INCLUSION

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Inclusion is at the core of the global education agenda that virtually nations of the world have agreed to. Sustainable Development Goal 4 seeks to: "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Inclusion was the theme of the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report.

The notion of inclusion originally became part of the discourse on education in connection with the education of children/young people with disabilities. Article 24 of the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognized the right to inclusive education:

> States Parties ensure the realization of the right of persons with disabilities to education through an inclusive education system at all levels, including pre-schools, primary, secondary and tertiary education, vocational training and lifelong learning, extracurricular and social activities, and for all students, including persons with disabilities, without discrimination and on equal terms with others. (UN 2016: 3)

Inclusion focuses on the responsibility of authorities to educate all children regardless of ability, as part of the general education system, with children "mainstreamed" to the extent possible in general classes. In 2016, the General Comment No. 4 on Article 24 officially broadened the conception of inclusion to refer to students' differing backgrounds as well as their varying abilities:

> The same mechanisms exclude not only people with disabilities but also others on account of gender, age, location, poverty, disability, ethnicity, indigeneity, language, religion, migration or displacement status, sexual orientation or gender identity expression, incarceration, beliefs and attitudes. It is the system and context that do not take diversity and multiplicity of needs into account, as the Covid-19 pandemic has also laid bare. It is society and culture that determine rules, define normality and perceive difference as deviance. The concept of barriers to participation and learning should replace the concept of special needs. Inclusion is a process. Inclusive education is a process contributing to achievement of the goal of social inclusion. (UNESCO 2020: 11)

This note looks at inclusion and proposes two basic tasks, 1) shift to an inclusive approach to education on the part of educators and authorities; and 2) the work of inclusion, discussed here in relation to curriculum and teaching.

A Case for a Shift in Thinking: The role of the school vis a vis learners on the margins

Numerically, most of the world's children and youth are "in school.[2]" Yet, those on the margin and not in school or those marginalized in school, are considerable in number and significance. Marginal children and youth represent the failure of the world to achieve its ideals, indeed the legal obligations it has agreed to—the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Dakar Framework for Action, and the Millennium Development Goals. Out-of-school youth, unemployed and disengaged, represent a political threat and source of potential unrest, a waste of human capital, or at least an unexploited resource. Often vulnerable, frequently excluded, sometimes invisible, marginal children and youth represent a unique challenge to the world's education systems.

They may even be difficult or impossible, to "reach" through conventional means. The usual strategies of provision of more school places and improvements in quality are necessary but sometimes insufficient to engage those at the margin. In a metaphorical, and sometimes actual sense, educators interested in educating marginal children may have to "get out of the school" and go to the student—adapting delivery of educational programs to the constraints facing child laborers, for example; or providing supports not needed by mainstream children and not conventionally the responsibility of schools. Reaching marginal kids may require education ministries to partner with other government sectors and institutions. At a most basic conceptual level, educators need to recognize their need to learn about the complex needs of marginal children and youth and how these needs can be appropriately met, knowledge that schools—being teaching rather than learning organizations—generally lack.

The words "marginal" and "marginalization" are used to describe two groups: children and youth who are or have not received a basic education and children and youth who, though enrolled in school, are/were treated peripherally, their educational needs substantially unmet. The latter group children might include, for example, children taught in a language in which they cannot learn, or students whose abilities are minimized and opportunities undermined, on account of gender, ethnicity, or some other factor. Marginalized children are those who because of individual or group characteristics are poorly served by formal education as organized and delivered in a particular context. By this conception, children are marginalized when the organization and delivery and content of education fail to meet the educational constraints facing children, or when the content does not meet their needs. In this sense, underachievement is an indicator of marginalization. In this understanding, it is possible for a numerical majority of children in a particular system or context to be marginal. "Mainstream," in contrast, refers to those children according to whose needs, constraints, and supports schooling is conventionally organized and delivered in a particular context.

