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Developing learning and participation in schools: using the Index for inclusion in

Spain

Lessons learned and common challenges¹

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*Developing learning and participation in schools: using the Index for inclusion in
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a documentary review in Spain on the uses and experiences of school change with Index for Inclusion materials (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Booth and Ainscow, 2011) during the last fifteen years. A brief description of the Spanish educational system is made in order to contextualise this analysis. The initiatives are grouped into three categories. Firstly, it has served as a source of partial inspiration, primarily in research contexts, to generate tools for *analysis*. Secondly, it has been taken up in *teacher education* activities. In this context, the *Index* has been especially useful to help to construct and share a common language about inclusive education. The third category encompasses projects that have used the Index in the evaluation and *improvement processes* to guide inclusive development in schools. Some ‘lessons learned’ are shared and common challenges are discussed, among them the need to give greater emphasis to *the conditions* which support schools on their journey to become more inclusive.

KEY WORDS

Inclusive Education, Index for Inclusion, Spain, Challenges, School Change

Introduction

UNESCO's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development states that education systems must make changes to fulfill the right to inclusive education for all children and youth. Goal 4 seeks to ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. UNESCO (2017, p. 7) defines inclusion as 'a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners. Meeting the commitment to the values and principles of inclusive education requires change and enhancements to the processes and systems of educational practice (Simón, Muñoz-Martínez and Porter, 2021, p. 2). To speak of inclusive education is to focus on a process that must entail changes in the inclusive cultures, practices and policies of schools (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). As states by UNESCO (2020) "careful planning and provision of inclusive education can deliver improvement in academic achievement, social and emotional development, self-esteem and peer acceptance" (p. 18). But carrying out these changes is not a simple task; educational changes for a more equity and just education require work by the entire educational community (Liasidou, 2015; Porter and Richler, 2011).

Spain is no stranger to these objectives. In fact, several reports indicate that Spain should review its educational policies and practices for violating the right to education, including the right to education of certain groups, especially people with disabilities (CRPD, 2018). Spanish educational context remains anchored by a dichotomic perspective of diversity, i.e. 'normal' students versus 'special needs' students, together with the existence of a medical model of intervention for students in situations of higher risk of segregation, marginalization or school failure. It is for this reason that for many Spanish stakeholders the so-called "measures to respond to diversity" in education (Martínez, 2005), are mainly

understood as specific measures focused on, and for the most vulnerable students, be it for (dis)ability, origin, or cultural identity. For this reason, when many schools interpret the recent mandate for a more inclusive education, they implement it from an “individual or essentialist perspective” (Ainscow, 1999). This is related to the fact that in many cases there still remains a "traditional" perspective when it comes to understanding whose responsibility it is for the pupils considered most vulnerable: mainstream teachers would be in charge of 'normal' pupils and special teachers for the students with an official decision on special needs (Sandoval, Simón and Echeita, 2018). Moreover, we must not forget that, in the Spanish education system, "special education" remains as the framework to deal with inclusive education of pupils with SEN, an aspect to which the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has drawn attention (CRPD, 2018). Definitively, different reasons that contribute to maintaining the status quo of inequity and exclusion in our current educational system (Tarabini, Jakovson and Montes, 2017). Unfortunately, there is no shared, consensual and agreed definition of inclusive education. We know that this is very important for the implementation of sustainable transformation processes of education systems with the aim of becoming more inclusive (UNESCO, 2020).

Spain does not have a centralized education system throughout its territory. In fact, it is quite decentralized and pluralistic. This is due to its territorial and political organizational structure whereby Spain is divided into seventeen Autonomous Communities and two autonomous cities (Ceuta and Melilla). This also implies that progress in relation to inclusion varies from one Community to another, and this must be taken into account when interpreting judgements made about 'the situation in Spain'.

In Spain, schooling has been obligatory up to 16 years of age since 1992 (before that, it had been obligatory up to 14 years). Since 1992 schooling has also been comprehensive;

that is, students received the same education, at least in terms of the overall organization of their schooling, until they turned 16. This common secondary education is referred to as ESO (obligatory secondary education). At the end of compulsory schooling, students chose either to continue their studies with a university preparation course of two years, or by attending a professional training college.

