming that the fight against exclusion must be the most important principle of any inclusive research project. In this sense we assume that inclusion is neither negotiable nor admissible, that everyone has the right to inclusion and that absolutely nothing legitimises exclusion. Research, as Barton pointed out in 2011, has a duty to expose exclusion, and must also commit itself to identifying the structural and cultural elements that maintain and perpetuate exclusion (Slee, 2010).

Secondly, we were concerned about the representation and participation of the different people involved in the processes of educational inclusion and exclusion and pondered how to incorporate this into our research. We were clear about the inadequacy of the dominant model that left the design and development of research in the hands of professionals, ignoring the voices, needs and priorities of groups in situations of heightened vulnerability and others who, while in a better situation, were also not consulted. We then asked ourselves how we could transform research

into a legitimate platform for listening to and amplifying the voices of those excluded by existing cultures and practices in schools, from the marginalized or surplus populations written about by Bauman (2016). This led us to start a process of incorporating the voices of those involved in the studies we were developing and the research tools that helped us to see and call out everyday examples of exclusion (those that end up being seen as unimportant or insubstantial) and to understand them from the experience of their protagonists. Continuing in this direction, we carried out intensive work that involved the incorporation of the conceptual lens from studies on disability (Barton & Oliver, 1997; Goodley, 2014, 2016) in our research, and the use of biographical and narrative methodology (Bolívar et al., 2001) to position ourselves and to understand personally the situation of women and young people in situations of vulnerability or risk of exclusion (Susinos & Parrilla, 2008). Other examples of work in which the voices of the protagonists of the processes of exclusion were featured are those developed in the project “Schools moving towards educational inclusion: working with the local community, student voices and educational support to promote change” (Parrilla et al., 2012) or, more recently, the launch of a Human Library to expose, share and speak about the barriers faced by young people with visual impairment (Sierra et al., 2019).

Thirdly, other questions and interests that were becoming a key priority were those connected with our awareness of and concern about the difficulty of research having an impact that could promote change. This led us to revisit and link approaches to research and processes of change and improvement. There is no doubt that resistance to change is greater when it is designed and imposed externally, distant from the context in which it is to be carried out. Conversely, processes of innovation and educational change are more solid and stable when they are constructed in a network, from the ground up, and connected to the context in which they will be used. One way of organising research, which may not be entirely original but is extremely effective, is via networks of collaboration between professionals, between services, entities and/or diverse agents. This involves assuming a relevant conceptual shift in the way we understand and conceive of the contribution of research to change. All this led us to align ourselves with a more local and contextual research approach, which accommodates diverse educational and social agents within itself, and at the same time involves the participants in transformation and change towards improvement (Hargreaves et al., 2010; Mujis et al., 2010; Villasante, 2010). For example, the commitment to the search for new formats and models that respond to the needs of the unresolved processes of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the inter-professional relationships that exist between agents and participants has been addressed in the project “Innovation networks for educational and social inclusion “. In this project, which took place in the city of Pontevedra, a network of six projects of collaborative inquiry were combined by different members of the social and educational arena. They addressed and developed innovative projects, with each team designing them with an inclusive objective. For further details see the works of Fernández and Parrilla (2021), Raposo-Rivas et al. (2021) or the inter-school network of educational centres of A Estrada, analysed in the work of Parrilla et al. (2018).

Fourthly, we were concerned about how research could both empower inclusion and at the same time be an instrument of inclusion itself. This approach to a participatory research perspective that is inclusive, responsible and transformative has been the axis that has finally structured the network of concerns common to the group. We have begun a line of reflection and training that originates from this way of understanding inclusive research, based on the pioneering work of Walmsley (2004), Allan and Slee (2008), Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) and later Nind (2014). This issue has been present in the most recent research projects of the group, in which we have focussed on the different levels of possible participation in research; on epistemological issues and on participatory construction of knowledge (Parrilla et al., 2017); or on the ways in which participatory and inclusive research necessitates that we test, study and map methodological strategies that are adapted to the nature of the situation and the participants who will carry them out (Sierra & Parrilla, 2019). In this line of research we have identified the following as basic components of inclusive research: the commitment to a research agenda that is at the service of participants; the constitution of heterogeneous, horizontal and transitory research work teams; the collective and transdisciplinary construction of knowledge; the commitment to the improvement and transformation of everyday practices in school and the community; and research as a participatory, collaborative and deliberative process.

Some Lessons Learned: How to Move Forward to Promote More Inclusive Institutions and Practices

The brief presentation we have made of the history of our teams and the context for our research, both CSIP and participatory inclusive research, makes it possible to highlight some key differences between them in terms of their starting point and their development process. For example, the origin and construction of CSIP is linked to consultation for the improvement of educational practices in an inclusive direction and to the professional development of teachers, while participatory inclusive research is linked to the search for forms of research that are most consistent with inclusive principles and values. Likewise, CSIP has focused primarily on the dynamics of change for inclusion in teaching teams and in school institutions, while participatory research highlights the importance of a socio-educational and community approach, which requires the involvement of different agents, services, institutions and social groups involved in inclusion by coordinated, multidisciplinary and multisectoral work. However, the two proposals coincide decisively in promoting inclusion from inclusive action and an inclusive perspective that is participatory, collaborative, responsible and transformative. From a GIE perspective, we therefore see them as clearly convergent and complementary. This complementarity makes it possible to jointly analyse and establish some “lessons learned” both on the basic

principles on which to base the processes of change of educational practices and on some key development issues in the action of these processes.

