**Disability and Inclusive Education in Mexico:**

**Perspectives and Impact of Civil Society**

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in promoting inclusive education (IE) in Mexico. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from July to September 2022, involving 33 representatives from 28 distinct CSOs and capturing the voices of some individuals with disabilities and parents. The findings delve into the current state of IE in Mexico, ideal of IE as envisioned by CSOs, and the actions they take to advance IE in Mexico.

Contrary to existing literature, personal barriers emerged as a key obstacle hindering inclusion. In addition, many CSOs challenged the predominant view of a stark dichotomy between IE and special education, presenting both frameworks as mutually reinforcing. The research also sheds light on the diverse contributions of CSOs that directly and indirectly impact IE. CSOs lay the groundwork for IE by creating inclusive cultures, improving accessibility, training educators, collaborating with support teachers and governmental entities, and engaging in activism. Importantly, CSOs also directly participate in the IE process within educational institutions, playing a hands-on role in facilitating the inclusion of students with disabilities and ensuring they receive a high-quality education.

In essence, this research underscores the dynamic and versatile role of CSOs in shaping an IE landscape in Mexico. CSOs are uniquely positioned to bring together all key stakeholders involved in IE and orchestrate the entire process.

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**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

In Mexico, people with disabilities (PwD) experience multiple barriers to inclusion in education and society at large, ultimately leading them to the vicious circle of poverty and marginalization. According to the latest census in 2020, there are more than 6 million people with some form of disability in Mexico (INEGI, 2021), 45.9% of them only have primary or no education at all (CONEVAL, 2021). In the past 30 years, Mexico has been actively involved in international discussions and signed treaties related to disability and inclusive education (IE). Following the philosophy of global initiatives and disability rights movement, the Mexican government took action to develop regulations and modify federal laws and Constitution to ensure legal protection of the rights of PwD, including right to education (García Cedillo, 2018; Hammann, 2020). Despite the existing legal foundation, considerable efforts of educators, and increased attention to the issue on the part of the government, equity issues persist and quality of education is far from fulfilling the needs of students with disabilities (Lay Arellano & Anguiano Suárez, 2019; Niembro et al., 2021), which results in absenteeism and high dropout rates. In 2020, 300,000 children and youth with disabilities between 3 and 21 years old did not attend school and did not receive formal education (CONEVAL, 2021). In addition, those who are physically present in classrooms are unlikely to receive appropriate instruction, and the quality and accessibility of education diminish with every grade (García Cedillo et al., 2015; Movimiento Tres Doce, 2018).

To date, most research in this area has focused on analyzing policies, school practices, and government support, identifying such problems as a consistent lack of funding, contradictory agendas, poor policy design, inadequate professional training and teaching methodologies (e.g., Cruz Vadillo, 2018; Díaz Rodríguez, 2017; García Cedillo, 2018; Pérez Castro, 2014; Romero

Contreras & García Cedillo, 2013). The downside to these studies is twofold. First, they overlook the complexity of IE, by neglecting to include the voices of other actors. Second, they emphasize the need for top-down solutions, major systemic changes, and increased government spending, which is unrealistic in the context of structural adjustment policies and high levels of corruption (Morga Rodríguez, 2016; Tuman et al., 2008). Therefore, a different approach is needed, one that includes other key actors and focuses on alternative solutions not reliant on state support and funding.

In this study, I argue that turning to civil society organizations (CSO) in Mexico holds the potential to include voices of key stakeholders in the field (in particular, PwD and their parents) and close gaps in our understanding of IE. In addition, by exploring the experiences and contributions of CSOs, we can identify practical strategies to foster IE that can be implemented despite the challenges posed by the current socio-political context.

The term 'civil society organization' refers to "any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organized on a local, national or international level" (United Nations, n.d., The UN and Civil Society section, para. 5). In Mexico, disability CSOs work hard to bridge gaps in the current system by providing vital services, training, and other types of assistance, while also collaborating with the state, other organizations, schools, and families. Interestingly, many disability CSOs in Mexico are founded by parents in response to government, yet they are rarely recognized as an important actor in the realm of IE (Lay Arellano & Suárez, 2019; Niembro et al., 2021) and the impact of their work remains largely unexplored. There is a need to examine the experience and knowledge of CSOs, as well as the extent to which they contribute to education of students with disabilities, how they mobilize key stakeholders and potentially influence processes pertaining to IE agenda in Mexico.

Even though I do not have a disability myself, I am personally invested in this area of research. In my family, I have witnessed for years how the stigma associated with my brother's psychosocial disability has had detrimental consequences for his life, career, and self-perception. In addition, throughout my experience as an educator, I had the opportunity to work with students with learning disabilities and behavior and emotional disorders. Having firsthand experience with the challenges faced by these students has made me realize the extent to which the current education system is not adequately designed to accommodate their needs. Now, I see it as my personal and professional goal to deal with persisting discrimination toward people who are stigmatized as a result of their health condition, and I am deeply convinced that education has the power to eradicate prejudice by embracing differences and fostering inclusion. In this regard, I see civil society as the driving force in this process that could transform current practices and policies pertaining to education, ultimately providing invaluable opportunities to children with disabilities to learn and explore their potential the same way as their nondisabled peers.

To enhance the readability of this thesis, below I have included a table of acronyms used throughout the document for easy reference.

| Acronym | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| AAC | Augmentative and Alternative Communication |
| CAM | Center of Multiple Attention (*Centro de Atención Múltiple*) |
| CONAPRED | National Council to Prevent Discrimination (*Consejo Nacional Para Prevenir la Discriminación*) |
| CRPD | The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities |
| DPO | Disabled people's organization |
| IE | Inclusive education |

| | |
|---|---|
| INEA | National Institute for Adult Education (*Instituto Nacional para la Educación de los Adultos*) |
| INEGI | The National Institute of Statistics and Geography (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática*) |
| OAS | the Organization of American States |
| PwD | People with disabilities |
| RIADIS | The Latin American Network of Non-Governmental Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and their Families (*Red Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de Personas con Discapacidad y sus Familias*) |
| SEN | Special educational needs |
| SEP | Ministry of Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*) |
| SPED | Special education |
| UACM | Autonomous University of Mexico City (Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México) |
| UDEEI | Unit of Special Education and Inclusive Education (*Unidad de Educación Especial y Educación Inclusiva*) |
| UDL | Universal Design for Learning |
| UNAM | National Autonomous University of Mexico (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*) |
| USAER | Unit of Support Services to Regular Education (*Unidad de Servicios de Apoyo a la Educación Regular*) |

*Table 1. Acronyms used in the study.*

**CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND**

This chapter provides an overview of the historical progression in understanding

disability and the evolution of educational provision for PwD, ultimately defining the concept of

IE. Building upon this theoretical foundation, the chapter proceeds to explore the specific context

of Mexico, exposing the perspectives and experiences surrounding disability while also

discussing the historical patterns of education for PwD in the country. Furthermore, it examines

recent legal developments and practices that have embraced IE. The concluding section of the

chapter delves into the role of CSOs on a global scale, examining their contributions to disability

rights and education. It then shifts focus to the Mexican context again, evaluating the position of

CSOs as an actor in advancing disability rights in the country.