In education, there is state framework law called LOMLOE (2021) (Organic Law Amending the Organic Law of Education) came in January into force. The new legislation repeals the LOMCE (Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality, 2013). Nevertheless, each Autonomous Community has the legislative capacity within its territory to guide and specify its educational policy on sensitive and relevant topics, which amongst others include questions of equity and inclusion and of course. Therefore, when referring to 'Spain' in this paper, it should be understood as a geographical reference that encompasses significant territorial differences. This also implies that progress in relation to inclusion varies from one Community to another, and this must be taken into account when interpreting judgements made about 'the situation in Spain'. This does not mean that everything is different in each of these areas, there are also common elements due.

One of the common elements throughout the country is related to the structure of the existing schools. Spain has three types of schools: (1) state funded (2) charter (private initiatives also funded by state) and (3) private. In previous years, especially in some Autonomous Communities, the growth of the charter schools has been to the detriment of the state sector. Undoubtedly, this is a clear indication of the encroachment of the private sector on the school system, something that puts into question the hope for more equitable education systems in the world (Ainscow, Harris, and Harrington 2018). What is certain is that the triple system in Spain creates an unequal situation between the

different types of schools when it comes to important matters such as employing teachers, administrative autonomy, or the availability of resources.

Given the complex situation that has been explained of the Spanish educational system with respect to inclusive education, the need arises to carry out actions that can foster a change in the policies, practices and cultures of schools to achieve the right to inclusive education. In this sense, a tool that has been very useful at the international level is the well-known "Index for inclusion", whose effectiveness in promoting inclusive school development has been amply demonstrated. (EASPD, 2012, Vaughan, 2002; Booth & Rustemier, 2005; Marietjie, 2010; Alborn and Gaad, 2014; Nes, 2009; Higham and Booth, 2018).

It was almost 20 years ago that a group of lecturers from three different Spanish universities, Madrid, Barcelona, País Vasco, had become familiar with the Index of Inclusion shortly after its first publication (Booth and Ainscow, 2000). They agreed to translate it and adapt it to the Spanish context in 2002. Fifteen years later, the authors of this paper, re-translated and re-adapted the recent version of the Index (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). This edition has been widely distributed in Spain and Latin America as a result of its publication in both hard copy and electronic formats by FUHEM (independent non-profit foundation that promotes social justice, deepening democracy and environmental sustainability) with the support of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture Organization (IEO).

The Index is a set of materials designed to support schools in the process of moving towards inclusive institutions, taking into account the views of the community. This tool can become an invaluable support framework to promote reflection and the development

of inclusive practices through a process of methodical self-assessment across three interrelated dimensions in many contexts: culture, policy and practice.

The Culture dimension is oriented towards reflection on the need for the creation of a safe, welcoming and collaborative educational community. It aims to help analyse the extent to which there are inclusive values, shared by all teachers, students, families, or other members of the community. The Policy dimension helps to analyse the general plans and organisational and operational measures that condition actions to improve the learning and participation of all students. Finally, the third dimension, Practices, focuses on exploring whether the specific activities that are developed encourage access, learning and participation for all learners. The three dimensions are developed through six sections, two per dimension, each of which is broken down into indicators. There are 45 indicators whose meaning is clarified through 500 questions, approximately 10 to 12 per indicator. As Booth and Ainscow (2011, p.15) point out, "indicators represent a formalisation of aspirations against which the existing situation in the organisation is compared in order to set priorities for improvement".

The *inclusive perspective* that the Index promotes is, undoubtedly, generally viewed with distrust or indifference by the majority of the competent educational authorities in the different Autonomous Communities. They prefer to stick to a superficial, politically correct discourse of 'inclusion', but without actually implementing the profound transformation processes needed to improve their educational system (Echeita et al., 2017).

