

Can Mexico Achieve an Inclusive Education? An Analysis of Higher Education Policies of Recent Decades

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the changes that have been made in Mexican higher education policies, over the last two decades, regarding inclusion. Disability has been an issue of educational policies since 19th century, however, this problem was addressed from the perspective of special education and the governmental strategies were mainly focused on basic education. It was not until the end of 20th century that the concept of inclusion was gradually introduced in all educational levels. Nevertheless, until now, there has not been a federal program that helps people with disabilities to enter, remain and graduate from higher education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, higher education, educational policies, disabled persons, vulnerability

1. Introduction

Currently, there are 7 million 751 people in Mexico with some form of disability, which represents 6.6% of the total population (National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics - INEGI, 2012b), thus placing them as the second most populous group, behind only the indigenous population. Despite this fact, the educational opportunities for these people are very low, especially, in higher education.

Among the main factors contributing to this problem are: the limited access available to them regarding formal education, the lack of public policies with an inclusive approach, the physical barriers, and negative attitudes towards this sector of the population.

This article reviews Mexico's educational policies over the last 20 years so as to analyze the manner in which the authorities have addressed educational equity and inclusion regarding people with disability.

2. Purposes and Perspectives of the Research

In this research we focus on the analysis of disability from the social vulnerability approach, along with the perspective of inclusive education. In particular, we are interested in finding out what the challenges and opportunities of disabled students are regarding their chances of enrolling, continuing their studies and completing higher education.

We begin by examining the social vulnerability perspective, since we understand disability as the result of the relationship between "external" and "internal" factors (Chambers, 1989). The former deals with the tensions, risks and threats which are a part of daily life; the latter is dependent upon the quantity and quality of the resources and knowledge available to the persons or groups so as to be able to address the said risks and threats and to manage their effects.

Vulnerability is the result of a process of imbalance in one or more of the dimensions that constitute human interaction: natural, physical, economic, social, political, technical, ideological, cultural, ecological and institutional (Gómez, 2007; Palacio, 2000). None of these dimensions operates on an isolated basis, on the contrary, when an individual or group is in a vulnerable situation, it is highly likely that it is due to deficiencies in a number of these dimensions.

For example, people with disabilities are vulnerable in their natural dimension due to suffering some form of deficiency in their functions or their corporal structure that impedes them from resolving, in an autonomous way, one or several of their personal necessities. Moreover, in Mexico, the majority of these individuals also tend to be economically vulnerable, in fact, almost a third of the households with one or more disabled members are among the two poorest deciles of the population (INEGI, 2012b). This situation increases their physical vulnerability, since - in general - these domestic units are located in zones where there is a lack of the most basic public services such as drinking water, drainage and electricity. Finally, disabled persons also tend to suffer technical vulnerability as a result of the limited access to formal education: almost a third of them do not attend school and the ones who do have an average attendance of 4.7 years, just half the national average (INEGI, 2012b).

It is important to note that although, within the phenomenon of disability, this imbalance is usually very high, it does not necessarily mean that all the disabled people face difficulties in all the ten dimensions considered within the social vulnerability approach. The differences between the levels of vulnerability depend upon the relationship between the external and the internal, to which we referred above.

The other pillar on which we rely is the inclusive education approach that, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is [...] a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children (UNESCO, 2005:13).

For its part, the term 'special educational needs' recognizes the different problems and deficiencies faced by the learners, not only those with some form of disability, but also those who are living on the street, the ones who have to work, those suffering extreme poverty and those experiencing malnutrition, as well as the physically, emotionally or sexually abused; those who have suffered due to war or armed conflicts, those with a lack of interest in learning and those who undergo classroom problems, whether pedagogical or relational (UNESCO, 1994).

Although initially, the approaches to inclusive education and special educational needs were focused on basic education, as seen in *The Salamanca Statement* and *Framework for Action on special needs education*, little by little, they have been extended to cover higher education. Nowadays, the UNESCO (2008) admits that it is necessary to broaden this perspective if the aim is to overcome the differences within and between the educational systems. Specifically, regarding higher education, it notes that large differences can still be observed in the enrollment and the permanence of the students, as well as emphasizing the need to strengthen the educational orientation and follow up processes based on the needs and demands of the students themselves.

In this sense, as part of our research, we are interested in the actions (and inactions) implemented by Mexico's higher education institutions and the general educational system, to assist vulnerable students, specifically those with some form of disability. In the following sections we analyze the main changes undergone - in this respect - within the realm of educational policies.