**Disability and education globally**

This section will delve into the historical perspectives of disability, exploring three key

models: the charity model, medical model, and social model. Additionally, I will provide a brief

overview of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its

significance in both encapsulating the disability rights movement and advocating for IE. To

contextualize IE within a historical framework, I will examine the development of this

framework and analyze how international instruments have shifted from special education

(SPED) to educational integration and ultimately embraced IE. This section will conclude by

offering general guidelines for operationalizing the concept of IE, drawing upon the insights

provided in General Comment No. 4 of the CRPD and the Index for Inclusion developed by

Booth and Ainscow. It is important to note that the concepts and models discussed in this section

primarily represent dominant paradigms promoted by the Global North, which significantly

influence processes in Mexico. However, it is essential to recognize that these models may not necessarily align with the thoughts and aspirations of the disability community in Mexico.

### *Disability models and definitions*

Disability is a complex and contested phenomenon that can be conceptualized in multiple ways. In general, there are three main conceptual models of disability that have gained prominence worldwide: the charity model, the medical model, and the social model. Exploring these models and their historical context is also crucial for comprehending the evolution of different approaches to education provision for PwD (Dally et al., 2019).

The charity model of disability is one of the oldest, it perceives disability as an individual problem that elicits pity, sympathy, and charitable aid from society. It ascribes disabilities to supernatural causes and portrays PwD as unproductive, useless, dangerous, or insignificant to society. Within this model, PwD are often denied access to education, deemed uneducable, or receive limited training in segregated settings. At one extreme, the charity model has historically been associated with eugenic practices like infanticide or forced sterilization (Sandoval et al., 2017).

The medical model of disability emerged in the late 18th century and is still dominant in many parts of the world. This model views disability as a deficit within the individual, as a problem that needs to be fixed or cured so that the person can approximate the societal standard of norm (Dally et al., 2019; Lindsay, 2003). It places emphasis on diagnosis, rehabilitation, and interventions, attributing any secondary challenges such as limited access to education, employment, poverty, or discrimination as direct outcomes of the individual's specific medical condition, which restricts their participation in certain social contexts (García Iriarte, 2015). Unlike the charity model that considers disabilities a permanent condition defining the person,

the medical model portrays a person with a disability as an object of interventions that aim to improve their quality of life and mitigate the negative effects of the disability.

The emergence of the social model of disability marks a watershed moment in the history of disability worldwide. This model posits that disability is a socially constructed concept, rather than an inherent attribute of the individual, thereby shifting the focus from the person to the environment. Based on this model, it is not the medical condition, but rather the society and the environment that disadvantage and disable the person. Overcoming barriers associated with disabilities requires changes to the physical, social, and cultural settings, without attempting to 'fix' or change the individual themselves, as the medical model suggests (Oliver & Barnes, 2010; Sandoval et al., 2017). Not only does this model view PwD as not inferior to others, but it also underscores their potential to contribute to society on different levels, on a par with their non-disabled counterparts.

The social model of disability was a revolutionary idea developed in the second half of the 20th century by the disability rights movement in the UK. In the 1960s and 1970s several disability activists and civil society organizations in the Global North brought to the spotlight the ongoing discrimination and marginalization of PwD, their exclusion from participation in politics and society (García Iriarte, 2015; Sabatello, 2013). The disability movement was inspired by the civil rights movement in the US and mobilized PwD to become vocal advocates of their rights. The development and promotion of the social model of disability allowed them to flip the old paradigm, challenge the status quo, and demonstrate that the world is designed for non-disabled people, thereby inhibiting active and effective participation of PwD. This also led to the emergence of disability studies as an academic field and the creation of various important legislative initiatives, primarily in the countries of the North (Oliver & Barnes, 2010; Petasis,

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2019). From that moment on, disability garnered attention by the international community and became part of the global political agenda. In Latin America, it resulted in Inter-American Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities in 1999 – the first treaty following the social model of disability and recognizing disability rights (Van Rompaey, 2020). Nevertheless, on a global scale, the culmination of the movement is widely regarded as the UN CRPD.

Over time, the social model has faced criticism for its limited perspective and failure to acknowledge the impact of impairments on individuals (Lindsay, 2003; WHO, 2011). Consequently, it has undergone further development to encompass the multifaceted nature of disability as an interplay between internal and external factors. For example, the CRPD posits that "disability is an evolving concept" and that "disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (UN, 2006, p. 1). This emerging conceptualization integrates elements from both the social and medical models of disability. Some authors call it the biopsychosocial model (Andreozzi & Pietrocarlo, 2017; García Iriarte, 2015; Sandoval et al., 2017) or the social interactionist model (Dally et al., 2019), even though others refer to it as a refinement of the social model. For the purposes of this study, the term 'social model' will be employed, emphasizing the recognition of the intricate interplay between biological, psychological, and social factors in the disability experience. While this model has its limitations, it may offer a more comprehensive and holistic perspective on disability.

In my research, I will rely on the social model framework and also incorporate the human rights approach to disability where "disability is framed as a human rights issue […], with the basic premises that difference is inherent to the human condition, that contributions from

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different members of society help diversify the range of the human experience and that society should provide for equal opportunities to all its members to realize their rights" (García Iriarte, 2015, p. 24). Even though some authors refer to it as a separate model (Retief & Letšosa, 2018; UN, 2016a), I align with García Iriarte's perspective, considering it as one of the approaches to implementing disability models, with a strong emphasis on rights, equity, and justice. Disability models contribute to our understanding of disability as a concept, while the human rights approach directs our efforts towards protecting the rights of PwD and finding ways to eliminate barriers hindering the fulfillment of those rights. The CRPD serves as a guiding light in this endeavor.

### *The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*

The creation of the CRPD in 2006 represents a significant landmark in the advancement of disability rights. As the first legally binding convention of the United Nations dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights of PwD, the CRPD has garnered extensive global support. It has been signed by 164 countries and ratified by 186, making it one of the most widely embraced conventions in history (UN, n.d.-a). While preceding international documents laid the foundation for disability rights, including the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975), World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled People (1982), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), the CRPD stands out as the pinnacle of these efforts; it is the most comprehensive and well-developed treaty. Aligned with the social model, the CRPD positions PwD as active rights-holders, challenging the prevailing paradigms of charity and dependency that persist in many parts of the world. What sets the CRPD apart is its unprecedented inclusion

of civil society and PwD in its drafting process, making it the first global disability convention shaped by those directly affected by it (García Iriarte et al., 2015).

It is crucial to recognize that despite efforts to incorporate disability perspectives during the development of the CRPD, the Convention has faced criticism for predominantly prioritizing a mainstream viewpoint within the disability movement. This viewpoint is grounded in a Western, Eurocentric value system that emphasizes individualism, thereby disregarding the collective framework of disability and neglecting the diverse epistemologies present in the Global South and indigenous communities. Consequently, CRPD frameworks may fall short in encompassing and endorsing the perspectives and identities of all PwD (Gurung, 2019; Meyers, 2014).

Among its provisions, the CRPD upholds the right to *inclusive education* for PwD, as outlined in Article 24 of the Convention. While the concept of IE had been discussed prior to the CRPD, it is "the first legally binding instrument to contain a reference to the concept of quality inclusive education" (UN, 2016a). Consequently, IE has become an important paradigm that requires clear definition and contextualization within the historical context. Initially conceived as an alternative system to desegregate students with disabilities, its significance quickly evolved to embody education as a fundamental human right, encompassing all learners and extending its focus to various vulnerable groups beyond PwD (Peters, 2007).

