

## EXPERIENTIAL ARTICLES

---

# Community-based Inclusive Education: Best Practices from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras

Katharina Pfoertner\*

### ABSTRACT

*This article highlights some lessons about the strategy of community-based inclusive education, drawn from different programmes in Latin America. Having worked in the region for several years as a CBR advisor and special education teacher, the author provides insights into the progress that has been made. Early detection of disability followed by early education, with support from within the community, helps children with disability to participate in mainstream schools. Sensitisation of the public can overcome discrimination and exclusion. Teachers have to be trained to adapt teaching methods for the benefit of those with special needs. The author concludes that communities ought to initiate these strategies in their local schools as inclusive education is good for all children.*

### INTRODUCTION

Education and the lack of it is a major problem in many countries. In this article, the author describes the experience of developing the inclusive education strategy within a CBR programme in Nicaragua; followed by development of teacher training on inclusive education in other countries like Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

### THE CBR PROGRAMME IN NICARAGUA

In Nicaragua, where approximately 10.3% of the population has a disability (Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Censuses, 2003), it is estimated that 44% of people with disabilities have never been to school. Moreover, 51% of men and 74 % of women with disabilities have no formal work (All have a voice, 2011). There is hardly any data pertaining to children with disabilities below 6 years of

---

\* **Corresponding Author:** Inclusive Education and CBR Advisor, CBM International and Latin America, Apartado Postal # 80 ,Estelí, Nicaragua. Tel: +505-27134041 Email: Katharina.Pfoertner@cbm.de

age and their access to education. To quote Porter and Stone, (1997): "Access to quality education is the key for social integration and the identity of citizens". The CBR Matrix of the CBR Guidelines (WHO et al, 2010) mentions education as one of the components of CBR, and CBR programmes include education activities as part of inclusive community development. Inclusive education is good for ALL children, and especially for those facing exclusion.

It has been found that regular schools in Nicaragua at present do not accommodate special learning needs. Classrooms are packed with large numbers of children. Teachers are over-worked, under-paid and unable to cater to the varied interests of their students. Faced with stiff competition, little flexibility and poor accessibility, many children with disabilities give up schooling altogether. Special schools are rare and available, if at all, only in the city. In rural communities, "special education" opportunities do not exist. For the families of children with disabilities there are only two options: either send all the children to the same school, or exclude children with disabilities from education.

### **CBR Strategy for Inclusive Education**

The CBR approach is a proven strategy for the realisation of the rights of people with disabilities. In Nicaragua, CBM has employed this approach to help children with disabilities gain access to the regular education system. The idea is to work in the local context and support children in an integrated way by involving the family, the community and all relevant institutions. In addition, children with disabilities often require medical care or support through special aids. For example, some children may need to be accompanied by a helper during class, and this support can be provided by volunteers from the community.

The CBR project follows a Twin-Track approach. The first step is to find children with disabilities early, so as to improve the opportunities for early intervention through community workers and family members. The circumstances of the child's life and background are taken into account and, based on the community resources, an action plan is charted to help the child and his/her family achieve their goals. Right from the start, and parallel to the special support provided to the child with a disability, it is important to integrate teachers and community members through training courses. By discussing the basic features and benefits of inclusive development and education, the efforts for inclusion can be understood and supported from within the community. This is a more effective method than initiating change through outside agencies.

Other issues that are addressed in this context are improving the accessibility of school buildings and other public institutions, as well as restructuring the curricula. A departure from inflexible, pure frontal instruction towards child-centred, more active and movement-rich teaching methods, is essential to promote inclusive education, and will benefit all the children.

## Outcomes

In 2012, the success of the CBR project enabled 561 children with disabilities to access regular schools (primary and secondary) in their local and social environments. In some cases, students had to be accompanied by helpers to support learning, communication and socialisation within the classroom. This additional support benefited the teachers and other students as well.

The interactions between the parents of children with disabilities led to the growth of self-help groups. Parental initiatives are particularly important. For one, they encourage other families to send their child with a disability to school, and secondly, together parents can advocate more strongly for their children's rights at the political level.

Moreover, from this project emerged an alliance of the stakeholders for early childhood education. This includes the Ministries of Education, Health and Social Needs, and parent organisations. Together they focus their efforts on the development of children from birth up to the age of 6 years, because early intervention and early childhood education are essential for the successful inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream schools, and consequently to their participation in social life.