3. Equity and Vulnerable Groups in Higher Education

From the second half of the 20th Century to date, higher education in Mexico has increased and diversified dramatically, growing from a system which attended just over 80,000 students and was dominated by the state's public universities, to another that currently has around 3.5 million students and is composed by over 3,000 institutions in a variety of modalities.

Between 1980 and 2000, educational coverage grew slowly, increasing from 13.1% to 18.5%. However, the following decade registered a remarkable growth, reaching a level of 29.2% in 2010 (National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education - ANUIES, 2011). In 2013, the Secretariat of Public Education announced that educational coverage had attained a level of 29.2% (SEP, 2013a), which meant that higher education system had stopped growing and that only 3 out of every 10 people between the ages of 19 and 23 were actually able to attend higher education.

This scenario becomes even more complex if we analyze these statistics in light of other variables, such as the level of marginalization. The Mexican states with the highest levels of marginalization are far from attaining the national figure.

For example, in the school year 2012-2013, Chiapas registered a coverage rate of just 14.8%, Oaxaca 17.4%, Guerrero 17.4%, and Veracruz 22.9%. Only Puebla, which also suffers from a high level of marginalization, could reach a level of 32.4%. (SEP/National Information System for Educational Statistics - SNIEE, 2014).

If we compare these percentages with those registered in the most developed Mexican states, we observe that in Mexico City, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas and Coahuila - which have the lowest levels of marginalization - the coverage rates were 60.1%, 38.8%, 34.8% and 32.4%, respectively; in other words, above the national average. (SEP-SNIEE, 2014).

These examples provide us with an initial panorama of what is happening in higher education in Mexico, where, it seems that the state or region in which one is born is an important factor with regard to the access to educational opportunities.

Moreover, we can further refine our observational spectrum to focus on some of the most vulnerable groups. Concerning individuals living in poverty, Mexico has had some improvements; since the beginning of the 1990s, the participation of youths from this economic group entering higher education has increased constantly. In 1992, the estimation was that 84,028 youths belonging to the lowest income deciles (from I to IV) were enrolled in tertiary education; in the year 2000, the estimate was 254,991 and in 2010 the number had increased to 799,402 (Villa, 2013). Nevertheless, the contrast between 'the haves' and 'the have nots' is still very large. To date, the approximate estimate is that only 7 of every 100 youths from decil I attend higher education, meanwhile, in the most favored economic group, 47 of every 100 youngsters are registered in tertiary education (INEGI, 2012a).

With regard to gender, we can say that, from the start of the 21st Century, there is equity - on the national average - between male and female student enrollments. In the year 2000, 51.6% of enrolled students were male, whilst the remaining 48.4% were female. These percentages have been maintained in recent years; currently, the figures are 50.4% and 49.6%, respectively. Nevertheless, this parity is still not reflected within the institutions themselves since there remain several professional fields where women are underrepresented, such as engineering, the basic sciences and the field of agriculture, and still others where the female population make up the majority, for example, social sciences, humanities as well as the health sciences, especially in nursing (De Gray and Del Valle, 2012).

A further vulnerable group which is underrepresented in higher education is the native - or indigenous - peoples. It is calculated that 80.3% of the individuals between the ages of 15 and 29, who form part of a native ethnic group and speak their own languages do not attend school (National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination - CONAPRED, 2010). Besides, the proportion of those who do actually access higher education has been very low and highly variable in the last decade. In the year 2000, 4% of the indigenous population attended higher education; 2005 saw a slight increase when the proportion reached 4.7% (Gallart and Henríquez, 2006) but, in 2012, this figure dropped slightly to register just 3%.

Finally, we have the disabled group. As we have already stated, the current estimate is that there are 7,000,751 Mexicans with some form of disability. From this universe, 7.6% are aged between 15 and 29, the age group which includes those who should be attending Secondary or higher education. Nevertheless, these individuals have a very low average educational attendance of just 4.7 years, and though around 45% of them have attended school, at least, for a year of basic education, only 5.2% of them have attended higher education (INEGI, 2012b). The vulnerability of this population group is even reflected in the official Federal Government information, because, unlike with the other vulnerable groups, there is neither disaggregated information nor serial information available with which to draw comparisons, or to be able to make a more detailed analysis regarding their living conditions.