### *Education provision for people with disabilities*

Throughout history, the evolving conceptualization of disability has shaped different systems of education provision that include SPED, educational integration, and more recently, IE. While it is often assumed that these frameworks follow a linear progression, with SPED leading to integration and then to IE (Cheshire, 2019), the reality is more complex. In practice,

these three systems often coexist simultaneously, and the role of SPED is subject to ongoing debate (Romero Contreras & García Cedillo, 2013; UNESCO, 2020). In some cases, they are also seen as different aspects of the same overarching system (Kamenopoulou, 2018). It is also important to specify that SPED, educational integration, and IE are both placement options and methodologies.

*Special education*

SPED has a rich historical background dating back to the 19th century, where it emerged as the primary form of education for PwD. This educational approach involves specialized strategies tailored to address specific disabilities, and historically in most parts of the world, it has been predominantly provided in segregated settings known as special schools (Kamenopoulou, 2018). In addition to academic pursuits, SPED encompasses a broader range of goals, including the development of essential life skills such as self-care and independence, as well as non-academic abilities that can help mitigate the impact of impairments on individuals' lives (e.g., social skills, communication, and adaptive behaviors). Not surprisingly, the creation of distinct educational methodologies and segregated settings based on disability type (e.g., schools for the Deaf, schools for the blind) along with the common incorporation of medical interventions within the educational process place SPED in the realm of the medical model of disability (Erten & Savage, 2012; Peters, 2007).

SPED has faced substantial criticism, primarily due to its role in creating a division between disabled and non-disabled students, and for perpetuating the notion of 'normalcy' as the dominant standard (Connor & Gabel, 2013; Sauer & Lalvani, 2017). The system has been condemned for its discriminatory and oppressive nature, evident in the use of separate curricula and settings with lowered standards and expectations for students with disabilities. After the

social model of disability emerged in the 1970s and efforts to include PwD in all aspects of life intensified in the 1980s, SPED became associated with segregation, marginalization, and now carries negative connotations in contemporary discourse.

Surprisingly, despite the criticisms and negative associations, SPED persists and has not been fully discarded by PwD themselves. In fact, even during the creation of the CRPD, there were heated debates with regard to the role and future of SPED and whether it should be included in the Convention. Ultimately, the final version of the CRPD utilized the term 'inclusive education' as the framework for fulfilling the right to education for PwD. However, the Convention allows for a certain degree of flexibility, wherein the implementation of SPED would not necessarily contradict the principles outlined in the CRPD (De Beco, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). This flexibility can be attributed to the diverse experiences within the disability community regarding the practice of mainstreaming. For instance, Deaf students have advocated for their right to receive education in special schools, contending that their linguistic and cultural identities are at risk of being overshadowed in mainstream settings. Deaf schools, on the other hand, are able to provide high-quality education in sign language while incorporating elements of Deaf culture into the curriculum. This allows Deaf students to feel a sense of belonging to a significant and unique community (WHO, 2011). The ambiguity surrounding SPED, particularly in relation to IE, has given rise to extensive debates and unanswered questions that persist.

*Integration*

The initial international efforts aimed at bridging the gap between disabled and non-disabled students were primarily focused on simple mainstreaming as a solution. Essentially, educational integration involves placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms either for the entire day or for specific periods or subjects, while still providing them with specialized

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instruction or support either within or outside the regular classroom. Furthermore, in educational integration, it is common to place children with disabilities on a separate curriculum track, which often entails lower academic expectations and perpetuates segregation (Cheshire, 2019).

Educational integration can be seen as a transitional phase in the history of education provision for PwD. It gained relevance in global discourse for a brief period (roughly between late 1980s and 1994) until practitioners in the field recognized that simply placing PwD in regular school settings did not automatically lead to their inclusion. While educational integration represents a step away from segregation, it does not fundamentally challenge the underlying system, focusing on 'normalizing' students with disabilities to fit into the existing framework (Erten & Savage, 2012; Martínez Silva, 2018).

*Inclusive education*

IE is both a philosophy and a practice; it is a multidimensional concept grounded in various theoretical frameworks encompassing human rights and social justice, teaching, learning, and disability studies (Artiles et al., 2006; Pérez-Castro, 2014; Peters, 2007). Following the principles of the social model and the human rights approach to disability, IE essentially encourages social change (Dally et al., 2019; Gabel, 2010). Unlike integration, it challenges the existing system and seeks to devise curriculum, pedagogy, and school structure that would emphasize equity and diversity, facilitating participation of *all* learners in mainstream education regardless of their background, needs, and abilities (Ainscow, 2005; Smith & Tyler, 2011; UNESCO, 2020).

Over the past three decades, IE has gained significant momentum on a global scale. The IE movement emerged in the late 1980s, driven by the dedicated efforts of disability organizations and the activism of parents advocating for change (Barnes, 2007; Connor & Gabel,

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2013; Walton, 2018). However, it was not until the launch of the international initiative

*Education for All* in 1990 and the subsequent *Salamanca Declaration and Framework for Action*

in 1994 that the international community's focus shifted towards inclusion, recognizing IE as a

new ideal (Peters, 2007).

Both of these initiatives were the outcome of collaborative efforts involving multiple

stakeholders and orchestrated by the UN and its agencies, primarily UNESCO. Education for All

was established during the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, in

1990. This conference was organized by the UN and brought together representatives from 155

countries, including government officials, policymakers, and education specialists. Similarly, the

Salamanca Declaration emerged from the World Conference on Special Needs Education in

Salamanca, Spain, in 1994. In addition to the actors mentioned earlier, it actively involved CSOs,

international non-governmental organizations, parents' associations, scholars, and disability

activists (Ainscow et al., 2019; Mundy & Manion, 2015).

    *The Education for All* initiative had a rather broad scope, emphasizing the urgency of

securing the right to education for all categories of students, particularly those who face

marginalization or are at risk. It only briefly acknowledged students with disabilities, overall

highlighting that "the learning needs of the disabled demand special attention and that steps need

to be taken to provide equal access to education to every category of disabled persons as an

integral part of the education system." (UN, n.d.-b, Right to Education section, para. 12).

Notably, this document established that students with disabilities should be taught within the

general system of education, although the distinction between integration and inclusion was not

yet clear.

*The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* marked a significant milestone in the realm of education as it became the first international declaration dedicated explicitly to the education of students with disabilities and firmly endorsed the principle of inclusion, signifying a historic paradigm shift. This landmark document embraced the principles of the social model of disability, advocating for comprehensive structural changes and school renovation (Ainscow, 2005; UNESCO, 2020) to ensure the provision of "quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use, and partnerships with the communities" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 12). At the core of the IE approach lie child-centered pedagogy and a continuum of support services that "match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 12). Moreover, the document presents compelling arguments for the implementation of IE, citing three key benefits for the broader community: improved educational outcomes for all learners, fostering a more inclusive society, and potential financial savings, particularly if special schools are no longer maintained.

In the *Salamanca Statement*, IE was already defined in broader terms to include other minorities, marginalized and disadvantaged populations – essentially all students. Throughout the document, the term 'special educational needs' (SEN) was utilized to differentiate students with disabilities from other vulnerable groups. However, the use of 'special needs' within the context of disability (e.g., special needs students, special needs education, etc.) has since become widely unpopular and is no longer employed in recent official UN publications and academic articles. The disability community perceives it as stigmatizing, recognizing that there is nothing inherently 'special' about them or their needs. As a result, the appropriate and preferred language now centers around 'students with disability', 'barriers to learning and participation', and 'reasonable accommodations' (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Despite nearly three decades since the release of the *Salamanca Statement*, the practical application of IE continues to pose dilemmas and challenges (De Beco, 2018). To address these issues, various tools and instruments have been developed to enhance the operationalization of IE for successful implementation and subsequent monitoring. One such example is *The General comment No. 4 on the right to inclusive education* issued by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016, which serves as a comprehensive practical guide.

