Editorial

Understanding Social Inclusion in Contemporary Society: Challenges, Reflections, Limitations, and Proposals

Ana Belén Cano-Hila

Faculty Economics and Business, University of Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

In 2015, the UN approved the 2030 agenda on sustainable development, intending to bridge—and eventually close—the gaps that divide our societies. These 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) are presented as a master plan that covers the most painful global challenges to a knowledgeable and inclusive society. In this thematic issue we look more incisively into goals no. 1 (no poverty), no. 4 (quality of education and inclusive education), no. 10 (reduced inequalities), and no. 11 (sustainable cities and communities) of the agenda. Social inequalities have drastically intensified after the 2008 financial crisis and the period of austerity that followed, especially among the poorest people and in the most vulnerable communities. Nowadays particularly, with the Covid-19 pandemic, these gaps seem to be growing. Against this background, this thematic issue aims to capture, make visible, understand, and analyze how social actors are organizing themselves and collaborating amongst each other in order to help attenuate and satisfy dramatic emerging social needs and improve living conditions, especially among the most vulnerable social groups, in uncertain times of crisis. We focus particularly on two main thematic blocks: social inclusion axes on the one hand (formal, non-formal, and informal education, participation, leisure time, and culture) and vulnerable groups on the other (including children, adolescents, youth, women, the elderly, people with disabilities, and migrants). Contributions to this thematic issue offer interesting conceptual, methodological, and empirical approaches to the study of social inclusion and social inclusive experiences in contemporary societies in uncertain times, particularly in Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and Brazil.

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue "Promoting Social Inclusive Experiences in Uncertain Times" edited by Ana Belén Cano-Hila (University of Barcelona).

1. Introduction and Context

This thematic issue of *Social Inclusion* compiles articles, both theoretical and empirical, analyzing different ways of promoting social inclusion in contemporary societies. In the context of growing social inequalities worldwide, essentially as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis and the austerity period that followed it, and nowadays too, with the Covid-19 pandemic (Cucca & Ranci, 2016; Pradel-Miquel et al., 2020), as well as the millennium challenges set out in the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs), the need to build more inclusive societies becomes even more relevant and urgent. However, we know little about what social inclusion means (without confusing it with concepts with which it is closely interrelated, such as social capital, social cohesion, etc.), how it is constructed, under what conditions people are included, and what challenges and limits social inclusion presents in a specific social context or reality (Nilholm, 2021; Silver, 2010).

There is currently an open debate about what defines social inclusion (Alexiadou, 2002; Atkinson, 2002; Cordier et al., 2017; Oxoby, 2009). It is a multidimensional construct, dominated on the one hand by topics

of special education and special educational needs (Ainscow et al., 2006; Hodkinson, 2011; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017; Slee, 2011; Vislie, 2003)—perhaps obsfuscating other essential dimensions such as gender, class, or ethnicity—and being, on the other hand, closely linked to the concepts of social integration, social cohesion, social participation, social capital (Clifford et al., 2015; Cordier et al., 2017; Wilson & Secker, 2015), terms that are sometimes misplaced as synonyms of "social inclusion," which they are not.

Traditionally, social inclusion has been defined as the logical antonym of social exclusion (Koller et al., 2018; Peters & Besley, 2014). Different mechanisms, motivations, and actors produce social exclusion and social inclusion. However, social inclusion is not limited to combating social exclusion or promoting full citizenship (Silver, 2010). It is imperative to address the conditions under which people are/feel included, and how a claim and focus on universalism does not make differential treatment unworthy or stigmatizing. Social exclusion can sometimes be used to maintain the social order or build internal cohesion by distinguishing members from the "Other." At the same time, "opening the door" to belonging and facilitating access does not necessarily produce social inclusion or a perception of being included. Some additional effort or measures may be required, such as positive discrimination policies, which are not without difficulties both for the people who need to be included and for those who consider themselves already included in a collective or social group.

In the absence of a consensual definition, there is relative agreement in the scientific literature that social inclusion is made up of the following dimensions: (a) participation, (b) sense of belonging, and (c) rights and citizenship (Clifford et al., 2015; Cordier et al., 2017; Oxoby, 2009; Wilson & Secker, 2015). From a liberal perspective, social inclusion is often limited to providing equal opportunities and eliminating discrimination; whereas from a social-democratic stance, social inclusion is built on redistributive frameworks, especially for weaker members, and the recognition of the rights and needs of specific groups. In particular, the European Union often refers to social inclusion as a way of building social cohesion, paying particular attention to the connections between people and between people and their community.