4. Disability as an Issue of Higher Education Policies

People with disability began to form part of the discourse and the policies of equity regarding higher education towards the end of the 20th Century. As happened in other educational systems, such as those of the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Spain (Borland & James, 1999; Castro & Abad, 2009; Paul, 2000), this group began to make itself felt, mainly as a result of the discussion that had been ongoing in the international arena and which promoted the enactment of declarations, conventions and frameworks of action in favor of their rights. For its part, the increasing momentum towards inclusive education allowed an ever-increasing number of people with disabilities to complete both their basic and high school education and thus, slowly, generated a demand for access to higher education.

In Mexico, it wasn't until 1995 that, for the first time, a Federal policy was designed for this part of the population, under the name of the National Program for the Wellbeing and Incorporation of People with Disability (Zedillo, 1995). Its main objective was to promote the participation of people with disability, as well as achieve the full realization of their rights and quality attention in the fields of health, job training, transportation and education. The impact that this program had on education, and particularly on higher education, were null, since the changes aimed for were never incorporated into the Federal or institutional policies, nor in the regulatory frameworks and much less in the daily educational practices.

In 2001, under the new Federal Government, the National Consultative Council for the Integration of Disabled People was created, then, a year later, the decree for the National Program for the Strengthening of Special Education and Educational Integration was issued; this was focused mainly on basic, high school and special education (SEP, 2002) since a large part of the structure for special education continued to operate despite the fact that, from 1993, with the introduction of the National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education, the educational services were decentralized and the process of the integration of disabled students was initiated in regular schools.

As for higher education, it was only taken into consideration in two instances: the first one as a platform to promote awareness and information about the needs arising from disability among students, teaching staff and parents, and the second one as part of the agreements and links that the Sub-Secretariat of Basic Education and Teacher Training tried to establish with other educational levels (SEP, 2002).

For its part, the National Education Program 2001-2006 treated the school situation of disabled children and youths tangentially. For example, the program recognized that, at the time, there were around 190,000 disabled people who were receiving no formal education whatsoever. It also assumed the limitations of the educational system to identify the necessities of this part of the population, along with the problems that had arisen by attempting to integrate disabled students into the regular schools (SEP, 2001). Nevertheless, of the few specific measures that were destined to attend the disabled, none of them were aimed at higher education, but rather towards basic and high school education.

Another educational policy developed during this period was the Manual for the Integration of Persons with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions, developed by the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES, 2002). This generated great expectations given the position held by the ANUIES regarding the definition, discussion and implementation of the policies and financing of higher education. However, the said manual was not binding. As the ANUIES itself sustained, this was only a document whose main objective was to "guide the people in charge of the higher education institutions to promote equality and broaden opportunities to the persons with disabilities in the institutions of higher education throughout the country." (ANUIES, 2002:10)

Among the most important actions proposed in the program were: 1) organize an internal network within the higher education institutions so they could become acquainted with and delegate the actions and responsibilities between the different bodies; 2) form an Inclusive University Committee with representatives from both the universities and the people with disabilities; 3) elaborate a program for an Inclusive University that would reflect the necessities of the disabled people and the philosophy of each institution; 4) create an external network for the development and evaluation of the Program; 5) promote actions to achieve full physical and administrative access to all persons; 6) evaluate the possibilities to make changes to the curricula of the academic programs; 7) increase the efficient use of the different human, academic, administrative, material and physical resources; and 8) outline the necessary criteria for the monitoring and evaluation of the Program (ANUIES, 2002).

Through this work, the ANUIES tried to encompass the different aspects of institutional life in order to promote the development of inclusive universities. However, to date, we have been unable to find any evaluation or archival information that allows us to assess the results of this program, since, as we mentioned, it had no obligatory character and its completion depended mainly upon the interest and knowledge - of this problem - possessed by the authorities of higher education institutions.

Thereafter, the issue of the disabled in the educational system seemed to be diluted. In the following sexennial period, the Education Sector Program 2007-2012 considered this problem from the perspective of vulnerability, which, in effect, would have been an advance if they had recognized the particularities of each vulnerable group.

However, the plan regarded the problem from a very general point of view, fundamentally, under the scope of quality in education (SEP, 2007). But, moreover, the document was not aimed specifically at the disabled population, but rather towards the native peoples and those who were living in poverty.

Similarly, during this period, the National Program for the Development of People with Disabilities (PRONADDIS) 2009 – 2012 was developed as a way to accomplish the proposals of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (2006), which Mexico signed and ratified in 2007. Specific new objectives were established, among them: “Improve the quality of education and extend the opportunities of access, permanence, graduation and academic achievement for the population with disabilities in the different types, levels and modalities of the National Education System” (CONADIS, 2009:36). The National Commission for People with Disabilities (CONADIS) was in charge of the coordination of the program but other Federal agencies were to participate in achieving each objective.