This document broadly outlines four distinct dimensions of IE: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. Availability emphasizes the universal access to IE, where educational institutions and programs are adequately available in terms of quantity and quality, offering a wide range of educational opportunities for PwD. Accessibility focuses on ensuring access to buildings, information and communication, curriculum, teaching methods, assessment, and support services, while also fostering inclusion through accessible transportation, water and sanitation facilities, school cafeterias, and recreational spaces. Among other aspects, it entails providing education materials in accessible formats and languages, such as Braille, sign language, and digital formats, and making education affordable by ensuring that reasonable accommodations do not result in additional costs.

The acceptability principle, established in *The General comment,* means that educational facilities, goods, and services should be created in a manner that respects the needs, cultures, perspectives, and languages of PwD. Finally, adaptability in IE calls for the application of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework that enables the creation of versatile learning environments and instructional approaches tailored to accommodate the unique needs of learners. It highlights the importance of acknowledging individual learning styles and creating engaging classrooms with high expectations for all. To effectively meet the needs of each student,

curricula and assessments should be flexible, diverse, and able to acknowledge individual

progress while offering alternative learning paths.

Another instrument that sheds light on the practical application of IE is the Index for

Inclusion developed by renowned British scholars Booth and Ainscow. It is an extensively

referenced and widely utilized tool translated into 37 languages, including Latin American

Spanish. It is a three-dimensional model of IE that "can help to clarify thinking and prompt

individual and collective action as well as structure whole school and community educational

development" (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p.19). The three key dimensions encompass Creating

Inclusive Cultures, Producing Inclusive Policies, Evolving Inclusive Practices.

The culture dimension of the Index revolves around cultivating an environment where

every individual is valued and respected. It emphasizes the importance of fostering positive

relationships and promoting respectful and collaborative interactions among all members of the

school community. At the core of an inclusive culture lies a set of inclusive values that guide

policy decisions and day-to-day actions. "Inclusive cultures encourage a recognition that a

variety of ways of life and forms of identity can co-exist, that communication between them is

enriching and requires differences of power to be set aside." (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p. 46).

The policies dimension of the Index concerns the development of inclusive policies that

inform actions and practices within the school. This includes a comprehensive examination of

areas like admissions, integration of new students, learning support systems, and behavior

management. Furthermore, it entails the identification and elimination of barriers to inclusion,

encompassing such aspects as physical accessibility, curriculum access, language and

communication requirements, as well as addressing social and emotional well-being, including

the prevention of bullying.

Finally, the practices dimension concentrates on curriculum, instructional methods, and classroom strategies, encompassing both the content being taught and the methods of teaching and learning. It involves the implementation of differentiated instruction (akin to UDL), fostering active and collaborative learning, and ensuring the provision of suitable support and accommodations. This dimension highlights the significance of student voice, active participation, and critical thinking. It is crucial for inclusive practices to be firmly rooted in the other two dimensions of inclusive culture and policies.

The Index for Inclusion is designed as a questionnaire and serves as a guide for implementing and monitoring inclusion in educational settings. Each dimension of the Index contains indicators that correspond to specific questions, offering a flexible and user-friendly approach. It breaks down the complex notion of IE into manageable and comprehensible steps, which can potentially enable schools to foster inclusion in a more systematic manner.

The principles of IE outlined in the General Comment, along with the dimensions and specific questions from the Index for Inclusion, provide a solid foundation for operationalizing IE. Therefore, both frameworks loosely guided the development of my interview questions, ensuring that they accurately reflected the essential elements of IE.

**Disability in Mexico**

*Views of disability (based on disability models)*

A historical analysis of disability models, laws, and practices in Mexico reveals that the country has undergone multiple stages of development. It has transitioned from the charity model to the medical model, and it is currently in the process of establishing the social model with a human rights-based approach to disability.

According to Sandoval et al. (2017), the charity model prevailed in Mexican society and institutions during the pre-Hispanic Era and the Colonial Era. This dominance was influenced by traditional beliefs and the Catholic Church, leading to contrasting responses towards disability. Traditional beliefs often attributed disabilities to sins, divine punishment, or acts of sorcery, resulting in exclusionary practices. On the other hand, the Catholic Church promoted love and compassion towards PwD, which led to the establishment of social welfare institutions. The downside to all these practices was a shared perception of PwD as objects of pity and charity.

After 1859, when Mexico became a secular state, the charity model gave way to the medical model, with a renewed emphasis on treatments and interventions. Institutionalization became commonplace for individuals with severe disabilities, and there was a prevailing belief that PwD were biologically inferior to those without disabilities. This era witnessed the establishment of numerous specialized schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and asylums throughout the country. National laws and acts pertaining to PwD primarily focused on providing assistance and financial support to PwD.

In present-day Mexico, one can observe the coexistence of various manifestations of the three disability models. Although the language used in national laws largely aligns with the social model of disability, the practical fulfillment of disability rights remains limited (Garín Montes & Rodelo, 2018). Most policies primarily focus on medical and financial assistance programs (Castañeda Rivas, 2016). Additionally, the cultural aspects of Mexican society often perpetuate the charity model of disability, where individuals attempt to assist those with disabilities out of pity and goodwill, without recognizing their strength and capabilities. Disability is still predominantly viewed through a medical lens, with little expectation for PwD to actively contribute to society, economy, and politics.

For instance, a study examining media representations of persons with disabilities in Mexico revealed "a paternalistic perspective on people with disabilities, representing them as disempowered subjects, whose socialization does not foster authentic social inclusion" (Garín Montes & Rodelo, 2018, p. 23). The media tends to depict PwD as helpless victims who are incapable of advocating for themselves, emphasizing the responsibility of the state to assist and care for them. These deeply ingrained stereotypes rooted in the charity and medical models can also explain the presence of various discriminatory practices in Mexico. For instance, employers often hold low expectations of PwD as employees, perceiving them as an additional cost rather than recognizing their potential as valuable assets to the workforce (Hernández et al., 2017; Vite Pérez, 2012); and there is no legal protection against work-based discrimination. Similarly, many doctors hold the belief that women with disabilities are incapable of being mothers and caring for their families (Cruz Pérez, 2004).

Thus far, it is primarily civil society, particularly disabled people's organizations (DPOs) and parents' organizations, that have adopted a human rights approach and are actively working to overcome existing barriers to inclusion across various domains such as political participation, employment, education, and reproductive health.

### *Policy and census*

In Mexico, there is a legal foundation for the protection of the rights of PwD, which has been significantly influenced by global processes. Mexico, as a signatory to the CRPD and other international treaties, was motivated to amend its Constitution, national laws, and policies (Cruz Vadillo, 2021). Currently, the Mexican Constitution prohibits any discrimination "based on ethnic or national origin, gender, age, disabilities, social status, medical conditions, religion, opinions, sexual orientation, marital status, or any other form, which violates the human dignity

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or seeks to annul or diminish the rights and freedoms of the people" (DOF, 2023, Art. 1). Nevertheless, there is a significant gap between the law and its implementation (Garín Montes & Rodelo, 2018). This disparity can be attributed to several factors, such as vague language and terminology in the legislation, as well as weak policy design lacking clear deadlines, concrete action plans, and penalties for non-compliance. Moreover, some policies and provisions are not legally binding.