Schools may reproduce, even reinforce, the inequalities of the larger society, or they may challenge them, or work through inclusion to overcome the marginalization of excluded, vulnerable and "invisible" children so that all have access to education. The words "inclusion" and "marginalized" are used preferentially to emphasize the stance adopted here that schools play a more or less active role in determining the marginal or mainstream

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[2] This section draws on Chapter 1 in Cummings & Williams (2008).

status of children. At a minimum, we would argue, schools have a responsibility to respond to the marginalization of children under their care.

This understanding of marginal children and youth includes those who are:

- *excluded* from obtaining educational services in a way that threatens their personal development and/or their "ability to participate in society in the future" (UNICEF, 2005, p. 7);
- *vulnerable*, either to missing out on educational opportunities, or alternately to exploitation, disease or other threats to well-being and healthy development that interfere with their educational advancement;
- *invisible*, either more literally, "in effect disappearing from view within their families, communities, and societies and to governments, donors, civil society, the media, and even other children". (UNICEF, 2005, p. 35), or
- those children and youth who are present but *less visible*, such as girls in a gender-biased classroom, or displaced children in terms of official statistics, etc.

These categories are not always distinct, nor need they be for these purposes. Often, children are multiply disadvantaged. Children and youth may be marginalized because of who they are (e.g., members of a low status minority group), where they are (e.g., rural children); what they possess or don't possess (i.e., the poor); or their particular needs (i.e., children and youth with disabilities). Exclusion may be based on "static" characteristics that cannot be changed, i.e., membership in an indigenous population; or "dynamic" characteristics that vary according to circumstances, i.e., child labor.

Marginalization varies in severity. Lewis and Lockheed (2006) describe four levels of exclusion. Most severe is exclusion leading to ethnically based slavery or even genocide. Examples would include African-American slaves in the US and Brazil, or native peoples of the Americas. Severe exclusion is associated with the shunning of particular groups, such as the Dalits in India before the enactment of anti-discrimination legislation or the Roma in Europe. Moderate exclusion is a less formal discrimination against marginal groups, but is often associated with a poor match between the schooling offered and the needs and situations of students, e.g., education in a language the child does not speak. Mild exclusion is associated with "individual social preferences" of teachers, for example, who might ignore or dismiss members of minority or lower status groups, as for example the treatment of girls or ethnic minorities in many schools.

Marginal children and youth include those that are members of:

- Clearly vulnerable groups—street children, children in detention, children with HIV/AIDS, children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, orphans, urban poor, landless people and squatters, child soldiers, sex workers, nomadic people, children and youth with disabilities, refugees, displaced people, children in early marriages, hazardous labor or combat; trafficked or indentured children; children affected by armed conflict; victims of abuse and violence; dropouts.
- Potentially vulnerable groups—girls, rural children and youth, linguistic and ethnic minorities, indigenous groups, immigrants, child laborers, girls, the poor.

The question might be raised as to whether there are enough shared characteristics among such disparate groups to speak of them usefully in one document or under one set of strategies and policies. We would argue that there is.

Most education systems, from individual classroom to national systems, face the challenge of educating large numbers of heterogeneous children and youth with too few resources. This heterogeneity derives from students' individual characteristics, e.g., children's differing native abilities and intelligences, their academic backgrounds, the value and support provided by families; by social characteristics, children's varying economic and social academic backgrounds, and the particular cultural and linguistic context and history of home, community, school, and nation; and by especially difficult circumstances, such as children affected by conflict, or AIDS orphans.

Individual heterogeneity poses a difficult instructional challenge, even in the best of circumstances and especially when, as in most developing education systems, resources are tight. Schools and education systems work to simplify their task, by standardizing work and focusing their teaching, often either to the "middle" or "mainstream," or, alternately, to the students most able, through circumstance or ability, to learn. Given the difficult circumstances of schooling in much of the world—large classes, insufficient numbers of instructional materials, teacher training insufficient for actual conditions—such simplification may be (or felt) necessary for schools to make any progress in their work.

