

Inclusive Schools

Learn and live together in democracy

Second Phase Overall Research Report

February 2016

This report furthers the analysis on inclusive practices at the school level by focusing on inclusive strategies within the classroom at the Argentinian, Mexican, Romanian and Slovakian contexts. In particular, the analysis explores inclusive teaching 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*.

1. Introduction

With the goal of deepening the analysis of strategies that foster inclusion in schools, the second phase of the project accounts for practices that promote effective learning from a bottom-up approach in the Argentinean, Mexican, Romanian and Slovak contexts. A sample of schools from the 1st phase has been examined in their ‘smallest’ unit in order to focus the study on teacher-student relationship within the classroom as environments where learning opportunities are available for all.

As a sociocultural perspective that focuses on how learning occurs in the community of the classroom (Florian and Kershner, 2009), “Inclusive Pedagogy“ has been here used as a theoretical framework that enables the analysis of practices with transformative learning capacity. These are characterized by ways and means that engage children actively in their process of learning without distinction of socioeconomic status, ethnic origin, gender or disability. Through key pedagogical principles that work together to guide decision-making processes, this approach involves teaching practices with specific purposes, such as affective (those which strengthen confidence, security, competence, control), social (those which increase acceptance, belonging and community) and intellectual (those that help ensure access, enhancing relevance, meaning and reasoning) for all students (Florian, 2010).

Within this framework, the objective of this second phase was to explore the extent to which teachers’ practices and beliefs at the schools under study are aligned to the inclusive pedagogy approach and the principles that guide them. This report presents a detailed description of teaching practices and tools identified as having an impact on pupils’ involvement in each country. Based on each Country Report and its the main findings, challenges and aspects to improve in each context, each country research was carried out in one school selected from the 1st phase sample. Data has been collected through interviews for teachers (3-5 per school, see Annex A), focus groups with students (5-10 see Annex B), surveys for students, and class observations (4 per school, see Annex C).

In order to provide a complete picture of the kind of practices needed in order to transform schools into more inclusive learning communities, this phase added depth and scope complementing the original project, which examined inclusion policies and practices more generally at the school level.

2. Argentina: Zoom-in to inclusive practices at the classroom level

2.1 Inclusion through practices with affective purposes

Success ingredients to enhance teaching practices with affective purposes in the Argentinean school involved teachers that care for each pupil's needs and that make students know that their learning and wellbeing is a priority. By showing them real interest in their learning, teachers increase motivation and commitment for academic success.

Offering alternative opportunities and paying close attention to their personal situations make teachers boost pupils' self-esteem, attitude and confidence towards learning. Standing on their side and stressing the value of everyone's work have proven to have impact on the most relegated students and their disposition towards learning. This caring attitude is complemented by mechanisms that help remove emotional obstacles and enhance pupils' trust in teachers and in themselves. In order to do that, teachers set time aside to ask pupils about their feelings and opinions. In addition, at the Argentinean school art has become a key transversal component as a way to foster everyone's participation, precisely to strengthen self-expression skills.

A wide range of informal mechanisms is developed to enhance children's expression and communication in class. From classmate spokesmen (*voceros*), to informal notes in handbooks, and even more alternative ways such as taking turns to whisper their doubts at teachers' ears, are some of the methods teachers come up with to guarantee that each of the students can raise their voice in class. In general, a common factor among teachers at this school was the emphasis put in the need to avoid pupils' embarrassment or fear for mistakes. Most teachers refer to "emotional blocking" as a major factor to address when students face learning difficulties. Therefore, they care about not promoting frustration or favoritism among students. Hence, flexibility is a term that comes to mind to describe strategies that teachers come up with to integrate everyone. For instance, providing different types of tasks for homework, being considered for personal situations and negotiating submission deadlines, are some of the most effective.

Moreover, teachers also tend to plan lessons and design activities that encourage pupils to make decisions and choose how to learn. Choosing topics, formats and different methods to access knowledge (for instance, going to the library, watching videos, interviewing key actors) boost students' self-confidence and thus engagement on school projects. Furthermore, most of the activities observed had a component where pupils are required to use their creativity to show what they understand after reading, listening to stories or just discovering new content. Here, the work with the assistant teachers is crucial since in pairs they can monitor and be more aware of larger groups. Focus on pupils' interests, needs and their capacity to choose, seem to make a difference in access to learning.