Mexico played a prominent role in the establishment of the CRPD. It was Mexican President Vicente Fox who put forward the proposal at the UN General Assembly to develop a "comprehensive and integral convention to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities" (UN, 2008, para. 4). Mexico actively engaged in the drafting process and was among the early adopters of the Convention, being one of the first countries worldwide to sign and ratify it. The Convention was influential in provoking changes in Mexican laws, in particular, leading to the updating of the name and normative framework of The General Law for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities (Martínez Silva, 2018).

The General Law for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities was initially established in 2005, underwent modifications in 2008, and was subsequently updated in 2011 (García Cedillo et al., 2015; Martínez-Martínez et al., 2020). The primary objective of this law is to acknowledge and safeguard the rights of PwD, encompassing various aspects such as healthcare, employment, education, housing, public transportation, social development, sports and recreation, culture and tourism, access to justice, and freedom of expression. Section IX of the law defines disability as "the consequence of the presence of a deficiency or limitation in a person that, by interacting with the barriers imposed by the social environment, can prevent their full and effective inclusion in society on equal terms with others" (DOF, 2023a, Art. 2, IX).

It is important to note that the General Law for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Mexico adopts a broad definition of disability, aligning with the social model of disability. However, the statistical data collected by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) takes a more limited medical approach. INEGI utilizes a survey developed by the Washington Group, which focuses on identifying disabilities by assessing specific difficulties associated with impairments (Guzman & García Salazar, 2014). The survey covers various domains, including mobility (difficulties in walking or climbing steps), vision (difficulties in seeing, even with glasses), hearing (difficulties in hearing, even with a hearing aid), cognition (difficulties in memory or concentration), self-care (difficulties in activities like washing or dressing), and communication (difficulties in understanding or being understood).

The Washington Group was established by the United Nations Statistical Commission in 2001 to gather disability data (WHO, 2011). Although this survey is widely used internationally and endorsed by the UN for measuring disability and enabling cross-country comparisons, it does have limitations. It fails to encompass certain impairments, such as psychosocial disabilities, physical disabilities resulting from hand-related mobility issues, HIV/AIDS, multiple disabilities, and others, thus excluding a significant portion of the population. Consequently, the number of PwD in Mexico is significantly underestimated, exacerbating their invisibility in society. For example, studies suggest that the absence of data on individuals with psychosocial disabilities perpetuates their marginalization and neglect by the Mexican State (Concepción Montiel & Chavez, 2020). Furthermore, the census only collects limited additional data on gender and age of PwD using restrictive categories, making it challenging to conduct comprehensive analyses.

*Living with a disability in Mexico today*

In Mexico, the percentage of the overall population with any disability or mental condition is 5.7%. Among them, 1.2 million individuals (or 19%) are aged 15 and older and are illiterate. Only 38% of PwD or mental conditions participate in the formal economy, which is approximately half the rate observed among individuals without disabilities (INEGI, 2021a).

While some positive changes have occurred in the past three decades regarding the inclusion of PwD, significant challenges still persist that require attention at both policy and community levels. On the one hand, PwD are no longer confined to institutions or special schools, signifying progress. On the other hand, they often face a lack of necessary support in mainstream schools, resulting in high dropout rates after completing primary education or even earlier. This issue is further exacerbated in rural and impoverished areas where access to education may be non-existent. On the one hand, PwD possess a legal right to employment and independent living, which is a step forward. Unfortunately, the reality is that a significant number of them struggle to secure employment, leading to homelessness or dependency on caregivers. And although the Constitution prohibits discrimination, paradoxically, many PwD are officially denied political participation and may even be subjected to sterilization and other forms of abuse (Antebi, 2020; Carreon Castro, 2018; Pérez Parra, 2020). These contradictions permeate various aspects of the lives of PwD.

In contrast to many Western countries, "in Mexico, many of the institutional and social deficiencies are supplied by the family, which is the basic structure on which the well-being of the individual rests and is a fundamental support network for persons with disabilities" (Escobedo, 2006, p. 194). As reported by PwD themselves, a strong and united family can help alleviate the negative social impacts of their disability (Castillo Sánchez et al., 2019). While

social networks, love, and support from caregivers are vital for the physical and psychological well-being of PwD, the responsibility of caring for a disabled family member can take a toll on the caregivers themselves, resulting in "a psychological and emotional stress, isolation, and loss of socioeconomic opportunities. These difficulties increase as family members age" (Castillo Sánchez et al., 2019, p. 22). Unfortunately, at the federal level, there are no programs to assist caregivers of PwD; but local initiatives, primarily involving financial assistance, are present within some state governments.

Women with disabilities, in particular, are among the most discriminated and yet most invisible populations in Mexico (Castañeda Rivas, 2016). According to a recent study by Castillo Sánchez et al. (2019), among 165 women with disabilities they interviewed in Toluca, "only 17% reported having a job, which basically consists of working as a dependent of some establishment or as a domestic worker, receiving in most cases (89%) less than the minimum wage, in addition to not having any type of social benefits" (p. 18). These and other findings show that women with disabilities live primarily in poverty and, as a result, have a limited access to health services, appropriate housing, food, education, etc.

Women with disabilities also face a heightened risk of falling victim to sexual violence, and paradoxically, their families often refrain from educating them about reproductive health. Particularly for women with physical disabilities who aspire to become mothers or experience pregnancy, medical services are frequently denied, and medical practitioners often strongly recommend abortion or sterilization (Cruz Pérez, 2004).

In 2015, a study on the sterilization of women with psychosocial disabilities in Mexico City was conducted by Colectivo Chuhcan and Disability Rights International. It revealed that a significant proportion (42%) of women with psychosocial disabilities who had received

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institutional health services were subjected to forced sterilization, often due to familial pressure. The study also highlighted instances of abuses by gynecologists and sexual assaults by institution workers. The motivations for these coerced sterilizations ranged from eugenics to family beliefs that these women would not be suitable mothers, and the misguided notion that sterilization would prevent sexual abuse. Paradoxically, the article points out that such sterilizations could actually exacerbate the problem of invisible and unpunished acts of rape.

These examples provide a glimpse into the challenges experienced by women with disabilities. Unfortunately, delving into the concept of intersectionality within the realm of disability – which encompasses variations in disability experiences influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or residence – is challenging due to the absence of comprehensive statistical data and a scarcity of academic research.

Overall, in Mexico, it has been argued that "discrimination against people with disabilities is a harsh reality that is undeniable, pervasive, and often overlooked in daily life" (Gutiérrez Contreras, 2007, p. 112). According to a study by Martínez-Martínez et al. (2020), a significant majority of disabled individuals in Mexico (76.5%) perceive that Mexican society is largely unaware of their challenges and issues. Education plays a vital role in promoting visibility and inclusion, particularly through the establishment of inclusive schools. Inclusive schools can enable students, both with and without disabilities, to thrive and learn side by side, fostering an environment that values diversity instead of labeling and isolating individuals. Moreover, quality education serves as a powerful tool, empowering PwD to unlock their potential and actively engage in all aspects of society.