But, most of the document was dedicated to describing the program itself. In the educational arena, the proposed policies were of a general character, they did not focus on one educational level, except in the case of one strategy which was aimed specifically at high school education, and neither were specific objectives determined, nor the time scale for their completion and, for this reason, it was difficult for the program to be evaluated.

Currently, there are three Federal documents in which the relationship between disability and education are mentioned directly or indirectly: the Education Sector Program 2013-2018, the National Program for the Development and Inclusion of Disabled People 2014-2018 and the Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination, created in 2003, and which has since been amended, enlarged, and certain articles were repealed in 2014.

The former deals with the policies provided so far to the disabled regarding inclusion and equity and also recognized that some of the actions to improve educational services have fallen short of their goals, especially with regard to the most vulnerable groups. It is also noted that, to date, there are still important gaps regarding access, permanence, participation and the educational achievement of students with special needs. Furthermore, it appeals to the compromise taken on by the system and the educational institutions regarding the creation of conditions and strategies to enable people to fully exercise their right to education.

In this regard, Objective 3 of the Education Sector Program proposes to: “Ensure greater educational coverage, inclusion and equity to all population groups for the construction of a more just society” (SEP, 2013b: 54). Specifically, for persons with disability, the aim is to promote new models and facilities for the provision of educational services. To do so, several strategies are proposed such as: mainstreaming the inclusive approach in the regulatory framework of all educational levels; the promotion of inclusive practices in all the institutions; the improvement of the integration process for students with disabilities in regular schools through the capacity building among the teaching staff, managers and supervisors; the development of methodological strategies and educational materials consistent with the different types of disabilities; the design of technical and pedagogical resources from the perspective of inclusion for teaching staff and managers; the distribution of financial supports so that disabled students can stay in the educational system; and the elimination of physical barriers to foster the full participation of all students (SEP, 2013b).

In a similar vein, Objective 4 of the National Program for the Development and Inclusion of Disabled People states its aim as being to: “Strengthen the participation of persons with disabilities in both inclusive and special education, as well as in cultural activities, sport and tourism” (Official National Daily Gazette - DOF, 2014a: s/p). There are seven different strategies defined in Objective 4, of which 3 are related to education. The guidelines are highly varied, including the most general ones, such as: promoting the right to education and the prohibition of any form of discrimination, and the most concrete ones, such as: the distribution of educational grants and materials.

It should be noted that this program dedicates one of its strategies to the development of research into inclusive education throughout all the educational levels, as well as the promotion of scientific and technological work among the disabled community. It also seeks to stimulate the participation of this community in the programs and financial supports of the National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT), along with encouraging the design of universal equipment, plus the development of goods, services and research specifically for disabled people (DOF, 2014a).

Finally, there is the Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination. In this case, there are no significant changes from the previous Law issued in 2003. Basically, the theme of education is present in Chapters II and IV. The former refers to the measures laid out to prevent discrimination. Discriminatory actions within the educational system are defined as follows:

Prohibiting access or permanence in public or private education, as well as access to grants and incentives in schools;

The use of contents, methods and/or educational devices which are contrary to equality, or which disseminate a condition of subordination; [...]

Limiting access to, and permanence in, programs and vocational training (DOF, 2014b:7)

For its part, Chapter IV is organized around the measures aimed at educational leveling, inclusion and affirmative actions. Regarding leveling strategies, it considers all the measures related to physical accessibility, the adaptation of spaces, the distribution of materials, books and official communications in Braille, the use of sign-language interpreters and the eradication of the discriminatory requirements that impede access and permanence in schools or workplaces.

Among the measures of inclusion are the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies in favor of the right to equality and non-discrimination, education to promote equality and diversity throughout the national education system, the development of campaigns to promote people's sensibility and awareness against discriminatory actions and attitudes. Finally, affirmative actions are defined as all those which favor access, permanence and educational achievement of both the underrepresented groups and those groups who are discriminated in public spaces (DOF, 2014b).

5. Final Considerations

In Mexico, the topic of educational inclusion and disability was incorporated as an issue in public policies around two decades ago. Although the first educational institutions for the disabled and for the training of teaching staff in this area were opened in the 60s of the 19th century (SEP, 2010), the policies of the Mexican state with regard to this sector of the population were based on the perspective of 'normalization' and special education, a tendency which was maintained until the 90s of the 20th Century. That is to say, for a long time, disabled people were considered as unable, or unfit, to take part in the regular education system and, as a consequence, were separated or segregated and often excluded from formal education.