2.2 Inclusion through practices with social purposes

To promote peer culture in the classroom, teachers at the Argentinean school stress the importance of sharing with parents and even classmates the responsibility for student learning. To do that, they design tasks and assignments that require teamwork, workshops, co-evaluation and discussions. Not only these strategies foster social values but also raise their engagement towards learning.

Activities that result in more success are those where pupils are asked to help classmates with more difficulties or even from lower grades. Teachers believe that in this way even the not-so-engaged students become increasingly committed when they are placed in different positions, when they are given a teaching or leading role. Pupils seem to learn twice through

the metacognitive activity of thinking and planning how to explain certain content to others. That is why students are not separated according their ability, but to their interests, friendships and trust. In most cases they set activities where the fastest children are mixed with the ones who face more learning difficulties. From the lowest to highest grades, from writing skills to maths and arts, this feature was observed in most interviewed teachers' classrooms.

Along with the actions that favored tasks and activities that involved diverse modes of grouping by mixing students with different abilities, strategies that fostered students' sense of belonging also enhanced solidarity and mutual respect among students. Practices promoting different ways of working with others encourage acceptance of diversity and differences. This feeling is reinforced by the major role given to their families, no matter from which social background they come from. Teachers tend to design tasks that promote discussions and dialogue among students, and support from their parents. Since the 1st grade, open classes and workshops are implemented to provide families with tools to support their children's schooling. Since a great proportion of pupils' parents do not come from highly educated backgrounds and some are even illiterate, teachers develop a shared complicity with them by teaching parents how to support their children.

Teachers have detected a major and increasing involvement of Bolivian families in school activities thanks to these activities. They even argued that this managed to build support and constituted alternative ways to engage pupils facing drawbacks on their academic performance.

2.3 Inclusion through practices with intellectual purposes

At the Argentinean school, teachers try to resist and oppose limits on learning created by external forces by adapting the curriculum content to contextual issues such as local elections, football cups, neighborhood matters; this allowed more students to be in conditions to participate and contribute and some of them happened to be surprisingly active. In addition to this, opening and widening the models of learning and approaches to planning enable the use of creative tasks and projects such as the radio program, the kiosk, and games that also expand learning opportunities by responding to individual's needs.

By organizing the content according to multidisciplinary projects or nodal questions, teachers manage to facilitate the generation of meaningful knowledge related issues that are relevant for pupils. According to teachers, one of the most effective ways to deal with children who lag behind in class is to adapt content to students' interests, backgrounds or previous ideas. Creating such learning opportunities extends what is ordinarily available for all learners instead of just for some. For instance, everyday issues and conflicts from the neighborhood and the news are highly strategic to engage students.

Moreover, art is usually the heart of the projects of most subjects done by art and music teachers. At 7th grade, the teacher planned a series of lessons that involved launching a school radio program. This enabled her to develop a more sophisticated understanding of some of the children up to the point that she was extremely surprised by what students were able to do. The teacher argued that pupils were much more imaginative than they used to be when working on more traditional activities. By selecting topics that they would have to talk about, drafting and composing the texts to transmit the information and ideas, pupils could integrate practices of reading comprehension and writing production. A wide range of topics generated interest in children that wouldn't normally participate in class. The radio provided a space that allowed spontaneous discussion about issues that would come up from their realities, and to which everyone could contribute with ideas. For instance, the teacher shared her experiences with a girl who was incredibly engaged with childrens' and citizens' rights.

She argued that at a typical class, the girl would not have participated at all, however through the radio activity she took an active role.

Another topic that proved very popular among students was the institutional and political organization of their neighborhood, which belongs to commune n° 8 of Buenos Aires city. The 6th grade Language and Informatics teacher, explained how hard it is to strictly follow a class plan, and shared a similar experience. In order to incorporate the children's voices to the daily curriculum and as a way to express their interests, she developed a Digital Newspaper. Likewise, students were motivated to participate, not only because of the ICT tools usage but also because they had the chance to include whatever topics interested them most. This allowed children to discover some new contents and deepen their understanding of others. In addition, a strategy that made 7th grade teacher realize how much alternative activities could affect pupils had to do with the South American and World Football Cup. Before that, she had not been able to scratch the surface of potential that they had.

