

## **Inclusive education inside the classroom:**

### **The San Pedro School in Monterrey, Mexico**

#### ***Classroom zoom-in to inclusive practices***

#### **Introduction**

This report furthers the analysis on inclusive practices at the school level by focusing on inclusive practices within the classroom. In particular, the analysis explores inclusive teacher practices with affective, social or intellectual purposes geared to expanding meaning and relevance of learning for all students. These practices are guided by the inclusive pedagogy principles of *co-agency*, *trust*, *unpredictability*, collaboration and *working together*, and access for *all*.

The analysis was based on the San Pedro School, also included as a Case Study in Phase I – Mexico of this research. The analysis was based on the data collected previously at the school, as well as four teacher interviews, eight class observation sessions, and three focus groups with students, carried out exclusively for this analysis. When relevant, information from the San Pedro School Case Study has been included in this report, especially from Sections 4, 5 and 6.

#### **Inclusion through practices with affective purposes**

Teachers emphasize that in order to guarantee the inclusion of all students and an opportunity for relevant and meaningful learning for all it is essential to establish a connection with each student. Practices with affective purposes linking feelings, values, motivation and attitudes in students are highlighted by teachers at the San Pedro School as the “building block” on which a teacher can then promote a productive classroom environment, both in terms of learning and in terms of social interactions with other students. All teachers emphasized this general vision for inclusive learning.

The practices highlighted by teachers for affective purposes include those focused on (1) Building trust and a personal connection with each student; (2) Understanding and accepting children’s needs beyond the classroom; and (3) Understanding and recognizing children’s backgrounds, and responding to them adequately.

All teachers interviewed emphasized the importance of recognizing the student as an individual and building a relationship with him or her in order to work effectively. Part of this connection is based on the trust and mutual respect between the teachers and the student. Teachers spoke of this role as a natural part of their responsibility, speaking of it as a kind of “fundamental base” on which to build further interactions with the student. In general, teachers emphasize that for students to participate and learn adequately in school they need to feel comfortable emotionally.

There is a strong sense among interviewed teachers that this is a kind of prerequisite to effective learning and even effective collaboration and interactions between the student and his or her peers.

Teachers emphasize that they promote not just the trust that students vest in themselves as teachers, but also in the self-confidence and trust of each student in him or herself. Teachers argue that this process of building trust and a personal connection is a “balance” between ensuring that students know teachers are there to support and guide them, but that they will not do things *for* the student: rather that it is the student’s job to learn and succeed.

Teachers 2 and 3 interviewed for this study commented that such relationships allow children to feel recognized and engaged as soon as they walk in the room, because they know that someone there cares for them. All teachers emphasized that they did “small things”, like always saying hello, meeting children’s eyes, engaging them as they walked into the classroom, smiling, and making time for students when they wanted to talk about something. Teachers emphasize that more than specific “practices” they perceive that these small gestures are part of the general character and attitude of teachers who are committed to their students.

Teacher 3 emphasizes that building these relationships later allow teacher-student to have difficult conversations about obstacles to effective learning that the student might be facing at a particular point in time. For example, she mentions a student with whom she built a strong relationship; when he started having a difficult time getting along with his peers, she pulled him aside and was able to have an honest dialogue about his behavior. In this way, such relationships also prevent students’ isolation down the road if they are having academic or behavioral problems.

In general, teachers observed in the classroom do not seem to be stressed “teaching to the test” or creating a high-stakes, high-stress learning environment, but rather seem to appreciate that students need to learn things beyond the textbook and indeed that they learn from each other who they are and how to be, in addition to pure academic content. In interviews teachers emphasize that this reflects the general philosophy of the school, where the focus is on integral human development of all students, and not purely in academic skill. This vision seems to strongly permeate to the classroom level, in general changing the discourse from one of “good” and “bad” students (academically) to one that seems more equally dominated by issues of self-esteem and capacity for getting along with others, along with academics.

One of the most interesting implications of this focus on integral human development is the inclusion at the school level of a focus on the student’s spirituality as well. Given that the school is Catholic, all students are instructed in Catechism. Part of this spiritual instruction includes a daily classroom practice of contemplation and meditation. All students have a daily pause in their work activities for a moment of reflection, gratitude and meditation at the school. Though religious, the good practice in this sense is the attention to *all* needs of the student, including the spiritual dimension, with its natural limitations given its focus on Catholic teachings exclusively. Again, these practices stress that students are more than just a “good” or “bad” student label, opening up more possibilities for students to define and articulate themselves in the school environment.

A final strategy used at the classroom level for affective purposes is a general preoccupation by the teacher of the student's background and needs, even outside of the classroom walls. The three teachers interviewed highlighted the importance of understanding where children are coming from and recognizing this history in order to build from it and understand it. Contrary to other schools, teachers (while recognizing that some elements were beyond their control) in general sought to understand children's needs beyond the classroom, and when possible made the appropriate liaisons (with parents, the principal or the school psychologist) to aid the student. Teachers seem to depart from the assumption that any issue that obstructs student learning – even if not directly related to “content” – is their issue, too.