Therefore, the interest of the educational authorities in the dissemination of, and support for, the *Index* has been very limited. Only two Autonomous Communities, the Basque Country and Catalonia, have become involved in the first 2 translations and editions, in

2005, and 2006, respectively. Although, it should be mentioned that in both cases there was limited follow up support to stimulate and extend its use.

This article reviews the uses that have been made of the Index for Inclusion in the Spanish context. The objective is to find out what uses have been made of the Index and to what extent it has fulfilled its objective in this country.

Method

This work is framed within the qualitative paradigm of research through documentary content analysis (Barbosa, Barbosa and Rodríguez, 2013; Azorin and Sandoval, 2019) which seeks to systematically access the two levels of analysis: descriptive, trying to identify and show the uses of this instrument, and analytical, which is characterised by organising the text formulations according to the defined categories of analysis (recipients, intentionality, parts of the instrument used, evaluation, and results).

For the bibliographic search, the following databases were used: Web of Science, Dialnet, DICE, Scopus, as well as the Google Scholar tool, which was useful for locating the texts, both in English and Spanish. The descriptors or keywords used were the following: 'inclusive education guides', 'tools for inclusion', "inclusive practice guides" and " index for inclusion" and "Spain". A total of 24 texts were reviewed, selecting 13 publications during the 2005-2020 years.

Results and discussion

We have organized this section into three broad categories: The Index as a research tool, the Index in teacher education training and the Index as a guide for an inclusive school development.

The Index as a research tool

The indicators of the *Index* and their associated questions have inspired many research teams when constructing other related questionnaires. For many of them the objective seems to be aimed at developing tools that allow for an analysis of the ‘level or degree of inclusion’ in schools. These instruments have also been used to analyse how the global meaning of inclusive education is interpreted in different schools, or in relation to some partial aspects; for example: the school holders’s beliefs about what is understood as ‘support’, or the particular role of ‘values’ in an inclusive school.

An example is the project carried out by Moyaco, Anguita, and Moyaco (2013), in which the scales of the *Index* were transformed into a 45-item questionnaire that was used to assess inclusion in 41 state education schools in the city of Córdoba. In this case, the informants were the principals of the schools. In a similar way, Moliner, Sales, Ferrández and Traver (2011), used questionnaires based on the *Index* to assess, from the perspective of the faculty, different aspects related to the culture, policies and practices in sixteen secondary education schools. Sisto (2017) has also used the *Index* for an inclusion questionnaire for students to collect the opinions of primary school students. We have also found quantitative validation work of the *Index* questionnaire for parents (Fernández-Archilla et al., 2020) or for compulsory secondary education students.

León y Arjona (2011) used the *Index* as one of the sources to develop a questionnaire for the faculty about the attention to diversity policy and the organization of the schools during the period of compulsory secondary education.

For their part, Gómez, Arias y Rodríguez (2013), created an adaptation to the Spanish context of the first questionnaire of the *Index*, to be used with the staff and principals.

Likewise, it has been used as a reference for evaluating the situation of specific vulnerable groups, such as for example, the work carried out by Gutiérrez, Hernández and Jenaro

(2019) where it was used as the basis for the creation of an evaluation of the inclusion scale for those services working with people with disabilities. The work of Darretxe, Goikoetxea and Fernández (2013) focused on the analysis of educational practices in two schools in the Basque Country, one in primary education and one in secondary education. Using an ethnographic approach, they employed observation strategies inspired in part by the indicators of the *Index*. Iglesias and Calvo (2010) also analysed the culture of what is called as “integration schools” in Salamanca from the perspective of the teaching staff. They used an ad hoc questionnaire created with some indicators and questions from the sub-dimensions of the *Index* termed ‘developing community’ and ‘inclusive values’.

In the same way, Sánchez, Rodríguez and Sandoval (2019), based their work on the dimensions of culture, policies, and practices of the *Index* for the construction of tools used to evaluate different primary education schools in Spain.