Furthermore, although it might be a minor element, a strategy that actually makes a huge difference when it comes to engaging all pupils with the content and reasoning are the comprehension questions. When teachers elaborate certain kind of questions where students are required to link, compare, and associate the given information in order to elaborate their answers, their learning is stronger. Teachers are convinced that learning becomes easier and natural if the activities imply having fun. Therefore, instead of adding different or special methods for those children with learning difficulties, they implement strategies that are suitable to all by implementing games. Offering alternative ways to traditional academicist strategies has become a key strategy to foster learning for all.

3. Mexico: Zoom-in to inclusive practices at the classroom level

3.1 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 Mexican 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. 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.

Teachers 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 attitude of teachers who are committed to their students. One of them, emphasizes that building these relationships later allows 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. Such relationships also prevent students' isolation down the road if they are having academic or behavioral problems.

One of the most interesting implications of the school's focus on integral human development is the inclusion at the school level on the development of 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 the school focuses on Catholic teachings exclusively, the good practice in this sense is the attention to all needs of the student, including the spiritual dimension. These practices stress that students are more than just a "good" or "bad" label, opening up more possibilities for pupils to define and articulate themselves in the school environment.

3.2 Inclusion through practices with social purposes

The practices highlighted by teachers for social 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.

The teachers interviewed emphasized in different ways the importance of social interactions between students. 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. Teachers use this social awareness to observe interactions 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.

An example where these teacher attitudes are clearly seen are in classroom seating arrangements. Teacher 3, for example, recognizes that it is important that students sit with those they feel comfortable with, especially if they are shy, but it is also key to have them learn to interact with others. Another teacher comments that she starts the year by having pupils 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 in order to engage them have them make new friends.

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), described more fully in the case study section.

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 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 discuss hard-to-talk-about 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 *clubs*, 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.

3.3 Inclusion through practices with intellectual purposes

The practices highlighted by teachers for intellectual purposes include those focused on (1) Using differences in student achievement to help everyone’s learning; (2) Participative learning that allows children to be the protagonists of their learning processes and (3) Practices that help give teachers feedback about individual learning and techniques that allow them to respond to different learning styles.

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”.

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

Teachers commented they brought students into the classroom through dynamics like the use of participative methodologies that helped students take an active role in 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 that they 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 students’ strengths.

4. Romania: Zoom-in to inclusive practices at the classroom level

4.1 Inclusion through practices with affective purposes

To begin with, it is necessary to point out that not always teaching practices aligned to inclusive pedagogy at the Romanian school. However, this enables to reflect how scattered and hidden inclusive practices are in the educational system and how much visions about the school can differ from the point of view of the Principal and within the classroom. What follows is a detailed description of general practices that are worth to take into account from the Romanian experiences.

The atmosphere during classes – without exception – is warm; pupils and teachers respect and trust each other. Teachers give positive messages to pupils (with some exceptions), encourage them to keep trying, and show trust in their capacity of learning – but this happens mostly for the whole classroom, not individually. Teachers are kind and patient, but they do not tolerate if pupils are not respectful to each other.

Theoretically, almost all of the interviewed teachers accepted and valued children's spontaneity. In practice, their behavior and acceptance varied from class to class. By the end of the day, teachers were asking for more discipline and were less willing to accept the children's spontaneous interventions. In classrooms with 25-29 children, it is impossible to meet the needs of all the pupils, however, ADHD or SEN children are allowed all possible concessions: they can move around, stand or walk, eat or drink water during classes, provided they do not disturb the others. Observations conducted during classes confirmed that children in 3rdA grade especially, and those in all the three 7th grades (Chemistry and one of the Maths classes) acted very spontaneously, even if some pupils intervened quite out of topic (barely connected to the teacher's questions). Thus, it is obvious that children feel encouraged to express their views, attitudes, and feelings even during classes.