In addition, schools are organized, implicitly or explicitly, in ways that make it easier for children and youth of dominant social groups to succeed in school, and more difficult for members of non-dominant groups. These exclusionary modes of organization are often invisible, especially to members of dominant groups, yet they effectively marginalize members of socially disfavored groups. Finally, schools are not well organized to serve children in especially difficult circumstances. As a result, disproportionate numbers of marginal kids fail at school—they do not enroll, repeat and drop out, fail to learn. Sometimes they are not reached by schooling, or are offered schooling in ways they do not want to or do not feel they can take advantage of. Often, marginal kids may attend school but do not "reach their potential," failing in the worst cases to acquire permanent literacy, or in many other cases, to learn what might help them maximize their individual and social growth.

Reaching marginal children and youth requires an act of will on the part of education systems. The possibility of universal education is a recent idea in most of the world, and for the most part has yet to be achieved. Who else but those on the margins would lose out when there isn't enough for all?

We start with two premises, 1) that all children can and do want to learn (though they may not want or be able to learn in the ways or on the terms by which education is offered), and 2) that all children have a right to formal education, a right the state has the moral and legal responsibility to ensure. From a rights-based perspective, the burden of "reaching" kids is on the school. This, we argue, is in stark contrast to the way most systems are organized, where the burden is on the child and his/her family.

Education systems instruct, certify successful completion of that instruction, and often govern admission to higher levels of education. School systems are thus in the business of selection as well as instruction. Kids come to school, take a test, some pass, some do not. The conventional teachers' notion—that some kids "get it," while others do not—comes naturally to schools. In some cases, it is likely true that some kids absolutely do "get it" while others cannot. In many more cases than is often practiced, however, kids can get it if it is offered differently. There are increasing numbers of examples of how education—organized and delivered in ways responsive to the needs and constraints of particular groups of learners—can reach and educate previously marginal children, whether individually, socially, or circumstantially. Sometimes it's the timing or location of schooling, other times the language of instruction, other times the provision of supports the school has not conventionally provided.

Marginality in schooling is substantially variable. Groups with very similar characteristics may be "mainstream" in one educational context and marginal in another. Gender might be a prime example, where girls in one context are in the mainstream, whereas in another context, they are marginal. Schooling in its normal functioning plays an active role in marginalization–creating winners and losers, defining more and less competitive characteristics, creating and reinforcing new socio-economically competitive forums, gateways, and credentials. Moreover, schools often serve the role of reproducing inequalities of the larger society.

Schools and school systems are quite used to teaching. But school systems are much less inclined to focus directly on learning, what students are learning and perhaps more importantly, learning how the system can ensure that all children are learning to the best of their abilities. From the perspective adopted here—that all children can and want to learn, and that government has the legal and moral responsibility to provide basic education to all children, the decision of whether to acknowledge and respond to marginality is a policy choice, albeit not always a conscious one. The first over-arching policy question relates to who bears the primary burden of closing the gap between school and child. Is it the responsibility of the school (and its supportive system) to reach the child, wherever the child is, physically, linguistically, culturally, and intellectually; or does the burden belong with the child (and her family and community)? The second question asks whether schools, as we believe they do, have a responsibility to educate all groups of children equitably when the larger society does not treat them so?[3] Answering these questions in favor of children on the margin requires an act of will on the part of schools, and a process of learning, for schools and school systems really do not know how to do these things. Schools and school systems are accustomed and organized more to teaching the material at hand than to understanding and meeting the diverse needs of all children, especially those outside the norm.

Of course, the issues are not as simple as just portrayed. Children have a responsibility to attend a nearby school, just as governments have the responsibility to build schools within children's reasonable reach. Even so we would argue that a notion of "reasonable reach"

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[3] A larger question might be whether schools have the responsibility to challenge the inequitable treatment of different groups of people.

needs to be redefined with greater attention to the constraints, perceived needs, and values of children, their families and communities, if all children are to be educated and the promises of universal basic education realized. Many fewer children need be marginalized than currently are. As noted, substantial evidence from cases throughout the world suggests that placing education "within reasonable reach" of previously marginal children sparks great interest in education among children and communities thought deficient in educational demand.

