Special Education in Spain

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ABSTRACT

This article does a revision of Special Education in Spain. Its objective is to analyze the current state of this field in that country, in order to reach real inclusion among children. The text covers the origins of special education, the changes in legislature since then, the application of them in classrooms, and the present day. After a bibliographic review, we can conclude that, although there are good intentions, Spain is far from being an advanced country in the special education field, with insufficient measures for this kind of children, not only in schools, but in high schools and universities.

Keywords: education, Spain, special education, special educational needs.

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay focuses on special education, the range in charge of teaching children with specific necessities or disabilities, adapting the action to the concrete kid and his or her needs. It is a wide field that has become a lot more important in recent years. Specifically, this study is centered on this kind of education in Spain, so its objective is to inform about the situation and the possibilities of improvement in this country. As a former student in Education, it is very important for me to investigate this topic, its evolution and its present, in order to take it into account in my future classes, in which I can have kids who have these special necessities.

II. ORIGINS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN SPAIN

The origins of special education in Spain are not very clear, as some may point out it was created in the sixteenth century because of the treatment that kids with a deficit were receiving, and others mark its start when specialized centers for these children appeared, or when it was considered a branch of education related to pedagogy around the twentieth century.

Speaking in general, in ancient times, disabled people were considered demonic, bad, and miserable. The treatment of these people in Mesopotamia, Greece or Rome was awful. They thought they did not deserve anything, and they even tried religious therapies to convert them. In some cases, they even sacrificed these people. In the Middle Ages, the situation changed a bit. Although there was still a negative vision of disabled people, and abandonment was still taking place, some people started showing mercy on them. Probably, thanks to Catholicism, people started protecting the least favored ones, taking care of them (Vergara, 2002).

Following the religious line, but ahead in time, we can clearly highlight the efforts of Pedro Ponce de León (1509–1584), a Spanish monk who taught deaf children to write and even talk. That was revolutionary for his period of time, as it was believed that deaf people could never talk or get abstract and moral ideas, in the words of Aristoteles. Actually, before Ponce de León, the monk Vicente de Santo Domingo did a similar labor, but we don’t have much data about this. Pedro Ponce de León’s methodology was used as well by Pablo Bonet, who also contributed to the education of deaf people (Coleto, 2009).

III. EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION LAWS IN SPAIN

Although there are antecedents that can be referred to as special education, like the case of Pedro Ponce de León, or Moyano’s Law in 1857, which contemplated education for sensory deficient (with degrading categories as the weak and mentally retarded, the mid-grade fools, and the mentally defective), we can properly start talking about this field in Spain with the introduction of specific schools after the Primary Education Law in 1945.

Decades later, thanks to the LGE (“Ley General de Educación,” 1970), in English, General Education Law-, people started seeing special education as another modality of teaching, not just a sanitary treatment for disabled people. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 referred to the rights of disabled people, being one example of this the “normalization principle” (“Principio de normalización”). With this principle, done by the Ministry of Education and Science, every citizen (including the disabled ones) had the right to use every service of the community, in order to get a normalized life. In these services, we include schools, the integration in them and the individualization of learning in order to attend
to everyone’s needs.

In the eighties, another two laws contributed to the advance of this modality of teaching, the Law of Social Integration of Disabled People (“Ley de Integración Social de los Minusválidos”) in 1982, and the Royal Decree on the Regulation of Special Education (“Real Decreto de Ordenación de la Educación Especial”) in 1985, when we start talking about students with special educational needs (NEE). Thanks to the last one mentioned, the Experimental School Integration Program (“Programa Experimental de Integración Escolar”) started, and many children who were being scholarized in specific centers could do the transition to ordinary centers, so they could get a normalized life and interact with other kids. However, a kid is not integrated just by being in an ordinary class, it is also necessary to implement measures that make them feel integrated, and that was not occurring at the time.

The next relevant law is called LOGSE (“Ley Orgánica de Ordenación del Sistema Educativo”, 1990) in English, Organic Law for the Organization of the Educational System. It considers the Educational System the one that must offer the necessary resources in order to teach children with special educational needs and achieve the same objectives as the other students. This law refers to special education as the union of material and personal resources in the school, to answer in a right way the necessities of the pupils. In its fifth chapter, “special education,” mentions the principles of the Law of Social Integration of Disabled People, which are normalization, sectorization, integration and individualization.