*Education for People with Disabilities in Mexico*

Mexico has a comprehensive education system consisting of three levels: basic education, middle education, and higher education. Basic education includes preschool (ages three to six), primary school (ages six to twelve), and secondary school (ages twelve to fifteen). Middle education encompasses high school (ages fifteen to eighteen), while higher education starts from the age of eighteen onwards (Romero Contreras & García Cedillo, 2013). Within the Mexican education system, the majority of schools are public, with a limited number of private institutions. During the 2021-2022 academic year, 89.7% of students were enrolled in public schools, while the remaining 10.3% attended private schools (INEGI, 2021a).

Over the past three decades, Mexico has been in the process of transitioning from fully SPED to educational integration and is currently formulating its IE agenda. The origins of SPED in Mexico can be traced back to the mid-19th century when the first specialized institutions were founded, namely the National Deaf School in 1866 and the National School for the Blind in 1870 (Romero Contreras & García Cedillo, 2013; Sandoval et al., 2017). Until 1992, the exclusive method of providing education for PwD in Mexico followed the medical model of disability, where the diagnosis and severity of students' health conditions determined the type of education or therapeutic services they were offered (Morga Rodríguez, 2016, Pérez-Castro, 2014). SPED schools were established across the nation, categorized based on specific impairments such as neuromuscular, auditory, visual, and intellectual (Romero Contreras & García Cedillo, 2013).

The initial steps towards educational integration in Mexico were initiated with the National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education in 1992. Subsequently, significant revisions were made to The General Law of Education in 1993, leading to the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms and the gradual dismantling of special schools

(Díaz Rodríguez, 2017; García Cedillo, 2018; Hammann, 2020; Lavin et al., 2020). The new system, both in theory and in practice, embraced the paradigm of educational integration, emphasizing targeted support for students with disabilities and the development of methodological strategies and materials tailored to specific impairments.

*CAM and USAER*

Under the new educational framework, special schools underwent a transformation and became Centers for Multiple Attention (CAM; Centro de Atención Múltiple), and at the same time, Units of Support Services to Regular Education (USAER; Unidades de Servicios de Apoyo a la Educación Regular) were created to support mainstream schools (García Cedillo et al., 2015; Hammann, 2020). CAMs function as a separate educational facility that resembles a special school that follows a general program of education, but with a crucial distinction: they accommodate students with various disabilities in the same classroom (Amaro Arista, 2018). In theory, these centers are primarily intended for students with severe or multiple disabilities, "conditions that make it difficult for them to enter regular schools" (Gobierno de México, n.d, Centro de Atención Múltiple (CAM) Section, para. 1). The remaining students with disabilities are expected to participate in mainstream schools, relying on assistance provided by USAER. USAERs are specifically designed to offer guidance to teachers, families, and both disabled and non-disabled students who face challenges in regular school settings (García Cedillo, 2018; García Cedillo et al., 2015; Hammann, 2020; SEP, 2019).

In the academic year 2021-2022, CAMs attended to a total of 1,663 students, while USAERs provided support to 4,739 students. the highest concentration of students, educators, and centers is in Mexico City, while the lowest figures were recorded in the state of Colima (SEP, 2022). While no further data was available regarding disparities between urban and rural

regions, some interviews brought to light the deficiency of SPED services in rural areas – either

they are nonexistent, or there is a limited number of teachers responsible for multiple schools

situated far apart.

Both USAERs and CAMs have sparked significant controversy due to their perceived

inefficiency and perpetuation of segregation (García Cedillo, 2018; Martínez Silva, 2018; Morga

Rodríguez, 2016). As Niembro et al. (2021) argued, "It is necessary to clarify that the objective

of these programs is educational inclusion, but this has not been seen as such, and the programs

that promote inclusion do not provide strategies to implement it correctly." (p. 47). The primary

.critique revolves around the marginalization of students with disabilities in CAMs, which often

resemble daycare centers rather than educational institutions, while USAERs "replicate the

segregation model within the school as support teachers take the students into the resource room

to work with them individually or in groups" (García Cedillo et al., 2015. p. 152). Another

concerning aspect is that in regular schools, the USAER tends to focus on supporting students

with the most noticeable and severe needs, neglecting those with less visible disabilities

(Niembro et al., 2021). The insights gained from interviews with representatives of CSOs

provide further understanding of the functioning of both systems, and these findings will be

discussed in detail in the subsequent chapters. As a side note, in 2014, USAER was renamed to

UDEEI (*Unidad de Educación Especial y Educación Inclusiva*). And while academic articles

still use the term USAER, during the interviews conducted for the study, both names were used

and acknowledged.

*Inclusive education*

In 2013, Mexican policymakers, influenced by global discussions on IE, began

substituting the term 'educational integration' with 'inclusive education' (Amaro Arista, 2018).

However, rather than advancing education, this change has resulted in more challenges. The primary issue lies in the conceptualization and implementation of IE. There is significant confusion surrounding the three paradigms, and even the laws tend to interchangeably use the terms 'inclusion', 'integration' and 'special education'. For instance, the General Law for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities states that the State bears the responsibility of establishing and developing programs for SPED and IE, with the aim of facilitating the educational integration of students with disabilities. Simultaneously, IE is defined as 'education that promotes the integration of people with disabilities into regular basic education schools, through the application of specific methods, techniques, and materials' (DOF, 2023a, Art. 2, XVII). However, this definition does not capture the true essence of IE; instead, it reflects the concept of educational integration.

The same pattern can be observed in all subsequent policies and regulations established since 2013, including the recently published *National Strategy of Inclusive Education*. Despite claiming to reject the old system and fully embrace inclusion (SEP, 2019), this strategy adheres to the same principles expressed in previous regulations. Interestingly, while it states that SPED should not be utilized to achieve IE, the strategy itself suggests reinforcing the use of SPED facilities like CAM and USAER, mentioned earlier. Essentially, the terminology employed in *the Strategy* implies a commitment to the inclusion model. However, the proposed measures indicate a continuation of the mixed practices of SPED and IE. As Cruz Vadillo (2021) points out, "Although a relevant placement of the issue in political matters is perceptible, from the perspective of inclusion, it [the Strategy] does not represent major transformations compared to previous views." (p. 109).

In Mexico, the discussion surrounding integration is generally linked to the principles of normalization and SEN, while the concept of inclusion is approached through the principles of diversity and addressing barriers to learning and participation. This opposing perspective could explain why the discourse on inclusion has led to an increased invisibility of disability.

The emphasis on diversity in Mexico has encouraged the consideration and simultaneous support of all vulnerable groups. However, on a practical level, this led to the dissolution of the national program dedicated to promoting the integration of students with disabilities specifically. As a result, disability became part of the National Program for Educational Inclusion and Equity, which encompassed all vulnerable population groups. This change resulted in a reduction in budget and overall control over the provision of education for students with disabilities (García Cedillo, 2018).

Similarly, both official documents and academic articles juxtapose the concepts of SEN and barriers to learning and participation. The former emphasizes the need for individualized support for students, while the latter suggests the implementation of general interventions for groups of students (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Martínez Silva, 2018). According to this perspective, providing individual attention and specific adaptations could lead to labeling and marginalization, contradicting the principles of inclusion. On the other hand, barriers to learning and participation are meant to be addressed holistically, with curriculum, materials, and assessments modified universally for all students, without any differentiation. In practice, this diversity-focused paradigm unintentionally contributes to the invisibility of students with disabilities, as they are not expected to receive the targeted support they may require. Interestingly, most Mexican scholars discussing IE tend to refer to *the Salamanca Declaration*

and *the Education for All* initiative but fail to reference the CRPD and its General Comment No. 4, which explicitly advocate for specific support for students with disabilities.