### **Inclusion through practices with social purposes**

Other teaching practices that help create environments that are adequate and promote learning and meaning for all students are those focused on fostering and cultivating the adequate social environment for students to learn in. It is important to note that teachers in the San Pedro School emphasize the importance of the social relationships between students even before they delve into intellectual strategies that foster inclusion, highlighting the fact that they perceive that an adequate social environment is a prerequisite for inclusive intellectual practices at the classroom level.

The practices highlighted by teachers for intellectual purposes include those focused on (1) Recognizing and being attentive to the social interactions of children, and (2) Developing socio-emotional skills in all children to recognize their own feelings, those of others, and deal and manage conflict adequately. These practices especially reflect the inclusive pedagogy principles of *co-agency*, *trust* and *working together* in the learning of these schools and in the creation of adequate classroom environments.

The teachers interviewed all emphasized in different ways the importance of social interactions between students and of guaranteeing a productive classroom environment by being attentive to these. Even before mentioning strategies to include students in relevant learning, teachers highlighted the importance of bringing each student into the classroom, into the group, and making him or her feel a part of it. Being responsive to these dynamics allows the teachers to help promote a good classroom environment, which can then make learning for all easier.

For example, a second grade teacher at the school comments on the importance of setting the right classroom environment when she reflects on her first steps in the school year with her new group:

*“The classroom environment was a bit tense because students were barely starting to get to know each other... Well, they knew each other from the year before, but then they were mixed into my new group, so they were getting to know each other, and there were a few conflicts... it was a tense environment at first. I started doing activities so that they could get to know each other, who they were, where they came from, what they liked... In order to get along better...” – Teacher*

What the teacher's comments highlight is first her ability to *assess* and understand the thermometer of social interactions in the classroom, and then also *act upon* those interactions. These two skills (being attentive to social interactions and acting upon a diagnoses of those social interactions) are common across teachers interviewed.

Another example can be seen in this text. The San Pedro School has a day of "retreat" where all students spend a day away from the school doing various educational activities. Teachers also emphasize this retreat allows a space reserved for building strong relationships away from the day-to-day of classroom activities. Teachers emphasize that sometimes grade levels are divided in small closer groups of friends, which may leave someone out of not allows students to fully develop:

*"Now that we have the retreat coming up I am wondering how to use that retreat to integrate the group a little more... They work collaboratively within the classroom, but at recess they make little groups at recess [and that is where some students are more alone]." – Teacher*

Teachers use this social awareness to observe interactions both inside and outside the classroom, and guarantee that all students feel included in such a way that then allows them to focus fully on learning in the classroom.

Another example where these sets of practices are clearly seen are in classroom seating arrangements. Teacher 3 recognizes that it is important that students sit with those they feel comfortable with, especially if they are shy students, but it is also key to have them learn to interact with others and make new friends. For this, a teacher comments that she starts the year by having them sit where they want in pairs, ensuring that they are with those who are already their friends. As the year goes on, she switches them around randomly as she sees fit in order to engage them with each other and have them make new friends:

*"They often sit together because they are friends from the year before, which is good. But then I will move them around, every once in a while, because they can't be the whole year with the same pair... boys and girls, shy ones with more outgoing ones... This also helps them see the way others think and work." – Teacher*

A second set of practices related to social inclusion is around developing students' social and emotional skills. One teacher interviewed explains that under the philosophy of the school that emphasizes integral human development, not having the skills to recognize, identify, feel and act responsibly on one's feelings can stunt one's own growth or relations with others. A key program that the school that focused on this goal is "Aulas en Paz" (Classrooms in Peace in its literal English translation).

The program comes from Colombia, where it was designed and evaluated by Dr. Enrique Chauv of the University de los Andes and the civil society organization Convivencia Productiva A.C. The program's goal is to give tools to students, teachers and parents to foster a positive school climate inside and outside the classroom. It includes an element of curriculum within regular classroom activities, focalized work with students with exceptionally high or low socio-emotional skills through extracurricular clubs implemented at recess time or after school, and a final component of work with parents, which includes workshops and home visits in some cases. More information can be found in the San Pedro Case Study.

A teacher comments that the program fosters a healthy and cohesive climate in her classroom because everyone works on the same materials, so that students have a shared set of experiences and knowledge about social and emotional interactions that they can refer to as a group. The entire classroom curriculum is child and age-friendly, so that students easily grasp the material and its application in their daily lives. For example, the program includes a component of a story with about bullying and a little pig; both the teachers interviewed and the students refer to it to understand similar situations in the classroom and school. Even more powerful examples come from the use of specific practices that the program works with, for example the use of specific body language to describe how we feel or phrases such as “like a turtle” or “like a lion” to describe different feelings. Ultimately, the program gives tools to students that bring them into the room and the group, instead of isolating them.

Teachers also comment that the program is particularly useful for integrating students with behavior problems because it works with them not as a separate group that can self-identify as “troublemakers”, but rather with the entire group. This is done through the focalized groups, which bring the students with the least socio-emotional skills in close groups with the students who have the most of such skills, integrating instead of isolating the former.