Five years later, the law LOPEG (“Ley Orgánica de Participación, Evaluación y Gobierno de los Centros Docentes,” 1995), in English, Organic Law of Participation, Evaluation and Government of Teaching Centers-, deepens more in what LOGSE announced, with the purpose of fighting segregation. Furthermore, schooling in specific centers under this law only takes place when the necessities of the student cannot be attended in an ordinary center because of their permanent necessities associated with psychic, sensory or motor disabilities that need significant adaptations of the scholar curriculum.

The following laws, LOE (“Ley Orgánica de Educación,” 2006) Organic Education Law, and LOMCE (“Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa,” 2013) Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality detail everything about children with “specific necessities of educational support” (one of the newest names to refer to this kind of students with difficulties), and have helped the global vision of the country in the recognition of the rights of this people. It is also important to mention (although it is not an educational law) the General Law on the right of people with disabilities and their social inclusion (“Ley General de derechos de las personas con discapacidad y de su inclusión social”), which was made the same year as LOMCE, 2013. It explored the discrimination that disabled people suffer, and promulgated rules and principles that were already mentioned in the International Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. We can highlight some of these principles, like the right to be different, the self-determination to decide by themselves, accessibility to the world, quality of life, no discrimination, and having the same opportunities as the rest of humans. These principles show that it is the government and society that must change and adapt to achieve the inclusion, not the people who suffer from these conditions.

Nowadays, the current law in Spain is called LOMLOE (“Ley Orgánica de Modificación de la LOE,” 2020) Organic Law Amending LOE, and it guarantees (within a period of ten years) that every ordinary school will have the necessary resources in order to attend properly the students with special educational necessities. Specific centers will be used for reference and help, as well as for children that require a very specialized attention. Also, there will be professionals who will evaluate the students as soon as possible and decide which kind of center is better for them, always attending the family and the kids will. However, this decision can be modified after each course, based on the achievement of the individual objectives for each pupil, always pursuing the most inclusive schooling.

This law divides into two groups the necessities of children, to try to get a better educational answer. On one hand, we can find students with special educational necessities (NEE), who are the “students who faces barriers that limit their access, presence, participation or learning, derived from disability or serious behavioral, communication and language disorders, for a period of their schooling or throughout all of it, and who requires certain supports and specific educational services to achieve learning objectives appropriate to their development” (LOMLOE, 2020). On the other hand, there are students with specific necessities of educational support (NEAE), “whose necessities are caused due to maturational delay, due to language and communication development disorders, due to attention or learning disorders, due to serious ignorance of the language of learning, due to being in a situation of socio-educational vulnerability, due to their high intellectual capacities, due to having joined late the school educational system or due to personal conditions or school history” (LOMLOE, 2020). These last kinds of students have puntual and transitory support because their problems are derived from special circumstances, while the NEE students have problems learning in general. Both of these concepts have been mentioned in previous laws, but their definitions have been extended, to include more children in these categories.

IV. EVOLUTION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Having analyzed every education law and their parts referring to special education, we can now talk about the translation of these laws into classroom life.

In general terms, we can say that people’s vision of disability has experienced a huge change. Before 2001, the classification was centered in a medical view, disability was seen as an illness that a doctor had to treat, a medical deficiency, a disability in biological meaning and a handicap in social eyes. An example of this is that specific centers in Spain were usually placed in the suburbs, the outskirts of the city, near hospitals, which represents the exclusion they lived and the clinic model of that time (Consejería de Desarrollo Educativo y Formación Profesional, 2017).

Then, these classifications stopped focusing on the person who presented the disability and started attending to the
contextual factors. Nowadays, disability is considered an interaction between the characteristics of the person and the society he or she lives in. Disability is not an illness or a disease, it is a generic term, a state that can be permanent or transitory, it can suffer changes and it is flexible.

Based on these two visions (past and current one), we can do a classification of the learning disabilities, distinguishing between a restricted category (focused on the medical model), and a broad one (in which learning disabilities means the same as special educational necessities). Learning disabilities is a concept that was created in 1963 to classify children that had problems in their learning, but these problems are not caused by deficiencies, as the special education at the time was centered in the deficit model (mental, sensory, motor, and other development disorders).

Learning disabilities were defined for the first time in 1962 by Kirk as “a developmental disturbance or delay in one or more processes of language, speech, spelling, writing or arithmetic that is caused by brain dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disorder and not by mental retardation, sensory deprivation or cultural or instructional factors”. This definition is under the restricted vision, which focuses the learning disabilities on scholar problems, and neither includes nor excludes the neurological cause.