In this sense, the policies and programs that have been implemented - from 1995 to date - have constituted a significant progress since, increasingly, they have been aimed at achieving the wellbeing, the respect for the rights and the full development of this part of the population; in effect, reflecting the changes undergone in the international arena, along with the recommendations and guidelines of the international organizations.

However, these efforts have been insufficient to bring about real change in the educational institutions. One of the main difficulties has been the actual design of public policies and Federal programs. In most cases, it has been indicated that they are nonbinding, thus meaning they have been limited to issuing recommendations or general guidelines whose performance has been dependent on the willingness and the compromise of the institutional authorities.

This is the case of the National Program for the Wellbeing and Incorporation of People with Disabilities (1995), as well as the National Program for the Development of People with Disability 2009-2012. Both the aforementioned programs recognize that, in Mexico, there has been a lack of public policies and services adequate for this sector of society and both propose the achievement of certain objectives on a national scale, with their respective lines of action or strategies in different fields: health, education, labor market, culture, sport and recreation. They even designate the different Federal agencies which are to participate in achieving the objectives and also determine which of them will be charged with the monitoring and evaluation of the actions taken. Nevertheless, none of their actions provide specific parameters for their achievement, thus, there are no time limits or quantifiable goals, neither is there a proportional distribution of the work to be undertaken by each of the federal agencies involved, nor the assignation of any material or economic resources.

In the case of the National Program for the Strengthening of Special Education and Educational Integration (2002), since it was directed exclusively to the education sector, it was clear that its completion should have stayed under the management of the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), however, this latter also provoked its failure to comply with its general objectives. As we said, the coordination of the program was originally undertaken by the General Directorate of Special Education; nevertheless, this office was discarded – as a result of the federalization of education – and was never replaced by any other Federal agency.

In this program, we can observe the influences of the changes that have taken place in the international arena regarding disability, at least on a conceptual level, since both inclusion and special educational needs have been the two main pillars of articulation. However, the weak point of this policy is precisely that related to the objectives, lines of action and operation, which, in a similar way to the two programs previously mentioned, are of a purely general nature and offer just few elements for their evaluation.

The most recent of the governmental strategies: the National Program for the Development and Inclusion of Disabled People 2014-2018 offers certain new features compared with its predecessors. Firstly, it circumscribes specific lines of action for each of the objectives with transversely articulated strategies, defines indicators to assess the objectives, and designates the Federal and State dependencies, as well as the autonomous constitutional bodies and social participation agencies which are to take part in the implementation of the Program. Additionally, there is a section dedicated to the detailed distribution of the Federal budget. In the case of public education, the financing is divided into four programs: Education for Disabled People, the Program for the Strengthening of Special Education and Inclusive Education, the Program for the Inclusion and Educational Equity, and the National Grants Program (DOF, 2014).

However, despite its meticulousness, the National Program has not advanced much from the aforementioned situation. The majority of its guidelines remains general and aims at the whole educational spectrum, in other words, there is no differentiation between the actions oriented to basic education, which is where there is a larger presence of disabled students, and the actions that focus on Secondary and higher education, which capture a very low proportion of the disabled population. Moreover, there is little articulation between the axes that make up the whole program, which means that certain strategies appear to be isolated whilst others are duplicated. The same happens with regard to the functions designated to the Federal dependencies. As happened before, once again there is no obligatory character to the program; in all cases they are well intentioned proposals, which contain neither specific compromises nor obligations, neither for the federal or State agencies, nor for the educational institutions.

Meanwhile, regarding the programs issued by the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), in the first one, the National Education Program 2001-2006, this issue appears in three instances: in the diagnosis as part of the problems of the education gap faced by vulnerable groups, in the section concerning remedial education policies in basic education, and in the policies aimed at extending the educational coverage - with equity - in Secondary education. In neither of these sections do we find an objective nor a specific line of action to strengthen the coverage for disabled people in higher education.

In the Education Sector Program 2007-2012, it doesn't even mention any of the problems related to education for disabled people. And, finally, in the Education Sector Program 2013-2018, in addition to dealing with the general diagnostic of the general education system, it includes policies on educational coverage, inclusion and equity, in which, as we stated previously, it proposes new lines of action aimed at disabled people; however, once again, these lines of action refer to the general education system and, as a consequence, there is no recognition of the specific needs and demands required by disabled population regarding access, permanence and graduation from each of the educational levels, nor does it comment on how to achieve their transition from basic education to Secondary and higher education.

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