The common dilemmas of IE in other countries are also evident in the Mexican context. Existing research primarily focuses on the analysis of laws and policies, school practices, teacher perspectives, government support, and discourse. Many articles offer theoretical reflections on IE, exploring different conceptualizations and modes of application, as well as the role of SPED within discussions of equity, justice, and diversity. To date, there is no clear and consistent definition of IE and its operationalization, leading to confusion among professionals working in schools (CNDH, 2020; Romero Contreras & García Cedillo, 2013).

Authors identify various problems within the Mexican education system, including consistent funding shortages, contradictory agendas, inadequate policy design, insufficient professional training, ineffective teaching practices, inadequate infrastructure, limited evaluation methods, and a rigid curriculum (e.g., Cruz Vadillo, 2018; Díaz Rodríguez, 2017; Pérez Castro, 2014; Romero Contreras & García Cedillo, 2013). Furthermore, the existing systems of SPED support, CAM and USAER, are also criticized for their inefficiency (e.g., García Cedillo, 2018; Niembro et al., 2021).

The majority of articles put forth top-down solutions as a means to tackle these challenges, including suggestions such as securing more funding, implementing stronger legislation, and providing comprehensive teacher training. However, it is important to acknowledge that these proposed solutions may encounter obstacles due to the influence of neoliberalism, which can restrict the feasibility of implementing such measures.

It is important to highlight that most studies focusing on IE in Mexico tend to prioritize teachers, policymakers, and parents as the primary actors, often overlooking the potential

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contributions of other stakeholders. This limited perspective is evident in both the discussions

and research designs. Notably, the voices of PwD and the valuable work carried out by CSOs are

frequently disregarded. Turning to CSOs is crucial in gaining a more comprehensive

understanding of the IE landscape and recognizing the grassroots efforts being made.

Before exploring the specific work of CSOs in Mexico and their contributions to IE, it is

important to provide a brief overview of CSOs, their role in disability rights and IE on a global

scale, as well as consider the specific context in which CSOs operate in Mexico.

**Civil society organizations**

*CSOs globally*

Civil society is commonly linked with transformative change and innovation, as it is

believed to provide a platform for diverse voices to be heard. While this notion holds true, it is

important to recognize the intricate and diverse nature of civil society itself. It encompasses a

multitude of social actors who often hold contrasting perspectives. These actors operate within

distinct public realms and usually have their unique methods of interacting with the political and

economic systems (Olvera, 2015).

Civil society has played a prominent role in advancing disability rights and inclusion

worldwide; not to mention its substantial contribution to the formulation and drafting of the UN

CRPD. Unlike other sectors, disability focused CSOs commonly adhere to the principle of

'Nothing About Us Without Us', ensuring that PwD lead or provide input into the actions taken

by their representatives. While the state often faces criticism for its emphasis on medical and

financial assistance programs and its failure to address and alleviate inequalities, civil society is

regarded as a catalyst for change, capable of uniting all stakeholders and driving concrete actions

(Gutiérrez Contreras, 2007). It is widely recognized that effective implementation of rights cannot be achieved without active participation from CSOs (Chaney, 2017).

In relation to IE, the international instruments discussed in the preceding section consistently highlight the crucial role of CSOs in promoting disability rights and education through policy development, planning, and service delivery. An illustration of this can be found in *The Salamanca Declaration and Framework for Action* (1994), which extensively references advocacy groups, community and parents' groups, and DPOs, emphasizing that DPOs should "take an active part in identifying needs, expressing views on priorities, administering services, evaluating performance and advocating change" (UN, 1994, p. 40). Furthermore, the document recognizes CSOs as agents of change, innovation, and catalysts in the sense that they "have more freedom to act and can respond more readily to expressed needs" and "should be supported in developing new ideas and pioneering innovative delivery methods" (UN, 1994, pp. 39-40).

Similarly, *The General Comment No. 4* (2016) highlights the significance of CSOs by asserting that "inclusive education cannot be realized by education ministries in isolation. […] Partnerships should also be forged with service providers, organizations representing persons with disabilities, the media, civil society organizations, local authorities, student associations and federations, universities and teacher education colleges" (UN, 2016a, p. 16). These collaborations are seen as essential for the realization of IE.

In addition to the provisions outlined in official documents, there is evidence indicating the role of CSOs in filling gaps left by public services with regard to IE, particularly through initiatives such as community-based rehabilitation (Paudel, 2018; UNESCO, 2022; WHO, 2011; Wood et al., 2019). However, it is worth noting that research in this area has predominantly focused on countries in the Global North, which poses a significant limitation. To fully grasp the

extent of the work and contributions of CSOs in promoting IE, it is essential to explore their efforts in countries of the Global South, including Latin America, where the voices and experiences of local disability communities are often underrepresented in research (Kamenopoulou, 2018).

Before delving into the examination of disability CSOs in Mexico and the insights obtained from interviews conducted, it is crucial to consider their historical background and the contextual factors that shape their operations. Civil society exhibits a diverse composition in each country, influenced by specific historical conditions. Additionally, the strategic actions undertaken by CSOs depend on the interplay between their goals and the local context, which can either drive transformative change or perpetuate the existing status quo.

### *CSOs in Mexico*

In Mexico, CSOs face significant challenges as they often remain unnoticed and unacknowledged. Examining their intricate history can provide insights into the scope of their work and difficulties experienced by the sector today.

During colonial times, the first charitable organizations were formed under the administration of the Catholic Church. However, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that formal, non-secular, and non-partisan CSOs began to emerge in the country (Cohen, 2004; Valenzuela, 2006). The growth of civil society in Mexico coincided with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, characterized by austerity measures, the expansion of the free market, and reduced government focus on social issues (Brumley, 2010). These neoliberal policies contributed to widening social and economic disparities, increased levels of poverty and unemployment, which in turn fueled civil mobilization efforts. Another influential factor was the process of democratization, accompanied by the international discourse emphasizing the

significance of the third sector as a representation of public voice, particularly promoted by the United Nations (Cadena Roa, 2015).

The year 1985 marked a significant turning point in the history of CSOs in Mexico. Following a devastating earthquake that struck the country, collective action became highly visible, and CSOs solidified their position as a powerful actor and an alternative to both the market and the government (Brumley, 2010; Cadena Roa, 2015).

Between 1985 and 1995, civil society played an active role in various movements and civil unrest, particularly in response to the election fraud in 1988 and the Zapatista uprising in 1994. During the 1990s, emerging organizations showcased a diversity of organizational forms, action strategies, interests, and ideologies. However, towards the end of the 1990s, CSOs began to experience a decline in their political influence. Although some protests continued to be carried out by students and agricultural workers, many CSOs started collaborating with the government, and in some cases, even deviated from their original causes to engage with political circles and assume political roles (Cohen, 2004; Collin Harguindeguy & Molina, 2009).

By the year 2004, CSOs had predominantly been assigned the role of service provision, charity, and philanthropy, while other actors took the forefront in the political arena. This shift in dynamics coincided with the formalization of the sector through the implementation of a federal law.