Pupils are also in the same mood all the time. Sometimes, for instance by the end of the school day or school year or when they are exhausted after some tough tests/exams, many children cannot concentrate as much as during other days/classes. Teachers adapt their teaching and learning approaches according to the children's academic skills, change their design lessons or introduce some activities to help pupils relax when they are feeling stressed. The children who attended focus groups agree that atmosphere during Romanian classes was always tense; the teacher was demanding/severe, impatient with slower thinking children and highly discriminatory against those who were not among the best ones.

Student's involvement in decisions about where, when and with whom they learn is an unknown experience in Romanian schools, and also at the Horea School. It may happen in private schools, but definitely not yet in public schools. According to the interviews with teachers, there is only small room for children's participation in decision making, especially when it comes to content and forms of learning. Pupils cannot decide on what and how they learn. School curriculum is to a large extent determined by the state, and school itself provides no room for maneuver. Nevertheless, in some cases, teachers change the form of instruction when pupils come up with some suggestions for different activities during classes. Pupils usually are asked or they can make decisions about extracurricular activities. Principals and class masters consult them and decide on the optional subjects/courses or when and how to organize trips or other events in or out of school.

4.2 Inclusion through practices with social purposes

Success ingredients of teaching practices with social purposes at the Romanian school are influenced by the new school system: pupils enrolled in the preparatory class at 6 years old, are benefitting from a better organized classroom layout, adjusted to their preschool age needs, and a friendly and easy program/curricula as well. Therefore, the context enables teaching practices to provide more leisure and artistic activities, which improves the quality of social interactions between them: meeting daily on the carpet at their first class, many classes for reading stories, playing, drawing, singing, and physical exercises/ relaxation.

During class observations, the beneficial effects of this different "starting school for the first time" are obvious: smiling, relaxed, cheerful, active, cooperative, confident children, and warm relationships with their teacher. However, the two primary school teachers' attitudes are different. The primary school teacher (an elder one, nearing retirement age) of the 3rdC grade is more authoritative, more eager to ensure discipline during classes, but very attentive to each child and full of devotion. The other primary school teacher (3rdA grade), who also has university studies in the field of special education, uses more alternative methods.

The classroom seating arrangement is in its "normal" rigid layout – pupils sitting in twos, in three rows of desks. There is much that can be done to change how the space within classrooms is used as compared to three traditional rows of desks facing the front. Classroom layout is decided at the beginning of the school year; sometimes pupils change desks during classes based on their friendships. The interviews and focus groups show that there are some teachers who encourage classroom layout with circles, semicircles or in a U-shape form, which children like very much but most of the teachers speak about lack of time/ space or disruptions during classes.

Most of the time, the primary school teachers/ teachers are sitting at the front, near their desk. They get around between the rows only when looking at the pupils' individual work/ task. Some exercises are solved by the pupils who go to the blackboard in turns. When a pupil does not sustain attention to the task, the teacher prompts the pupils to answer different questions to find out if they understand the lesson/ ask the pupil to go to the blackboard and perform the exercise/ task.

Primary school classrooms are tidy, clean, welcoming, and decorated with many drawings and useful informative/ illustrative materials on the walls, most of them made by children. In contrast, the walls of the 5 to 8th grades are almost empty, except for a watch, coat of arms of Cluj, and eventually an icon, which decorate the walls. In one of the classrooms, the children decorated the walls with some drawings and other materials.

During break times, the pupils go out and play in the school yard, in groups. The younger ones are allowed to stay in the classroom if they want. We have not seen isolated or lonely children. In case of pushing or punching, the pupils and teachers on duty intervene immediately in order to protect pupils and provide a safe environment for them.

Since the principal and deputy actively and constantly promote the inclusive policy of the Romanian school, teachers do their best not to label pupils with learning difficulties, disabilities or special educational needs. In some cases, at the beginning of the school year, special educators ask for the pupils' classmates' attention and support with pupils who might have learning or behavioral difficulties, a strategy that works quite well. Unfortunately, this principle is not without flaws. Focus groups with children reveal that some children still felt excluded based on their ethnicity or disabilities. Some of the children also complained about being labelled as "stupid", or "Roma" or even threatened with physical injuries.