**Table 1: CBR project activities to increase access to education**

### **CBR activities of the project in order to increase access to education:**

- The service to approximately 2,000 people with disabilities and their families in the implementation of individual "Development plan" by community workers and volunteers
- Children with disabilities in 2012 in regular education:
  - Preschools and Kindergartens: 436 children
  - Primary Schools: 298 children
  - Secondary Schools: 263 children

- Children with disabilities in 2012 in special education: 163 children
- Vocational training for young people with disabilities
- Training of teachers and educators for pre-schools and kindergartens in inclusive education
- Implementation of courses in sign language for teachers and families
- Prevention programme for eye health
- Establishment and support of self-help groups
- Cooperation with local authorities for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by local and national authorities
- Lobbying for inclusion of people with disabilities in society, school and government

**Success factors for inclusive education for children with disabilities:**

- Advance sensitisation and awareness raising with practical exercises for members of the community (in this case primarily parents, neighbours, community leaders)
- Involvement of the community and reduction of discrimination through participation of people with disabilities at all levels of programmes
- Inclusion begins immediately after birth: early detection, early intervention and a system for further support (in alliance with state and non-state stakeholders in and outside the community) allows the best start for learning
- Creation of an environment of diversity and inclusion through age-appropriate classrooms, neighbourhood schools, accessibility (with local resources), community support and teacher training
- Implementing inclusive education programmes is particularly successful in small local schools
- Cooperation with schools that are ready to integrate children into inclusive education on the basis of their own resources and culture.
- Application of the holistic CBR approach

The success of the CBR project in Nicaragua is best illustrated by the story of Maria Nazareth.

## **Maria of Nicaragua**

Maria Nazareth Montiel Marin was born in a hospital in Juigalpa Chontales, Nicaragua, in 2005. When she was only 5 days old, the nurse informed her mother that the baby had Down syndrome. Her possible future requirements were mentioned: special care, frequent medical check-ups, health problems which might need special attention, special education, etc. Though this came as a big shock to both Maria's parents, they devoted all their energy towards caring for the child as best they could.

After 3 months, they heard about the Early Education Programme run by Asopiecad (Association for Inclusive Education Community Programmes). Since then, fieldworkers have visited their home once a week, to work with Maria and her mother on the Portage Programme for Early Education (Bluma et al,1976), and to keep track of her developmental objectives and activities of daily living. The author, who was the coordinator and CBM advisor to the CBR programme, also visited Maria's home.

*"When I visited the family I was amazed about the care of the whole family for Maria. It seemed that she was the centre of all attention. When I asked whether she would participate in activities outside the house, the mother was very negative, explaining to me that this would be too dangerous, due to the risk factors for the health, as the paediatrician had explained to her after the birth. So I recommended to her and the CBR fieldworker to slowly experiment with activities outside the home and the mother was invited to training activities in her community, to know more about the CBR programme" (Author).*

This brought about a change in Maria's mother. She began to share her experiences with the other participants in the programme. Today she even supports other mothers by giving them orientation in Early Education, not only in her own community but also in the municipality where parents' self-help groups are very important.

*"Thanks for the support I received from the CBR programme of Asopiecad and the lessons I learned from my daughter, I hope to be able to help many other mothers in the same situation to accept their child with disability and I can tell them with assurance that I would never miss this important and positive experience to have a daughter with disability" (Consuelo, mother of Maria Nazareth).*

Maria has learned many self-care skills such as walking (18 months), eating, dressing and undressing herself, going to the bathroom independently, running and jumping, playing with other children, participating in home activities, asking

and answering questions, and opening and closing doors. The CBR fieldworker was able to convince the family to send Maria to a regular pre-school when she was 5 years old. At present, the fieldworker accompanies Maria to the pre-school and assists the teacher in the classroom, so that other children can also benefit from her presence.

Maria Nazareth, who will be 6 years old in July, will join the first grade in her neighbourhood primary school next year.

### Lessons Learnt

After 5 years of work, the CBR strategy in Juigalpa, Nicaragua, has succeeded in building an alliance of Early Education stakeholders: the Ministries of Education, Health, and Social Affairs and parent organisations are collaborating and supporting a system which guarantees attention to the child from birth up to 6 years of age. This brings sustainability.

As seen from the story of Maria Nazareth, inclusion begins right after birth: **early detection, early education and a referral system** (in alliance with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in and outside the community) are in place in order to create the best start for learning.

Self-help groups, CBR committees, and persons with disabilities are taking the first step towards inclusive education: awareness training based on practical activities with community members (in this case parents, neighbours, community leaders). A participative assessment called Mapeo will be done together - the situation of the person with disability (child or adult) is analysed in terms of the history and causes of his/her disability, rehabilitation means, social situation and communication, decision making and ideas for the future. The outcome of this assessment is a shared action plan.

Inclusive education needs preparation, and not necessarily money. Experience has shown that successful inclusive education programmes have been incorporated in small community schools. **Involvement of the community** ensures success by eliminating discrimination. Along with support from the community, other requisites to create an environment of diversity and inclusiveness include age peers, neighbourhood schools, accessibility (with community resources), and teacher training.

It must again be emphasised that inclusive education is better for all concerned, including the teachers. The CBR programme is training teachers in the pre-

schools and kindergarten (community and government-run) about inclusive education.

## EXPERIENCES IN TEACHER TRAINING ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FROM OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE REGION

Based on experiences in other Central American countries like Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, it has been found that practical training in inclusive education strategies helps teachers and community members to understand diversity. Some lessons learnt are highlighted below.