Years passed by, and this vision was replaced by the broad one, which is prevalent in Spain. The change occurred because of the new vision of the ability of school to answer the learning problems, the interactivity between development and learning, the new evaluation methods centered in process of teaching and learning, the increment of teachers who questioned the segregation between ordinary and specific school, the obligatory access to school to everyone, the growth of school failure and abandonment, the poor results of specific schools... We must also mention the Warnock report, which helped in this modern vision, defining educational necessities and the special ones, changing the concept of special education. It also exposed the necessary resources for the implementation of the correct measures to educate a kid with special educational necessities (Fernández-González, 2014).

This report helped in the integration of disabled students, but in Spain, the progress began mainly straight after the Decree of March 6, 1985, with the scholar integration of children with special educational necessities, and after the LOGSE (1990). This process of inclusion has been growing non-stop, with the purpose of creating an inclusive school that supplies the necessities of each child.

V. CURRENT STATE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN SPAIN

Nowadays, we can distinguish four different modalities of schooling, called Modality A, Modality B, Modality C and Modality D, ordered from the most inclusive one to the least.

In Modality A, the student follows the curriculum of the group, with insignificant adaptations. There is flexibility in groups, and the child receives educational reinforcement and specific attention from specialists, always in the class with the rest of his partners. In other words, the specific teacher is the one that enters into the classroom to give his or her support, and the kid doesn’t leave the classroom, because it is the full-time referent.

On the other hand, in Modality B the student requires specific and personalized attention, and significant adaptations of the scholar curriculum. He or she can be in the ordinary classroom, and it can be the referent sometimes (with adapted activities), but the student has to also go to a specific classroom, called support classroom. It is in this space where intervention in the most specific aspects of the development of the kid takes place, like speech therapy, or support in the core subjects, such as Mathematics, Language…

Modality C is for children that also requires a significant adaptation of the scholar curriculum, but these modifications are more extreme, so their referent is not the ordinary classroom, but the specific one. If their characteristics allow them, they can be included with the rest of the group in some activities or subjects, in order to improve their socialization, but it is not the usual thing. The curricular adaptation here is focused on the most basic aspects of learning, being examples of this self-knowledge, personal autonomy, knowledge and participation in the physical and social environment, the development of language and communication...

Lastly, we can find Modality D, the only one that doesn’t take place in an ordinary school, but in a specific center. This fact doesn’t allow inclusion experiences, unlike the other modalities that take place in an ordinary center, because kids can participate in activities of the school, and even have the opportunity of incorporating to other ordinary classrooms if they are progressing well. However, even though there are these modalities established, not every school has a specific classroom, so kids that need them must search for a school that offers them.

Apart from modalities of schooling, there are also measures of attention to diversity that every school in Spain has to follow. Depending on the case, these measures can be general or specific.

General measures benefit every student, not only the ones with special educational needs. Schools must pay attention to the diversity of the students, evaluate them, and provide the correct measures in terms of organization and curriculum. Some of the lines of action are the flexible groupings (temporal organization of students for levels), group splitting (in a heterogeneous way to improve attention to each student), support in ordinary groups (by a teacher or by another student) and flexible weekly schedule model.

Specific measures are destined to students with special educational needs or, at least, specific necessities of educational support. Here we can find educational reinforcement (to compensate for the curricular delays of the student), and curricular adaptations to answer the educational needs of each student. These adaptations classify in basic (the contents of the curriculum are modified) or access (the physical environment is changed), depending on the items of the curriculum that are modified. Inside the basic adaptations, we can find significant ones (the methodology, contents, objectives, and evaluation are modified) or insignificant (methodology and contents are the only ones that are changed), depending on the degree of the modifications.

These measures are the ones that schools have to follow, but the reality is that they are more taken into account by the teachers from Primary School than from Secondary School or
University. In an investigation done by Adán García (2014) in a high school from Málaga, IES Bezmiliana, the results show that students with specific necessities of educational support or special educational necessities have a negative view of their state in the school, are not happy with the relationship with the rest of the class, find problems to name friends in their school, are victims of physical and psychological abuse, feel lonely and are less popular between their partners. This is proof that the measures of attention to diversity are not enough, because they are not achieving a real inclusion among all of the students (Adán, 2014).

The results of investigations in universities are not better. In fact, university is one of the most discriminatory educational institutions (Díaz, 2000). Only between 3.6% and 8.7% of people with educational necessities end up finishing their university studies, which translates in a high abandonment rate. There are not enough resources and trained staff to attend these kinds of students, and there are many architectural obstacles (old classrooms without the necessary equipment for them, bad acoustics, limited lifts...).