4.3 Inclusion through practices with intellectual purposes

A specific feature of the Romanian educational system, inherited from communism, is to define the teaching-learning process as an instructive-educational one. Instruction meant teaching/communicating new knowledge, and education was simply understood as a socialist/communist/patriotic education/pattern. The technical language preserved this terminology, yet its educational part remained an empty shell: although everyone deplores the lack of education of "today's children", most consider that it is the family's duty to ensure a "good family upbringing during early childhood". Teachers believe that it is the class master's duty to educate children – in fact to discipline them; completion of pupils' education

could then be done during Civic Education or Religion classes. Due to the overloaded curriculum, no one else “has the necessary time” to tackle education.

Teaching/ transmitting new knowledge is generally perceived as serious work, conscientiously supported by all the teachers observed. They are striving to do their best and explain clearly and concisely, conduct classroom demonstrations even under difficult conditions (no Chemistry or Physics labs), prepare topic-specific tests and worksheets for the entire class, including special ones for children with learning challenges. Most of the teachers take into account what pupils already know and rely on their prior knowledge. Some of them use new methods (video-projector, grouping children and working on projects, or on nodal questions). But very few of them are really flexible, and interactive work with children seems to be the exception rather than the routine.

The best teachers use also peer education: in grade 3rdA and in Math and Chemistry classes, they encourage pupils with better academic results to explain some problems to their colleagues, leading thus to a better understanding for all. In addition to this, It is important to notice that each teacher is doing reasonable efforts to provide the necessary support for the children when transmitting new knowledge. During the interviews, they mentioned that pupils learned what they were asked to learn because they were interested in a good grade or a passing grade as well as because their parents forced them to learn for good grades or otherwise avoid being punished with bad grades.

Different teachers use different strategies for helping pupils motivate themselves to learn or to pay attention in class. The most appreciated teachers are those who care about the pupils’ feelings or well-being (whether they are tired, upset or under stress), ask them about their condition and adapt the lessons to the real situation. Furthermore, during class observations, pupils are very active, yet disciplined and courteous with those teachers who get their respect and are capable of establishing good relationships, even if they are often more demanding and sometimes discipline them for not paying attention in lessons or not doing homework. During focus groups, pupils particularly appreciated assessing their favorite teachers’ humor.

One of the essential elements of inclusive education lies in the fact that children are active subjects of their own learning. What is missing is the pupils’ involvement in establishing the learning content, in choosing methods or teaching locations. Teachers unanimously stated that it was quite difficult to get pupils involved and interested in the common goal/task. Teachers told us that children rarely came up, during a lesson, with their own ideas for an activity. It is also true that when asking about the reasons for this passive attitude, most of the teachers recognized that they did not even think about it or they did not even notice that children did not ask questions; or worse, some of the teachers probably ignored the children’s questions or even directly discouraged them. Even when children come up with a certain proposal, it is always the teacher’s decision whether to proceed with the idea or not.

5. Slovakia: Zoom-in to inclusive practices at the classroom level

5.1 Inclusion through practices with affective purposes

At the Slovak school, teaching practices that promote affective purposes gave significant importance to the individual temperament, nature and needs of each child. Therefore, teachers tend to adapt their approach to children, forms of communication or class work to these different conditions. For instance, one of the most effective strategies that they implement are the “mind refreshers” which consist in singing songs, dancing or simply changing activities or pace of the class.

Another means that evidence teachers' respect for pupils' needs has to do with the spatial arrangement of the class. Teachers tend to apply different criteria for sitting arrangements; pupils can sometimes sit as they wish, according to how they feel more comfortable with and trust, and other times sitting is strategically planned in order to grant pupils a chance to interact with different classmates. Some of them also decide who will sit with whom directly as they try to "pair" talented children with those with special educational needs to ensure peer learning.

5.2 Inclusion through practices with social purposes

One of the most remarkable strategies of the Slovak school that enhance teaching practices with social purposes are the "community sessions" which are held twice a week before the beginning of classes. Children and teachers discuss all relevant issues related to school life, but also the personal situation of children. In this way children have a chance to express their feelings and teachers are able to mediate potential conflicts or problems emerging at home or at school. Community sessions strengthen the sense of belonging to the class and help build deep relationships between children, as well as between children and their teacher.