If, in some cases such questionnaires are used in the general assessment of the school with regard to inclusive education, in others the focus has been on the analysis of the ‘degree of inclusion’ of specific groups of students considered to have special educational needs or learning difficulties; for example, Sanahuja-Gavaldà, Olmos-Rueda and Morón-Velasco (2016) whose work focused on the analysis of the support provided by four schools; three in primary education, and one in secondary education, to students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, in Barcelona. In addition, Alonso and Echeita (2005) developed an adaptation to analyse the schooling of deaf students in ordinary schools from an inclusive perspective.

The inspiration for the *Index* has not been limited solely to devising *ad hoc* questionnaires but has gone beyond this, becoming one of the main sources for the development of other guides with similar objectives. This is the case of the project by Escobedo, Sales, and

Fernández (2012), who developed the ‘Guide for the development of an intercultural inclusive school’ (CEIN), with the purpose of assessing and promoting school cultures that facilitate a change towards an ‘intercultural inclusive’ school. Similar research has also been carried out by Sánchez, Rodríguez y Sandoval (2019), Duran, Giné and Marchesi (2010), and Marchesi, Giné, Durán and Hernández (2009).

All these guides have focused mainly on the stages of early childhood, primary and secondary education, as has *Index* itself. However, in Spain it has also been the source of inspiration for analysing inclusion in adult and higher education, such as the research carried out by Salceda and Ibáñez (2015), who adapted the questionnaire of the *Index* for its application in a university setting.

Developing an inclusive perspective: The Index in teacher education training

Different academic teams have worked with the *Index* in the context of teacher education either in the field of initial or, in-service teacher education. We should point out that the *Index* has been, and continues to be, a fundamental intellectual framework of reference that has influenced our way of understanding inclusive education. Thus, it is understandable that we have used it to help others as well to develop this inclusive perspective, this is very important in order to ‘think in another way’ (Ballard, 2013), which then makes it possible to act in another way.

The *Index* has always guided lecturers and researchers when sharing with teacher students and educational counsellors the complex and sometimes contradictory meanings of inclusive education, its dilemmatic and processual nature, and the type of educational tasks necessary to advance towards this goal. In this context, working with the *Index* helps to achieve three main objectives. The first is to create a shared language that breaks away from the common discourse of ‘learning difficulties’, ‘problems of students’ or the ‘need

for more personal support resources’ as the main strategy of attending to ‘students with special educational needs’ as if they were the only target group for inclusive education.

In this respect, we consider the construct of ‘barriers to learning and participation’ as central to the inclusive perspective. It is a construct that compels one to pay attention to school factors that produce exclusion. For instance, which students are at risk at being affected by existing barriers? (This allows for a broadening of reflections about inclusion that go beyond considering students as having special educational needs). In which levels are these barriers found? (This forces a systemic look at the school’s reality). What type of resources and support are needed to remove these barriers? (This allows to contextualize the policies for support as something much broader than the simple addition of more ‘support teachers’).

The second objective concerns the location of the barriers that exist in the schools. This allows us to introduce and delve into another fruitful distinction of the *Index* between school cultures, policies and practices. The comprehension of the interdependence between these three dimensions of school life is of great importance for the introduction of changes, as the *Index* correctly suggests they must be ‘systemic’, i.e. they must influence all three aspects sooner or later.

The most useful aspect is that by taking many of the questions suggested in Part 4 of the *Index*, it is possible for student teachers or for teachers at work, to trigger reflections that lead to an understanding of this systemic approach. We will look at two examples to illustrate the use of a specific question to highlight this important aspect.

For instance, take question e), from indicator C2.9 ‘Staff plan, teach, and review together: Do teachers use collaborative teaching as an opportunity for learning from each other? Booth, ‘yes or no’ answers to this question will allow the reflection upon whether

collaborative teaching practices depend on the policies that the school have to facilitate (or inhibit) it; for instance, by allowing time to planning together. Finally, practices and policies depend on the importance that the school gives to collaboration as a constitutive value within their school culture.

The second example: To think about what ‘compassion’ means as a fundamental inclusive value, we frequently use the question h) in indicator B2.8 regarding inclusive school policy; Are children who have been absent given a genuinely warm greeting on their return to school? Very often, a teacher is surprised by this question probably because of their punitive beliefs about discipline. It seems easy to *talk* about inclusive values but much more difficult to actually implement them into policies and practices. This is one of the most important values in order to learn *how to live together* which is the main goal that the Index establishes for inclusive education.