As societies become increasingly diverse and heterogeneous, culturally, religiously, socially, the debate on diversity, freedom, and social cohesion becomes more central and relevant. Addressing this debate and the important challenge it represents within the framework of social inclusion implies defining a delicate and complex balance between the preservation of group values and the expression of identity, which must display sufficiently open, porous, and welcoming social boundaries so as not to be exclusionary, and accept difference without giving it a pejorative or hierarchical meaning.

2. Overview of Contributions

The thematic issue offers interesting conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions to the study of social inclusion and social inclusive experiences in contemporary societies in uncertain times, with key examples from Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and Brazil.

Alvarez-Cueva (2022) presents a study that examines 13 examples of music production during the Covid-19 crisis and argues how music helped create—mainly virtual—scenarios where emotions of solidarity, empathy, and responsibility were key to dealing with the lockdown. The author argues that, through the production of music, a sense of "shared feelings" ensued, as well as a whole new community dynamics, that helped cope with the severe social isolation imposed by the pandemic, capable of eroding the actual social inclusion of citizens and, perhaps most importantly, their own perceived sense of inclusion.

On the subject of initiatives urged on by the pandemic, Novella Cámara et al. (2022) offer an example of a pedagogical practice developed during lockdown to stimulate dialogue between professionals working to enhance the inclusion of children and adolescents in decision-making processes at the municipal level. Created amid strict confinement measures, the online initiative (what the authors called "coffee meetings") proved a successful formative space where technicians gathered to share knowledge and experience, strengthen bonds with their community of professionals, and, most importantly, find practical ways to promote youth participation in their municipality.

Complementing this line of research on child and adolescent participation, Mateos-Blanco et al. (2022) present an important exploration of the different types and results of child-led participatory practices. The authors carried out a scoping review to find out what evidence is available on child-led participatory experiences and found, out of 674 identified papers, that a total of 33 studies met the "inclusion" criterion. The review concludes that children can undertake transformative action in their social environment—if the "adult world" allows them to do so—but also that the ways we think about children's participation and put it into practice must be updated.

On that note, Esteban (2022) proposes a theoretical and reflective article arguing that inclusive and equitable education necessarily involves considering children as having the capacity for autonomous and collective action (action agency), recognizing children's moral responsibility and competence, the transformative power of their role (moral and transformative agency), and promoting their civic participation in school-related decision-making processes, on issues that interest and concern them (participatory agency).

Zooming in on the Spanish case, Morentin-Encina et al. (2022) seek to describe the state of children and adolescents' participation in 179 of the municipalities that

form part of the International Association of Educating Cities and Child Friendly Cities (CFC-UNICEF). To do this, they compile data from a questionnaire applied to 279 people (191 technical figures and 88 elected officials), and a qualitative analysis is made of those questions concerning strategies used to promote inclusion. Their results show that there is an agreement that Children's Councils are inclusive bodies, but the means and procedures adopted by them do not guarantee this.

Finally, based on a survey of 191 local youth workers, Laforgue et al. (2022) present a study on the inbuilt structures that help or hinder children and adolescents' participation in the local arena. The survey helps the authors determine the youth workers' perceptions of inclusivity in child participation bodies across their cities and the specific measures in place are discussed. Challenges to children's inclusion in local participation processes are identified, as well as strategies for advancing towards the creation of more diverse and inclusive arenas of participation. In this sense, the intersectional approach can help us avoid the exclusion of children and adolescents with added social barriers.

Challenges in a special educations school are addressed in the contribution by Argemí-Baldich et al. (2022). The authors present a case study from a carpentry classroom-workshop and try to identify the different meanings that participants (students and teacher alike) attribute to inclusive education, especially regarding presence, participation, success, and the relationship between students. By focusing on the specific context of the classroom-workshop, the article promotes a novel approach to research on inclusive education.

On the topic of young people in situations of social vulnerability, Ferrer-Fons et al. (2022) reflect on how non-formal education in the arts can attenuate socioeconomic and cultural barriers in a vulnerable context. The authors present the case study of an artistic non-formal educational organization located in a deprived neighborhood of Barcelona, Spain, and identify several key factors associated with successful social inclusion, albeit with limitations. This article concludes with the recommendation that artistic non-formal education can be used as a tool in the social inclusion agenda.

Raposo (2022) contributes to this discussion with an article on social inclusion policies for underprivileged youth based on the ethnographic accompaniment of an associative experience promoted by the Choices Programme ("Programa Escolhas") on the outskirts of Lisbon. An important contribution to the topic of social vulnerability among young people, the author questions the limits of citizen participation as a means to stimulate the political engagement of adolescents when participation is tied to individualist ideologies far removed from a "grammar of rights."