We have to add that it is more and more difficult to access a career in university, as the grades are getting higher, and the percentage of places reserved for disabled students is very low (only 3%). Doing an overall view, we can confirm that the barriers are more than the number of support that these students receive (Perera, 2014).

An explanation to this difference in the treatment of children with necessities can be that teachers from primary school have a specialized formation, they have studied a career focused on teaching (Primary Education), so they know the best ways to educate a child and attend to their necessities, being these special or not. However, secondary and university teachers have studied a career that is not related to Education (like Mathematics, Biology, History...) and end up working in high schools or in universities, in many cases without passion or interest in teaching kids.

Focusing on specific centers, they are now optional in most cases, for the families and students that decide to be educated there, but they are mainly reserved for children who need individualized support measures with high intensity (level 3) (Ferrer & Monserrat, 2021). Time ago, specific centers were considered a separate educational system, different from the ordinary one. However, from now on, current inclusive streams are criticizing this organization, because if we segregate students in different educational systems, we won’t achieve real equity. That is why specific centers are now combining their academic labor with other functions, such as advising educational teams from ordinary schools, helping with material or equipment resources, participating with teachers from ordinary schools to assist them... (Consejería de Desarrollo Educativo y Formación Profesional, 2017).

VI. CONCLUSION

After this examination of the state of special education in Spain, we can conclude that, although there have been many laws with the purpose of achieving inclusion in society, there is a long way to finally reach it. In fact, the last report done by the Spanish Committee of Representatives of People with Disabilities, in Spanish “Comité Español de Representantes de Personas con Discapacidad” (CERMI) for the UN Convention on Human Rights and Persons with Disabilities in 2017, said that despite the efforts of the last decades, our educational system does not provide the necessary resources for an inclusive education. The Committee concluded that these students with functional diversity challenge “a degraded education that does not ensure their rights” (CERMI, 2016).

Although there are many investigations and information recollected about most of the disabilities or special needs that a kid in a classroom can present (meaning that there is knowledge about the right treatment for these students), it is not that easy to get all the resources that their education needs. One of the first problems is that not every child that needs it can access a specific school due to lack of places. Also, children who have the luck to be schooled in a specialized center are not always as well attended as they should be. These schools do not count on the technical, human or economic support that could allow this egalitarian education. This same problem takes place in ordinary schools, which can or cannot have specialized classrooms for children with educational needs, and the teachers are not as trained as they should be (Negrín & Marrero, 2018).

However, the intentions of every law are on the right way to achieve real inclusion. Our imperfect educational system is at least evolving, showing more and more interest in creating an environment adapted to everyone. Proof of the relevance that special education is acquiring is that it is one of the main mentions of the degree in Primary Education along with Physical Education, English and Music. In fact, and even though you don’t choose that mention, in the University of Seville (where I study) there is a mandatory subject for everyone in the second course, called “Difficulties of development and learning,” that includes the history of special education, the main disabilities that children can have, and the way to treat each one of them.

In my experience, I can say that this subject opened my mind, and made me notice that disability starts and ends in society (the characteristics of the family, the school, the city they live in, the decisions of the government...), not in the person. This view stops us from thinking that a disabled person has nothing to do but resign to their condition and makes us realize that we have a lot to do in order to improve their lives. The relationship between context and disabled people is shown all over the world, because only 10% of people are disabled, but they are part of the 20% of the poorest people, so disability is both a cause and an effect of poverty, as disability causes discrimination and exclusion from social, economic, and politic life.

In my opinion, inclusion and equity are values that must be in every society. We are all different in our own way, so we have no right to discriminate against people based on these differences. In the words of Warnock (1978), “If there is agreement on the goals of education, then an educational need is stated in terms of what is essential for the achievement of these goals.” This means that the objectives are the same for everyone, and each student has their own educational needs, as every kid has to be taught and supported in order to reach those mentioned objectives. It is just that the educational necessities are different in each case, including in this category the special or specific ones. It is the duty of education to satisfy every necessity. As a future teacher, I
have the responsibility of creating an egalitarian environment in my classroom, where all the students feel comfortable in their own skin and are valued as who they are.

I think that these new generations of teachers are more trained than their predecessors in this field, so if we start educating little kids in these values, we can achieve a better society when they are adults. In fact, research done by Stárek (2022), shows that Special Pedagogy students find it so relevant to have their professional identity defined (level of knowledge, abilities, experiences...), and point out empathy as the most important quality of a teacher. These children that are raised in an environment where they are seen as equals will grow with that thought and will be more included in social and work life when they are adults. We must create a society that, in the words of Ainscow (2001): “not only accepts difference but learns from it.”

REFERENCES