Within in-service teacher training we found that many activities can be used to make them think and plan policies and practices that serve to implement a collaborative school culture. For example, in relation to the participation and collaboration of families in school life we very often use questions for teachers inspired by the approach of the Index: ‘What activities strongly promote a school culture that values the participation of all of the families in the school?’ or, ‘In which areas or settings should they be promoted?’ These types of activities allow for a relatively quick understanding of this dimensional interdependence and to implement or think about systematic improvements.

Muñoz, Rayón and Torrego (2014), carried out a particular experience with the use of the Index in a training context. It was conducted during four school years with postgraduate students who had completed their Master in Educational Psychology, in courses from the study track of ‘Education and Inclusion’. The *Index* was used to analyse the Educational

Mission and Vision of schools and to reflect on their policies, cultures and practices. Afterwards, proposals for the improvement of the course content were drafted, and as a result, new Missions and Visions with improvements based on an inclusive perspective were presented. The results showed that the *Index* is a solid tool for such analysis and the development of reliable improvement proposals.

The Index as a guide for an inclusive school development

Although it is certain that this was envisaged as its main use by its authors, at least when the first editions were published, it has been the least frequently noted. If this were common in other countries as well, we would all have to examine the possible reasons for this anomaly.

We found some uses of the tool to promote reflection in schools and be evaluated in order to improve according to Index shared values (Ardanaz, 2017; González Berruga, 2017). It is also the case of the work carried out by Añón, García, and Pastor (2018) to improve teaching practices, specifically as a guide for the design of teaching units for all students. In this section relevant experiences in this third group of initiatives (Durán et al., 2005) are presented and analyzed:

Public Secondary Education School (IES) Severo Ochoa. (Alcobendas. Autonomous Community of Madrid).

In 2007, the secondary school ‘IES Severo Ochoa’ had 1,600 students and approximately 100 teachers. It was a school “in motion”, with a leadership team in favour of an ‘improvement with attitude’ (Ainscow, 2005).

Without a formal agreement among the staff of the school and a University team as critical friends during the implementation of an improvement cycle. For the initial evaluation

phase, following the proposal in the Index, three questionnaires that were provided by the Index, were adopted by the faculty, students, and families.

The questionnaires were distributed to the entire teaching staff, although its completion was voluntary, as well as to a selection of students from each grade, which included all the foreign students in the grade, and to the families of the students surveyed.

After the year long process of self-evaluation that followed, the results allowed the group coordinator to bring some proposals to the staff meeting to aid reflection on multiple aspects of their jobs; to analyse the expectations that the school had for its students; to rethink school failure from the double perspective, that of the student and also from the point of view of the weaknesses of the school, such as the lack of strategies for an inclusive pedagogy. Two academic years after the process had begun, they agreed upon various concrete improvement goals directly attributable to the work with the *Index*. Within those we will highlight the following: a) To improve the welcome plan, to identify all the needs of the students e.g. educational, social, economic, as well as extend the plan to new teachers and the families; b) To improve the tutoring process in its diverse dimensions such as its coordination and monitoring and c) To improve the didactic strategies and resources for learning and the coordination of the existing human resources.

The university team made explicit the need to ensure that ‘inclusive’ values and practices should infuse through all the school’s set of actions; and that these would be embedded in school life and not seen as isolated aspects that were only related to a few students and teachers occasionally involved in ‘specific projects’, with little connection between them.

The participants time availability restricted the involvement. Without any doubt, the fact that the collaboration between both parts was voluntary that is, without an explicit agreement or contract, outlining its duration and mutual commitment, contributed to this

lack of continuity. Later, the fact that some of the teachers that had been most involved in the project changed schools caused this initiative to be diluted and limited our ongoing contact with the school.

Montserrat 'Concertada' School (Madrid. Autonomous Community Madrid).