### **Inclusion through practices with intellectual purposes**

Employing techniques that expand meaning, relevance and reasoning for learning of all students is key in promoting inclusion at the classroom level. Teachers interviewed at the San Pedro School emphasize that children in their classes are often at very different levels in their learning, especially if they have arrived to the school recently, and it is a challenge to ensure that all students have access to the same quality of learning in the classroom.

The practices highlighted by teachers for these intellectual purposes include those focused on (1) Using differences in student achievement to help everyone’s learning, instead of hindering it; (2) Participative learning that allows children to be the protagonists of their learning processes. These practices especially reflect the inclusive pedagogy principles of access for *all*, *co-agency* and *unpredictability* to guarantee learning for all and (3) Practices that help give them feedback about individual learning and techniques that allow teachers to respond to different learning styles.

The San Pedro School does not stratify students by achievement. Though teachers “definitely know” between them students who tend to have an easier time in the classroom, classes remain mixed. This allows students to avoid the stigma of being in “lower-level” classes instead allowing for equal learning expectations for all students.

Additionally, teachers in the classroom all emphasize that it is important to use differences in students' learning and achievement to strengthen the learning of all, instead of believing that differences in achievement are a barrier to this. In fact, a teacher mentions that this scheme also helps the more able students stay on task and engaged. For example, all teachers mentioned that a common strategy in this sense is that of "student tutors":

*"Students are very collaborative with the exception of this girl who becomes very impatient because she grasps everything very quickly. So I tell her to go and teach others... while I look over the work of other students, and when I get back to her, she's helped others too and not become distracted herself..." – Teacher*

More intentionally, two teachers also mentioned constantly placing students in mixed pairs. In this way they ensure that the student who is more able with the material can practice and solidify his or her knowledge by teaching another, while the student who is struggling gets one-on-one help from another student.

A second set of practices related to this purpose covered by teachers and observed in classrooms related to engaging students actively. Teachers commented first on the importance of tapping into students' intrinsic motivations for learning, while recognizing that they are often "constrained by the curriculum," also highlighted that there are often moments within each unit for introducing topics that students want to learn about. This engages more students and allows them to more actively interact with the material, expanding meaning for all:

*"I start by asking them what they want, what is it they want to learn, what is it they want to know... and sometimes I base my work on that. Sometimes the material is too difficult, too complicated... So we have to make it easier for them to understand... the most important thing is to make it interesting to them." – Teacher*

Though two teachers mention opening up subject matter to students, it is not clear from classroom observations in practice how much of learning is dictated by students' interests versus a narrowly focused curriculum.

A second way teachers commented they brought students actively into the classroom was through dynamics like the use of participative methodologies that helped students take an active role in classroom activities. For example, a teacher commented she would form classroom committees around different problems – trash on the floor, classroom conflicts between students – and task the committee with finding a solution and acting upon it. This helps engage students at the deepest level, recognizing them as individuals and helping them discover their own potential, ensuring their future engagement in classroom activities and helping them more readily extract meaning from all learning opportunities.

Finally, the teachers interviewed for this project stress the importance of the "Sistema 1," a pedagogical set of materials already covered in the case study for this school. They emphasize that it is useful first of all in providing up to date and individualized information on how each student is doing, allowing them to focus on students that they may be missed otherwise.

Secondly they emphasize that it allows them to present material in different ways, both through the contents of the program as well as on their own, because it helps them pinpoint where students' strengths lie. For example:

*“What I try to do with Sistema 1 is... for example I go back to the angles example. I heard from a mother that a girl was really struggling, but this year was doing so well, and that's because she learns visually and [you cover it too.] And I say yes, don't worry, with Sistema 1, we also Project a visual picture of the angles, you can see them too... and it is a way of motivating those visual students to learn at the same rhythm as everyone else.”*  
– Teacher

## **Conclusions**

### **1. Value of practices that arise from particular classroom situations**

Teachers interviewed and classrooms observed for this element of the project show that many of the most valuable practices that fostered inclusion at the classroom level were not derived from larger projects and programs, but rather very “small” practices that teachers often did. In fact many teachers were hesitant to call these habits, attitudes, behavior and processes as “practices”, and often referred to them as “small things” that needed to be done to respond to particular classroom situations. They also emphasized that class-based nature of these small practices, taking their cue of their need from the students and their environment.

### **2. Relationship between inclusion and effective teaching**

Another interesting element observed in this exploration of teacher practices for inclusion is the relationship between “inclusion” and “effective teaching”. Teachers often did not identify practices as focused on inclusion, but rather focused on effective teaching [for all]. This can be viewed in a positive way in the sense that teachers do not view inclusionary practices “for their own sake” in a way that could make them superficial, but rather remain committed to the end for which they are employed, which is to guarantee an education of quality for all children.

### **3. Sense of some elements being “pre-requisites” to effective learning for all**

All teachers interviewed viewed affective connections with the students as the most basic prerequisite for inclusion in the classroom. After that they emphasized social well-being, and general good interactions between the student and others. Only afterwards did teachers mention the value of techniques that expand meaning for all. This sense of a “ladder” to really get the change to engage each student in effective and meaningful learning poses interesting questions for further study.