Editorial

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Inclusive education was the theme of the 48th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE) and it has become an important focus of attention for the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE) in the last couple of years. Two years ago we began preparations for that 48th session, which was titled “Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future”. Last November, 1,500 participants, including 100 ministers and vice-ministers of education, representatives of international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and members of civil society, came together to engage in intense, diverse and lively discussions on the theme of inclusive education from an international perspective.

We owe much of the success of this conference to the country representatives and those who participated, but we must also acknowledge those who engaged in numerous preparatory activities. Over 900 policy makers, education experts, and members of civil society participated in the nine regional preparatory workshops and four conferences organized by UNESCO IBE, in collaboration with UNESCO Paris, national commissions, and various field and regional offices. The sharing of vision and policy experiences that took place throughout these events was instrumental in our developing an informed and effective agenda for the ICE. We also received a wealth of invaluable information from country participants, including 97 National Reports and messages from ministers of 139 countries. These contributions have helped shed light on national and regional specifics, as well as global opportunities and challenges in the journey towards making quality and relevant education available to all learners. These efforts also demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusive education as a part of our collective international efforts of guaranteeing quality Education for All.

We continue to work vigorously with our partners to push the inclusive education agenda forward. UNESCO IBE’s Community of Practice (COP) is an active network that brings together over 1,250 education and curriculum experts from 126 countries to share knowledge on inclusive education.

This issue of *Prospects* is the second that we are dedicating entirely to this theme. This particular one highlights some of the contributions, discussions, and outcomes of the ICE.

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We also aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the major issues, challenges, and questions facing inclusive education in further publications.

The ICE conclusions and recommendations included in this issue show the progress and level of agreement reached around inclusive education. Nonetheless, there is still a vast array of topics on which debate and controversy continue, so we believe this is a first step toward progress in a new field of knowledge. For this reason, we have decided to start the issue with two Viewpoints. The authors of both of these articles recognize inclusive education as an important and pressing objective, and yet their perspectives vary when it comes to policy-making and implementation. Renato Opertti, Jayne Brady and Leana Duncombe advocate a comprehensive approach that involves transforming the education system and school cultures. Marc Watkins, on the other hand, dismisses the holistic process as unrealistic and impractical. He instead suggests a targeted approach that focuses on what he deems most critical: improving educational opportunities for excluded children and illiterate adults.

Through a series of articles, including case studies and policy analyses, the Open File in this issue examines some of the most contested debates on inclusive education, including equity and quality as interconnected objectives, the role of government and school autonomy, the pedagogical and strategic importance of teacher training and development, and the role of community participation in initiatives and policies.

To start with, Andreas Schleicher takes an in-depth look at the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results and what they tell us in terms of achieving quality and equity in education. He presents evidence that establishes high quality and equity as compatible objectives, but also points out that in countries where students with privileged backgrounds tend to attend more prestigious institutions, school organization ends up “reflecting and reproducing” social divisions. Specific measures need to be taken, he argues, to correct these inequalities.

Juan Eduardo García-Huidobro and Javier Corvalán explore the relationship between inclusive education and democratic systems of government. They examine a range of systems and policies and demonstrate how these often end up generating exclusion, albeit unintentionally. They argue that because policies are typically developed as short- and medium-term responses to opposing policies, they fail to reflect long-term visions of what the education system should achieve. Without consensus on long-term goals and objectives, they claim, policies will continue to lead to exclusion.

Susan Peters and Laura Ann Oliver tackle the topic of high-stakes assessments in market-driven economies and analyze their negative consequences for education. Taking the United States as an illustrative case, they argue that instead of reducing inequalities, high-stakes assessment policies tend to exacerbate exclusionary educational practices. By assuming that all students should meet the same standards measured by high-stakes testing, the authors argue, initiatives such as No Child Left Behind tend to stigmatize low-performing students rather than recognizing individual differences, talents and achievements.

In another case study, Hannu Savolainen examines what he describes as the “educational society” of Finland, where inclusive policies have led to transformative improvements in quality and equity. The author attributes this success to various features of the Finnish comprehensive education model, including the integration of special education programmes into the regular school system, high-quality training and development of teachers, and a “culture of trust” in which governments are willing to provide additional funding to under-performing schools as opposed to penalizing them for lower results.

Drawing largely on National Reports prepared for the ICE, Massimo Amadio analyzes inclusive education issues in Latin America and the Caribbean, ranging from the legal and

normative frameworks to current education policies, proposed approaches, and persisting challenges. His analysis highlights specifics in the region, and brings into focus the difficulties associated with bridging the gap between policy and implementation.

It has been extremely encouraging to see such active and engaged involvement from the ICE participants, from those who contributed to the ICE preparatory workshops and conferences, and from the authors in this issue. We hope that by sharing these common visions and addressing persisting challenges, we can continue moving closer towards our shared objective of providing meaningful, lifelong learning for all.

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