In this school, an Academic University Team provided an advisory process and support to try to achieve amongst others the following objectives: a) to promote individual and shared reflection between the teaching faculty and the professionals responsible for school support, regarding the existing beliefs and practices connected with the concept of inclusive education; b) to analyse the resources, support, and the potential, of the school to carry out improvements that are consistent with this goal and c) to strengthen the network of collaboration and support among the teaching faculty itself. During the entire process, the *Index* was used as the framework of reference for all of the work. The work was carried out during the 2011-2012 academic year.

The method was structured in two phases; the first comprised a member of the leadership team who acted as the group coordinator and a senior teacher. In the framework of this phase, various awareness sessions were conducted with the faculty about the purpose of the project and the desired improvements. In the second phase, an analysis of the educational practices was conducted, which required the ad hoc design of various questionnaires based on the *Index*, as well as coordinating its implementation in the different educational stages: early childhood, primary and the first cycle of secondary i.e. 12 and 13-year olds. Joint reflection sessions were then implemented, by stages concerning the resources of the school, as well as the barriers that could be limiting learning, and the participation of the all of the students. We later looked for any differences and similarities between the stages.

Once again, the implementation phase of the planned improvements was not completed in its entirety. In this case, a significant reason was the sudden change in the principal of the school. The new principal took the report with the proposals, suggested guidance, and filed it away. At that moment, the collaboration and support between the academic team and the school ended. In summary, we were not able to think in advance how to make this school development process sustainable.

*La Paloma. Pre-School and Primary State School (Azuqueca de Henares.
Autonomous Community of Castilla La Mancha)*

In this school, the request for our advisory services and support arose from the fact that the school found itself in a novel situation due to an influx of students from other European countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, the majority of whom did not speak Spanish and many had emotional difficulties associated with their migration condition. The main objective of the project was agreed by the educational team, and consisted of an analysis of what was understood as inclusive education in order to establish an improvement project in the school, among all the faculty participants that would reflect its new reality.

The work was carried out over two academic years (2007-2009) in the following way. Firstly, two working teams were formed, one in early childhood education and the other in primary education. During the first academic year, the groups held twelve meetings in which the policies, practices and culture of the school were analysed using the indicators of the *Index*. Teachers themselves identified and analysed the policies, practices, and culture of the school that were not functioning well; e.g. an understanding of diversity, traditional teaching methods, organization of support, and group configuration. Once the analysis and reflection were finalized, the teachers understood that the difficulties that

they found in their daily work were far from being caused by the characteristics of their students, but had more to do with their expectations of them, the methods they used to teach them, how the students and families were received, and the collaboration between professionals and the community. An ad hoc questionnaire was also designed based on the questionnaires of the Index for families to highlight the beliefs of the families about their participation in the school and their involvement in the education of their children. An analysis of their answers resulted in the positions of the families and the faculty coming closer together.

An improvement plan that included changes in teaching methods and organizational changes to the school was designed as a result of the discussion groups. The actions were aimed at the implementation of a teaching and learning methodology based on cooperation and support among equals. During the second academic year, the plan was put into practice. Once the process had been finished, in the review stage, an analysis of the results was conducted and a proposal to improve these actions was developed. A considerable effort was made to initiate organizational measures that optimized the use of personal resources and the profiles of the faculty.

Evidence of positive results persisted over several years, some of the measures implemented are still in practice nowadays e.g. splitting the classes into two, the experienced teachers supporting new teachers' groups, learning and teaching methods based on cooperation. This allows us to affirm that the process of the *Index* helped this school to initiate changes that were sustainable over time, in teaching methodologies that provided a better education for most of their students and organizational strategies that helped promote inclusive education.

Conclusions: the use and usefulness of the *Index in Spain*

It was not surprising to find many initiatives, inspired by the *Index*, which focused above all else on developing questionnaires and instruments that sought to *measure and analyse* inclusive education. Moreover, this task is partly in vain when we speak about such a complex, multidimensional, dynamic and contextualized process that is needed to bring about a greater commitment to inclusive values and practices.