Another mechanism that enhances integration relates to teachers' beliefs on how to label pupils with disabilities or special educational needs. In many cases, children do not even know what diagnosis they have (e.g. dyslexia, Asperger syndrome, ADHD), so they do not get stressed by the fact that they are somehow different from their classmates. Although in practice this is still a challenge, it does contribute to strengthen inclusion at the school.

Additionally, teachers motivate each and every one to participate by asking questions to all, customizing the time they need to come up with an answer. This provision of time seems to be crucial as some children are simply more hesitant to speak up even when they know the answers. Being patient and waiting shows pupils that their contributions matter and ultimately helps them overcome the embarrassment or fear barrier.

Last but not last, the sense of belonging is also promoted among children with a distinct way. Every class has its own name chosen by pupils themselves. For instance, 3rd graders are called "the pirates", some other classes are named "smurfs", "birds", "zebras" or "explorers", names to which it is easier for them to identify with, unlike with just numbers. They get to make the decision together, and provides an identity for all, something to what all of them are part of as a group, and team. Students' identities and personalities are also well expressed in the class walls. They are in charge with their teacher of keeping the class decorated, cared of. These strategies contribute to increase pupils' conformability, wellbeing and sense of belonging inside the classroom

5.3 Inclusion through practices with intellectual purposes

A powerful strategy of teaching practices that promote intellectual purposes at this school is teachers' capacity to work with the flow of the class. This seems to make lessons more participatory and fitting to the needs of children. A highly significant factor that contributes to this is time constraints. The majority of lessons in the Slovak school last 90 minutes, unlike the usual 45 that are implemented in the rest. This is well appreciated by teachers who are able to plan lessons with greater depth and complexity.

Moreover, in order to implement mechanisms where there is enough flexibility to take into account everyone's interests, teachers tend to design activities in which pupils are assigned to create something or come up with a solution to a problem; these are reported to bring much better results. Therefore, setting aside some time within a lesson in which children will be invited to come up with their own proposals seems to contribute to students' engagement.

Although it might appear as a social strategy, at this school, sitting arrangements play a crucial role in academic performance. For instance, teachers employ different grouping strategies for different purposes. In case of smaller children, they usually group them in pairs based on abilities or mix pupils with better grades along with those with disabilities. This not only supports peer tutoring of children but also improves their relationships. To enhance team dynamics, each class displays posters that describe the respective roles in a team - one is responsible for comprehensive learning of the task, another for writing down the solution, the others for keeping time, bringing tools, etc. In this way it is assured that all the children participate according to their different capacities.

Furthermore, project education constitutes an integral part of the school's teaching curricula and has proven to be a significant tool to enhance student engagement. Usually once a year the children have a chance to choose a topic of their own interest, learn more about it from encyclopedias, internet or other sources, and create a colorful poster with the most important information. After the posters are completed the projects are presented in front of the other classmates, the teacher and the parents. The projects stimulate children's creativity, their curiosity, and sense of learning. It also cuts across the different subjects and as such helps children to systematize their knowledge.

The use of different resources, like technology, and media resources help teachers to increase students' motivation, not only for assignments but even for tests. Another advantage is that it helps teachers to work with children at different speeds. For instance, a Math teacher contrasts the usage of tablets to the usage of classical white/black board with highly different results. Whereas using the classical board the whole class waits for the pupil to complete the task, using tablets enables pupils to work and check their responses individually. Another useful instrument that characterizes teaching practices with intellectual purposes are the use of concept maps and posters. Whereas the purpose of concept maps is to write down what has already been learned and eventually to make connections with the other subjects, the posters are smaller projects done usually once in a month and devoted to a particular topic that are chosen by the pupils.

Finally, one of the most remarkable findings at the Slovak school to promote intellectual purposes is setting a learning goal and participatory progress of the class. Children set themselves a certain learning goal according to which their progress is being measured. As opposed to classical examination and grading this helps a teacher to measure actual improvement of pupils in time, rather than to compare him or her with general standards or with their peers. This practice is therefore very useful in environments in which the starting line of children varies and they differ in their capacities and capabilities. Moreover, if done in cooperation with the child, setting a learning goal is an important participatory practice, which tends to help the child to internalize the goal better and enhance his/her motivation to learn.