Finally, to address the subject of social inclusion also in a higher education setting, Binoti Simas et al. (2022) present the results of their documentary research on the interiorization program of public higher education in Brazil through the specific example of Unifesspa, a federal university created in 2013 in the relatively new municipality of Santana of Araguaia. While the creation of this campus in the specific municipal context of Santana of Araguaia was not without its challenges, the case study provides an example of how it must be possible to overcome aspects of inequality and guarantee the right to free public higher education of quality in the area.

Kasztan Flechner et al. (2022) deepen the debate on social inclusion opportunities by focusing on the important issue of women of migrant origin in the active labour market. Focusing on Flanders, Belgium, and using longitudinal microdata from the Employment Office and social security registers, the authors analyse the extent to which women' household composition is associated with their perception and usage of occupation-specific training. An important contribution to the topic of social vulnerability among women of migrant origin, their findings suggest that women's uptake of active labour market programmes is related to household characteristics such as the origin of their partner and the presence of children, and argue that family policies (e.g., childcare) are instrumental in increasing women's enrolment in such programmes.

As Sánchez-Martí et al. (2022, p. 139) eloquently put it, "equal rights and opportunities must be a social imperative that unites us all." This idea is pervasive in their contribution as the authors engage in a participatory research the main goal of which is to analyze how we can promote the construction of a pluricultural collective identity. Delving into public policies in Catalonia, their article sets out to identify situations and social spaces prone to discrimination and racism, exposing the hurdles to building a common public culture that includes an unprecedented diversity of origins and experiences.

A key element in our continuous search for belonging, identity, and connection, is media and social representation—and Masanet et al. (2022) provide a valuable contribution on this subject. The authors develop a close reading analysis of the first season of the American series *Euphoria* (Levinson et al., 2019–present) and use the example of Jule, a trans female character, to showcase how media portrayals can promote representation that is, on the one hand, aspirational and, on the other, improves visibility and a sense of social inclusion. The results of their analysis show that representation in the series moves away from the traditional portrayal of trans characters in three significant ways: (a) The narrative moves beyond the "trans fact" and presents complex and plural stories; (b) the trans individual is represented as an element of value and love (away from fetishism); and (c) there is a link between the trans realm and specific spaces of comfort and freedom.

3. Conclusion

This collection of articles aims to contribute to the literature on social inclusion, delving into this complex

concept, as well as its social transfer, from a multidimensional and interdisciplinary perspective, essentially highlighting limitations, challenges, and proposals for the construction and development of social inclusion in contemporary societies in times of transformation and uncertainty. The contributions in this thematic issue will be especially helpful and useful to professionals responsible for care services in fields of social inclusion (educators, teachers, social workers) as well as to political decision-makers. Each article in this issue illustrates how social inclusion is a complex, multidimensional process requiring clear definitions and indicators, as well as the need for it to be developed in a transversal way in all spheres of social life—education, culture, childhood/adolescence, city, participation—so that socially inclusive conditions emerge and become a driving force for social transformation oriented towards societies' sustainable development and social justice.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Ainscow, M., Booth, T., & Dyson, A. (2006). *Improving schools, developing inclusion*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203967157

Alexiadou, N. (2002). Social inclusion and social exclusion in England: Tensions in education policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, *17*(1), 71–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930110100063

Alvarez-Cueva, P. (2022). Music to face the lockdown: An analysis of Covid-19 music narratives on individual and social well-being. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 6–18.

Argemí-Baldich, R., Padilla-Petry, P., & Massot-Lafón, M. I. (2022). What is inclusive education? Voices and views from a carpentry classroom workshop. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 75–84.

Atkinson, T. (2002). Social inclusion and the European Union. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *40*(4), 625–643. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00391

Binoti Simas, T., Cardoso Cavalcante, L., Maviael de Carvalho, C., & da Silva Sousa, S. (2022). The interiorization of public higher education in Santana do Araguaia, Brazil. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 106–116.

Clifford, S., Leader, G., Kosciulek, J., & Leahy, M. (2015). Defining social inclusion of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities: An ecological model of social networks and community participation. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, *38*, 18–29. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2014.10.008

Cordier, R., Milbourn, B., Martin, R., Buchanan, A., Chung, D., & Speyer, R. (2017). A systematic review evaluating the psychometric properties of measures of social inclusion. *PLOS ONE*, *12*(6). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0179109

Cucca, R., & Ranci, C. (2016). *Unequal cities: The challenge of post-industrial transition in times of austerity*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687865

Esteban, M. B. (2022). Children's participation, progressive autonomy, and agency for inclusive education in schools. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 43–53.