On the other hand, it seems that there were those who understood the *Index* more as an intervention program than a guide. This is something that if applied properly would bring about higher levels of educational inclusion. Indeed, on many occasions, because of this, we found teachers and academics who spoke of “applying” the *Index* occasionally after an exhaustive review of the cultures, policies and practices in a setting. We believe they interpreted their task as trying to implement, at all costs, the improvement model proposed in Part 3. This task was performed primarily through the application of the questionnaires available and others that were developed ad hoc. In general, this task takes a length of time that might seem excessive compared with the urgency of many other aspects in the school, or other setting that also require change, and the stressful conditions under which most teachers in our country work.

In addition, these initial evaluation processes had the tendency to highlight the existing barriers more than the strengths of the schools. In part, this is logical because one is looking to improve inclusive schooling; however, we all know that frequently what needs to be improved is immense. When both factors are combined, i.e. the many barriers and limited time to analyse them, it is not unexpected that many educational teams feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task and therefore, frequently lose the motivation to continue.

For these reasons, firstly, we note the need to highlight the nature of the *guide* of the *Index*, which is closer to a travel guide for a never ending process, than a predetermined programme or action plan. As its authors point out (Booth and Ainscow, 2011, p. 48) “there is no one right way of using the materials” For this reason, even a single question can have the capacity to trigger a process of shared reflection about how to embody the values and principles of inclusive education in school policies and practices (Booth et al., 2015), which we consider to be the most relevant contribution of this work.

Therefore, we must make as much of an effort to highlight the strengths of a setting as we do in pointing out the difficulties, problems or existing barriers. These strengths should be viewed as support for initiating change and creating a shared perception that breaks the inertia and begins improvement.

In this context, it has been shown that the school conditions which can make this continuous reflection process possible (Ainscow, Beresford, Harris, Hopkins, Southworth and West 2001), are indispensable if we are to take advantage of all the indicators and questions in the *Index*. These conditions, which are all well-known within the research field of effectiveness and school improvements (Ainscow, 2005; Murillo and Krichensky, 2015), are repeatedly identified. They include the existence of administrative teams with strong leadership ethics; effective time, space and coordination for meetings, discussions and research into improvement; broad participation and clear goals, institutional support and incentives, sustainable planning.

In the framework of this analysis, we affirm that that authentic support and well-prepared ‘critical friends’ are fundamental in this process (Sandoval, Muñoz-Martínez and Márquez, 2021) because it is not easy to apply the *Index* to oneself; however, it is also very difficult to obtain such support. Without a doubt, there are many people competent

to support others in the use of the *Index for inclusion* or other instruments; however, they are not always available to participate in projects that could last for several academic years.

In accompanying schools, it is vital to know how to develop a relationship based on mutual trust, which cannot be based on haphazard volunteerism. On the contrary, it must be built up over time based on clear conditions and mutual responsibilities in accordance with the capacity of each school and the people who act as the ‘critical friends’.

Even though the indicators and questions of the *Index* point towards what the inclusive values, policies and practices might be, what is certain is that this is insufficient when it comes to implementing them. The same critical friend or another participant in the process, who had been able to help detect that something was not functioning properly e.g. a student body that does not work cooperatively, is not always prepared to advise on how to appropriately improve the situation.

In those school improvement experiences where academic teams have participated more extensively, we have found difficulties in obtaining greater participation from the families and especially from the students. The voice of these actors usually remains in the background. Undeniably, this is not a problem of the *Index*; on the contrary, it encourages their use as a strategic tool. As critical friends, we are committed to learning how to make these voices better heard if we want to continue supporting schools on their journey to become more inclusive.

There are different instruments and strategies (Azorín and Saldoval, 2019) that are useful in helping schools to review and guide their progress in terms of inclusion. The Index for Inclusion is, obviously, very effective for those tasks. But it is not clear which of them is more efficient with regard to the constraints under which, in general, most schools operate

under to fulfil this target. Currently, when there is already a lot of theoretical work in the field (Amor *et al.*, 2018) more comparative and collaborative research is needed to resolve this question among those who pursue the same dream.

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