The Work of Inclusion: Curriculum and teaching

After recognizing marginalization, the work of working for inclusion begins. Again the UN provides a challenging charge:

> The right to inclusive education encompasses a transformation in culture, policy and practice in all formal and informal educational environments to accommodate the differing requirements and identities of individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility. It involves strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners. It focuses on the full and effective participation, accessibility, attendance and achievement of all students, especially those who, for different reasons, are excluded or at risk of being marginalized. Inclusion involves access to and progress in high-quality formal and informal education without discrimination. It seeks to enable communities, systems and structures to combat discrimination, including harmful stereotypes, recognize diversity, promote participation and overcome barriers to learning and participation for all by focusing on well-being and success of students with disabilities. It requires an in-depth transformation of education systems in legislation, policy, and the mechanisms for financing, administration, design, delivery and monitoring of education. (UN 2016: 3)

Schools "teach" in many ways, elaborated in Table 1 (Williams 2011: 59). Directly schools teach knowledge and skills through the "intended" curriculum, as implemented by teachers. Schools also teach through the "hidden curriculum," through its provision and delivery, and through the social functions of education. In terms of inclusion, these latter modes of "teaching" are highly salient. Do the ways schools teach serve to increase inclusion or exclusion?

TABLE 1. HOW SCHOOLS TEACH
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A. WHAT SCHOOL TEACHES
  a. Intended (and Taught) Curricula
    i. Skills — literacy, numeracy, employable, academic
    ii. History and social studies
    iii. Science, mathematics
    iv. Culture
    v. etc
  b. Hidden Curriculum
    i. Relevance
    ii. Social practices
    iii. Silences

B. HOW EDUCATION IS DELIVERED
  1. Equitable and fair delivery of educational services, or systematic inequalities by location, language, ethnicity, gender, income, disability status, etc.
  2. Perception of fairness
  3. Equitable provision of educational services by different groups involved in provision, i.e, government, NGOs, international agencies
  4. Role of private education
    i. To increase opportunities? Or segment the education system?
    ii. To bring funding into the system? Or take it out?

C. HOW SCHOOLING FUNCTIONS SOCIALLY
  a. Reproduction of inequalities (and blaming victim)
    1. Allowing historical advantages to rule, even strengthening them
    2. Hegemonic silence
    ii. OR Challenging inequalities
    1. Increasing mobility among historically disadvantaged groups
    2. Affirmative action toward marginal groups
    3. Critical thinking about structural marginalization
  b. Socio-cultural functions of education
    i. Cultural dominance of some groups
    ii. Socializing function
    iii. BUT ALSO
    1. "Safety valve"
    2. Repository for social aspirations
    3. Hope
  c. Reinforcing or Transformative Role
    i. Reinforcing status quo
    ii. Transforming education
    1. Toward exclusion
    2. Toward inclusion

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Among these far-reaching challenges, the curriculum is directly under control of the school system. Again, the curriculum teaches by what it says but also what it does not say and what it shows, through pictures and visual images of various kinds. Inclusive curriculum would feature textbooks that portrayed learners of all abilities and backgrounds, in word and image. Inclusive textbooks would avoid divisive images and stereotypes, working instead toward portrayals highlighting the rich diversity of learners and the values of such diversity.

Traditional textbooks have generally relied on a single authoritative voice in their presentation. Full of information, such textbooks almost force teachers into frontal, lecture, teacher-centered modes of instruction. Research carried out by NISSEM (Networking to Integrate SDG Target 4.7 and SEL Skills Into Educational Materials) suggests that information heavy textbooks make the curriculum more textbook-centered than teacher centered. They provide little room for either teachers or learners, little guidance for teachers to improve their teaching and little space for learners to see themselves and engage with the material on their own as well as with teachers (NISSEM 2019). NISSEM provides concrete suggestions for ways to revise curricula so as to be more inclusive for all children. Examples of more representatively inclusive curricula abound, and there are increasing examples of textbooks reorganized to allow space for teacher and learners of all abilities and backgrounds to engage, teach and learn.

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