- a) **Learning profiles** are to be assessed at the beginning of the process (community-based assessment, observation in the classroom, information from teachers and family members), and the learning style investigated (multiple intelligences).
- b) Teaching practice should be based on **diversity**, starting from the reality of the students in their communities, and based on their interests. Awareness of all the school participants is a primary requisite. In this regard, mention must be made of the workshop for children (including children with disabilities) in a community in Sololá, Guatemala, which was conducted in their indigenous language, Suttujil.
- c) The necessary **community support** can be mobilised through family members, older students, volunteers, pensioned teachers, etc. An instance of this is the support from child to child activities practised in small community schools in El Salvador.
- d) Teaching is a **team activity** that includes all support persons and parents as well, and is based on community resources (original materials, artisan skills, practical learning, etc). Often, after some years of work, these experiences lead to a change in the attitude of authorities.

The Ministry of Education in El Salvador pays itinerant teachers who support inclusive education in schools in small communities: training, producing adaptations, referrals, coordination of activities, teacher and students' support, etc.

In Honduras (Institute Juana Leclerc), after a self-assessment process, the need for support groups for learning emerged. In collaboration with the teachers of the schools, the community founded these groups and they have

been functioning very successfully for years (evaluated by students, parents and teachers).

- e) The number of children with behavioural problems is increasing in schools, and most teachers are not prepared to deal with them. Two children in El Salvador had mental health issues. Before the start of inclusive education, they were threatened with exclusion from school; however, after training, the teachers learned that **problem-solving** (behavioural, etc.) should be dealt with by the team (internally), and only in exceptional cases should external help be sought. The resources in the community should be utilised. The team meets for half an hour and discusses (one after the other), proposes and decides on possible alternatives. Thereafter the team meets to monitor the process, and correct and evaluate the results.

- f) As inclusive education results in better quality for all concerned, an **inclusive learning friendly environment (ILFE)** should be created. This means that classes will adapt to students' needs in the community, and include their interests. Classes are built on learning with all senses and include movement.

Brain gym, which consists of exercises to help coordinate brain and muscles in order to get ready for learning, helps everyone.

Students work in different constellations, adapted to their needs and to the subject: in teams, in pairs or individually, collaborating and cooperating.

Communication should be fostered by the seating arrangements.

Not all students have to participate all the time; their personal profile might include the need to rest between units, or to leave early or arrive later.

- g) Many activities are identical or similar in different programmes. For example, **adaptations** were made for Gualberto, a child with cerebral palsy, when he was in the first grade in a small school in El Salvador. Overall adaptations were needed for his fine motor skills; other students helped him as the teacher could not spare much time for each child. He is now in the 4th grade and can read fluently.

In order to eliminate exclusion and discrimination, it is very important that the activities of the class are the same, and (following the individual profile of the student) adaptations can be made in:

- Instructions (verbal, non-verbal, written, etc.)

- Form of presentation of information (abstract, verbal, images, real objects, etc.)
- Material that is used (complex, simple, real, abstract)
- Degree of difficulty
- Form of evaluation (verbal, written, drawings, sign language translated to written language, etc.)
- Opportunities to practise (many, few, repetitive, diverse)
- Time-table of participation (flexible)
- Physical participation, direct or indirect (some persons might not be able to always participate in the classrooms so classes could be shared at home, online, etc.)

## CONCLUSION

Years of training parents, community members, pre-school educators, teachers and staff of the various Ministries has been fruitful. Early identification of disability and early intervention has resulted in a significant number of children attending government and community pre-schools where they are educated alongside their peers without disability. The numbers prove that the need for education is especially strong among persons with disabilities.

By a new legislation in Nicaragua, inclusive education has been incorporated into teacher training to equip teachers to do justice to the special needs of children with disabilities. All the same, the situation in the schools has not changed fundamentally. There are still many people who are prejudiced and unaware of the right to education and training for all.

On a positive note, a change in thinking has been observed even in very small villages. As more and more parents insist on the right to send their children with disabilities to school just like all other children, just as many teachers are trying to work out how inclusion can best be accomplished.

Instead of wasting time waiting for governments to put better systems in place, it might be a good move to **start inclusive education through the CBR strategy** in organised communities, with schools which are willing to collaborate and based on their resources and culture.

Publication of successful experiences in inclusive education could convince others and ultimately lead to the formulation of an inclusive education policy by the Ministry of Education.

## REFERENCES

All have a voice (2013). Ministry of Health Nicaragua: Successful program of integral attention of persons with disabilities. Available from: <http://www.minsa.gob.ni/index.php/noticias/452-todos-con-voz-programa-exitoso-de-atencion-integral-a-discapitados>

Bluma S, Shearer M, Frohman A, Hilliard J (1976). Portage guide to early education. Portage, MI: Portage Printers

Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Censuses (2003). Nicaraguan survey about disability (ENDIS). Ministry of Health, Nicaragua.

Porter G, Stone J (1997). Models and strategies of integrated education, Managua Nicaragua

WHO, ILO, UNESCO, IDDC (2010). Community-based rehabilitation: CBR guidelines. Geneva: World Health Organisation