Specifically, and in terms of the core principles on which to base the processes of transformation and improvement of practices, some of these “lessons” point out that:

- The processes of innovation, change and improvement of educational practices oriented to inclusion must be inclusive in themselves; this implies considering and carrying out processes of teaching innovation, educational research, and the promotion of educational and social inclusion in an interconnected and dialectical way.
- Moving towards inclusion means reviewing the processes of building knowledge and the forms of participation when researching on and supporting the processes of improvement and educational change. Collaborative support must be at the service of the joint construction of knowledge by the participants in the improvement processes themselves, in the same way that there must be a commitment by researchers to ensure equal participation and a relationship of equality between all participants. Assuming the autonomy and capacity of the participants means respecting different ways of understanding and different holders of knowledge.
- It is essential that the processes of change and research towards inclusion incorporate and are linked to the heterogeneity of educational contexts (circumstances, cultures, and values) and with it, of the agents involved. There can be no inclusion without the de facto incorporation of the culture of the groups, institutions and societies in which inclusion is intended to be developed.
- The processes of change and progress towards inclusion are largely at stake in the way in which the tensions and dilemmas that arise in such processes are addressed in a contextual way: conflicts and dilemmas between collaboration and direction; between processes of construction of the practices to be improved and processes of construction of the relationship and collaboration between the participants; between recognising the practices of the participants and questioning them; between short, medium and long-term change; between local change and systemic change...
- Changes in educational practices should be the object of attention and study as much as inclusive policies, and especially the coherence and consistency between them. Co-produced changes arising from participation should be considered and be able to inform decision-making at a policy level. More specifically, it is important to target changes in specific practices (“microchanges”) while taking into account the need to promote “bottom-up” broader changes in inclusive policies.

As for how to implement these processes, here are some lessons learned about certain basic moments in the journey these processes take are related to:

- The importance of the moments of the start of these processes (promotion, constitution, initial negotiation): this is the case, for example, with the constitution of the work teams, fitting them within the institution, the initial negotiation of

roles and responsibilities in the teams, or the negotiation, analysis and initial construction of the practices to be improved.

- The need for the analysis of existing conceptions, policies and practices, as well as barriers and levers for change, to be built with participants and by participants; the support of external researchers or consultants should serve to help build useful tools and criteria to identify areas for improvement, to collect and analyse practices, and to promote the agency and empowerment of the participants in these tasks.
- The importance of jointly building the changes and improvements, and the collaborative processes themselves, in an inclusive manner. This implies that they do not have to be manifested in the same way by all the participants nor that they require the same participation from all of them. For this reason, these changes cannot be fixed or decided unilaterally by external bodies (school principals, coordination teams or administrative bodies).
- The need to systematically analyse, evaluate and communicate both ongoing processes and their results. The prominence of the participants in the communication of these processes and their results, as much in the professional field as in the academic and research fields, can contribute decisively to the advancement of improvement. We believe that the process of the mobilisation of knowledge requires a two-way relationship of reciprocity and equality between the participants involved. But in addition, we have learned that the mobilization of knowledge should not only refer to new knowledge generated in the processes of improvement and research, but also with the mobilisation, recovery, highlighting and recognition of the frequently latent knowledge that professionals and citizens possess.

Some Open Questions

The joint analysis we have just carried out indicates some issues which we undoubtedly need to reflect on and address if we are to continue advancing the processes of changes in educational practices and institutions towards inclusion:

- The willingness and capacity of all participants to incorporate voices and practices that are as diverse as possible, although this implies a constant effort to maintain the principles of inclusion.
- Promoting processes of innovation based on voluntary participation and anchored in the participants' perceived needs and challenges; avoiding processes of innovation in which inclusive transformations of practices or institutions are not performed for their own inclusive value, but to obtain some kind of individual benefit.
- The difficulty of achieving broad and sustainable institutional changes and the need for support for change and improvement processes to be carried out over time, covering (in terms of CSIP) not only the stages of promotion and

introduction of improvements, but also, and specifically, those of generalization and consolidation.

- The recognition by the inclusive research teams that the protagonists of improvements in educational practices are full members of the team and that this is a necessary condition for recognizing a piece of research as inclusive participatory research.
- The persistence, in both personal and institutional terms, of ideas and practices that, although appear inclusive on the surface, they remain anchored to an “individual model” (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) of educational difficulties and disabilities.
- There are tensions and divergences between activity in the academic, professional and social fields, and there is a need to be aware of these differences and to create bridges and links between them that increase the chances of success of the processes of change and improvement of inclusive practices.

Before concluding, we would like to emphasize that the linking of the two strategies that we have proposed in this chapter reflects the more general question of how to generate exchanges and dialogue between structures and approaches that have demonstrated their inclusive capacity. This is fully in line with the need to promote inclusion from working in a coherent and interconnected fashion at different levels, in different areas and with different agents and dynamics, as proposed by GIE. As has been documented in numerous previous works, affiliations between research groups, work teams and institutions that address common issues from complementary perspectives, as is our case, are not only advisable but necessary to avoid fragmentation, unilateral visions and a recognised gap between research and educational practice. In this sense, we strongly advocate the possibility of contrast and convergence between groups to gather analytical tools and experiences that strengthen the solidity and permeability of the processes developed not only in the professional and practical field but also in the fields of academic research and politics. We believe that the search for this type of alternative must certainly be a medium and long-term proposal for a model to improve the development of inclusion. A model that, far from confronting approaches like the ones we have proposed, is able to explore their convergence and complementarity in depth, combining inquiry and participatory improvement. It is through this joint proposal that we believe it is necessary to explore and move forward on the inclusive path to which we are committed.

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