6. Conclusions

This rich comparative analysis between four countries allows for an exploration of the common topics around inclusive classroom practices in different countries. It allows for an analysis of the commonalities across countries and also the differences in the ways in which teachers seek to expand inclusion within their classrooms. By examining the classroom – the smallest structure within a school – in comparison to a more general school view presented through the school case studies, we can also explore the relationship between “bottom-up” and “top-down” inclusionary policies in the education realm.

The first key conclusion from the teacher interviews conducted is about the centrality of the teacher in classroom inclusionary policies. The school may or may not implement inclusive policies in other realms – whether in school management, teacher training policies, community participation, etc. – but the principal responsible person for inclusive policies within the classroom is the teacher. The teacher’s beliefs, attitudes and habits, in addition to his or her skills in mediating inclusion within the classroom, matter tremendously when it comes to actually opening up spaces for valuable learning for each child. Importantly, while the school may have strong inclusion policies at other levels, if these are lived in the classroom, children may still face exclusion or different opportunities than their peers.

The second conclusion in terms of inclusion relates to its multidimensionality, perfectly aligned with the categories already presented by the inclusive pedagogy framework of affective, social and intellectual dimensions to inclusion. The four schools studied presented good practices in each area, signaling that all three are key to true inclusion in the classroom – that merely intellectual practices, if students do not feel personally connected and socially accepted, will not be enough, and vice versa – and highlighting the more integral aspect of true inclusion for all children. Most teachers try to attend to all levels constantly, intuitively understanding the holistic nature of inclusion.

The third point relates to the nature of inclusive practices at the classroom level and their wide variety between different countries and schools. While some focus on providing a rich content that really responds to students’ interests, others build very strong social skills and a tight-knit social fabric on which to build learning, and others focus on a personal connection with each student given his or her background, experiences and expectations. Strategies range from simple habits like saying hello, smiling at students, the way the teacher walks around and engages pupils, to seating arrangements, to the way content is decided, taught and worked on, the way teachers follow up on learning, strategies for using different learning speeds between students, the use of special projects like radio shows of digital newspapers, “community sessions” and technology to ensure all students keep up. It is difficult to summarize the full range of inclusive practices revealed in this study, but what this highlights is the capacity of classroom teachers to innovate and to respond to the needs of their students.

It is interesting to note that in most cases, inclusive practices seem to be a product of context-based needs and situations, not so much a “standardized” recipe for inclusion. Teachers do not frequently mention being ‘taught’ how to do X or Y, but rather seem to adapt naturally to the classroom environment. This aligns with inclusive pedagogy literature that stresses the natural capacity of the teacher to create solutions together with the class that open up spaces for everyone’s learning, often without particular explicit instruction on how to do so.

The fifth point relates to the creativity of teachers in all contexts to find ways of involving students, whether this is through participative methodologies as in Mexico, through dynamic content as in Argentina, or through project-based education in Romania, among other techniques. Classroom teachers frequently seem to adapt these techniques given needs of students, and also responding to an inherent tension – also present in all four country contexts – of balancing flexibility, innovation and creativity in teaching practices with the curriculum content and the “regular” structure of class. To different extents, the study reveals this tension across all contexts.

A second source of tension seems to be related to the inclusive pedagogy principle of *unpredictability*. Across three country contexts, the study reveals that while some teachers may espouse all principles of inclusive pedagogy in theory, unpredictability in practice is harder to implement. For example, teachers may not try more innovative seating arrangements for fear of losing control of the classroom. This may be due to the fact that “traditional” teaching practices heavily focus on discipline, control and a more authoritative teaching environment, and teachers may view deviations from this norm – and devolving power to children – as examples of ‘poor’ teaching.

A final note concerns the use of technology in expanding spaces and opportunities for children in the classroom, especially related to intellectual purposes. In both the Slovak and Mexican contexts, teachers mention the value of specific technological tools that allow them to track children's progress and allow children to advance at different rates. Interestingly, these tools seem to be valuable insofar as they are used as tools, and not as ends in themselves – that is, teachers who *already* demonstrate skills at creating inclusive environments in the classroom use them for specific purposes.