Ferrer-Fons, M., Rovira-Martínez, M., & Soler-i-Martí, R. (2022). Youth empowerment through arts education: A case study of a non-formal education arts centre in Barcelona. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 85–94.

Hodkinson, A. (2011). Inclusion: A defining definition? *Power and Education*, *3*(2), 179–185. https://doi.org/10.2304/power.2011.3.2.179

Kasztan Flechner, T., Neels, K., Wood, J., & Biegel, N. (2022). Exploring women's uptake of active labour market programmes: The role of household composition across migrant origin groups. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 117–131.

Koller, D., Le Pouesard, M., & Rummens, J. A. (2018). Defining social inclusion for children with disabilities: A critical literature review. *Children & Society*, *32*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12223

Laforgue, N., Sabariego, M., Ruiz, A., & Cano-Hila, A. B. (2022). An intersectional analysis of child and adolescent inclusion in local participation processes. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 66–74.

Levinson, S., Nandan, R., Turen, K., Lichtenstein, H. M., Yardeni, T., Toovi, M., Mokadi, Y., Lennon, G., Leshem, R., & Levin, D. (Executive Producers). (2019–present). *Euphoria* [TV series]. HBO.

Masanet, M.-J., Ventura, R., & Ballesté, E. (2022). Beyond the "trans fact"? Trans representation in the teen series *Euphoria*: Complexity, recognition, and comfort. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 143–155.

Mateos-Blanco, T., Sánchez-Lissen, E., Gil-Jaurena, I., Romero-Pérez, C. (2022). Child-led participation: A scoping review of empirical studies. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 32–42.

Morentin-Encina, J., Noguera Pigem, E., & Barba Núñez, M. (2022). Inclusion as a value in participation: Children's Councils in Spain. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 54–65.

Nilholm, C. (2021). Research about inclusive education in 2020—How can we improve our theories in order to change practice? *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *36*(3), 358–370. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1754547

Nilholm, C., & Göransson, K. (2017). What is meant by inclusion? An analysis of European and North

American journal articles with high impact. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *32*(3), 437–451. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1295638

Novella Cámara, A. M., Crespo i Torres, F., Pose Porto, H. (2022). Meetings between professionals for the inclusion of children in citizen participation: A formative experience. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 19–31.

Oxoby, R. (2009). Understanding social inclusion, social cohesion, and social capital. *International Journal of Social Economics*, *36*(12), 1133–1152. https://doi.org/10.1108/03068290910996963

Peters, M. A., & Besley, T. A. C. (2014). Social exclusion/inclusion: Foucault's analytics of exclusion, the political ecology of social inclusion and the legitimation of inclusive education. *Open Review of Educational Research*, *1*(1), 99–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/23265507.2014.972439

Pradel-Miquel, M., Cano-Hila, A. B., García, M. & (2020). *Social innovation and urban governance. Citizenship, civil society and social movements*. Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839102325

Raposo, O. (2022). The art of governing youth: Empowerment, protagonism, and citizen participation. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 95–105.

Sánchez-Martí, A., Pàmies, J., Caravaca, A., & Llos, B. (2022). Towards a common public culture? Boundaries to belonging in Catalonia. *Social Inclusion*, *10*(2), 132–142.

Silver, H. (2010). Understanding social inclusion and its meaning for Australia. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, *45*(2), 183–211. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2010.tb00174.x

Slee, R. (2011). *The irregular school. Exclusion, schooling and inclusive education*. Routedge.

Vislie, L. (2003). From integration to inclusion: Focusing global trends and changes in the western European societies. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *18*(1), 17–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/0885625082000042294

Wilson, C., & Secker, J. (2015). Validation of the social inclusion scale with students. *Social Inclusion*, *3*(4), 52–62. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v3i4.121

About the Author

Ana Belén Cano-Hila is a tenure-track lecturer (Serra Hunter Fellow) in the Department of Sociology at the University of Barcelona. She has participated in international and national projects of research on social exclusion, social cohesion, culture and participation, social innovation and education. Some of her most relevant projects include: ERC TRANSGANG (H2020-ERC-AdG-742705), Chilhood and Participation (RTI2018-098821-B-I00), and INNOSOGO (CSO2013-47217-P). She is a member of RC21 and RC35 of the International Sociological Association and the Spanish Federation of Sociology.