The Federal Law for the Promotion of Civil Society Organizations' Activities (2004) acknowledges CSOs as entities of public interest, offering them fiscal incentives and access to public resources. It highlights the government's dedication to fostering citizen participation, supporting CSOs, and enabling their active engagement in decision-making processes. CSOs are

empowered to propose objectives, priorities, and strategies for social development policies, as well as contribute to program formulation and evaluation (Favela Gavia, 2015).

This law is a significant milestone in the democratic transition as it recognizes and acknowledges for the first time the valuable activities that CSOs have been carrying out in diverse fields and sectors, including education, environment, social causes, indigenous peoples, PwD, etc. It signifies progress, albeit incomplete, in the state-society relationship and fosters stronger bonds between the government and CSOs (Vargas González, 2012).

Despite making progress, the relationship between the State and the third sector continues to be highly complex. Historically, the government has imposed limitations on the sector, leading to the exclusion of CSOs from political negotiations. However, there have been instances of collaboration. While CSOs are frequently invited to participate in discussions and provide input, their role often seems more symbolic than substantive. There is no guarantee that their suggestions will be genuinely considered and incorporated into decision-making processes (Collin Harguindeguy & Molina, 2009). In other words, they are not truly "included in decision-making cycles … to substantially improve the quality of public policies", and generally, "the processes of building consensus and agreements on priority issues for the country take place outside of civil society, since it is not seen as a sector that is part of the democratic governance" (Hevia et al., 2009, p. 26).

Currently, the role of CSOs has become increasingly vital in addressing the pressing challenges of poverty, insecurity, and inequality that impact the country. They have gained significant momentum, particularly in response to the corruption and inefficiency of the state in addressing social issues (Baker et al., 2021; Muñoz Hernández, 2018; Lay Arellano & Anguiano Suárez, 2019; Pérez-Castro & López Campos, 2021). However, the position of CSOs as a sector

is complex, particularly under the current administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador

(AMLO) (2018 – present day), which strongly opposes CSOs and openly seeks to dismantle the

sector through reforms and negative publicity.

The current political and legal environment is extremely detrimental to local CSOs. Since

2018, the government has cut all federal funding for CSOs, and a recent reform to the income tax

law has canceled the separate 7% tax deduction limit for donations, which used to be in addition

to the 15% general deduction limit. Now, both individuals and businesses no longer receive the

benefit of deducting higher amounts from their taxes for charitable contributions; a monetary

loss for CSOs is estimated at 8 billion Mexican pesos (Saldívar & Nolasco, 2021). In addition to

these financial setbacks, the government has consistently portrayed CSOs in a negative light,

labeling them as dishonest institutions involved in corruption and money laundering. These

persistent portrayals aim to undermine public support for the sector (USAID, 2022).

### *Disability CSOs*

Despite the limited support from the State and their inability to actively participate in

policy formulation and program development, CSOs exert their utmost efforts to make a

difference in the lives of PwD (Gutiérrez Contreras, 2007). Unlike the United States and certain

European countries where the disability community played a vocal and active role in driving

change, in Mexico, a significant portion of the fight for PwD rights and services has been led by

CSOs, encompassing both small grassroots organizations and larger international entities.

In Mexico, there are global and regional coalitions that specifically focus on disabilities.

A notable example is the Latin American Network of Non-Governmental Organizations of

Persons with Disabilities and their Families (Red Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de

Personas con Discapacidad y sus Familias; RIADIS). Comprised of DPOs from 19 Latin

American countries, RIADIS plays a significant role in advancing inclusion within the region

and globally. The coalition actively participated in the development of the UN CRPD and

currently holds consultative status with both the United Nations and the Organization of

American States (OAS).

In the realm of smaller CSOs, it is not uncommon for parents of children with disabilities

to establish their own organizations. For example, Fokkema et al. (2013) discuss successes of

organizations established by parents of children with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, pointing out

that in Mexico "maternal activism has had a great impact in the social, scientific and even

political spheres" (p. 140). In their discussion, they provide examples of different CSOs

established by activist mothers in Guadalajara, Mexico City, Chihuahua, and Guanajuato.

Another study examines the experiences of parents of children with autism, shedding light on

their struggles with medical services and the system of education. The author states that "instead

of engaging in collective political action, some parents of modest means may choose

alternatives, including the formation of small non-profit associations that pool resources to

provide private services" (Tuman et al., 2008, p. 12).

Another noteworthy illustration of a CSO founded by parents is The Mexican

Confederation of Organizations in favor of Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (La

Confederación Mexicana de Organizaciones en favor de la Persona con Discapacidad

Intelectual), commonly referred to as CONFE. Although CONFE did not directly participate in

the present study, it was frequently referenced during interviews due to its substantial reputation,

influential presence, and collaborative endeavors with diverse disability focused CSOs.

CONFE's mission is "to contribute to achieving a better quality of life for persons with

intellectual disabilities and their families, promoting their full inclusion in the society and in the

world around them" (CONFE, 2021, p. 4). To fulfill this mission, CONFE operates through two primary avenues: direct support for its beneficiaries and extensive advocacy and collaboration initiatives. Their work encompasses a diverse range of activities, from the provision of vital services to involvement in policy formulation.

While CONFE provides services to people with intellectual disabilities starting from as young as 45 days old, their primary focus lies in labor inclusion and independent living, which are critical issues for this population in Mexico. CONFE has achieved remarkable success in job training and facilitating the integration of their beneficiaries into the labor market. They not only teach essential tasks and foster responsibility and collaboration skills, but also strive to create inclusive work environments by guiding and supporting companies interested in hiring individuals with intellectual disabilities. Numerous success stories highlight the positive outcomes of CONFE's efforts, with beneficiaries securing employment or establishing their own businesses with the CSO's support. CONFE also actively employs PwD within their own staff.

Additionally, CONFE actively collaborates with a network of 114 nonprofits throughout Mexico to advocate for the rights of individuals with intellectual disabilities. They work closely with the government to consult on and develop documents, protocols, and strategies that safeguard the rights of this community within public policies. The CSO also empowers individuals with intellectual disabilities to become self-advocates, giving them a voice to advocate for their rights and inclusion. Despite the pandemic, in 2020 alone, "CONFE and the Network self-advocates participated in more than 11 national and international forums" (CONFE, 2020, p. 14), tackling such issues as disability rights, inclusive electoral systems, impact of the pandemic, and education.

As many other disability CSOs in Mexico, CONFE actively promotes IE and facilitates the inclusion of their beneficiaries into mainstream schools. Lay Arellano & Anguiano Suárez (2019) argue that Mexican CSOs and parent groups hold a significant share of the right and responsibility in the journey towards IE. It is crucial to turn to CSOs to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the IE landscape and recognize the grassroots efforts being made. However, despite an extensive search conducted in both English and Spanish, no existing research on the work of CSOs related to IE in Mexico was found. This research project aims to fill this gap by exploring the experience and role of CSOs in promoting IE in Mexico.

**Research questions**

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the perspectives and experiences of CSOs in Mexico regarding their involvement in and promotion of IE. I did not enter the study with preconceived expectations or models, only hypothesized that Mexican CSOs collaborate with all stakeholders involved in IE and have a positive impact on advancing IE. The following research questions were formulated to guide the research:

1. How do Mexican CSOs conceptualize disability and inclusive education?

This question aimed to explore the perspectives and understandings of CSOs regarding the concepts of disability and IE within the Mexican context. It sought to identify the CSOs' viewpoints on the appropriate approach to implementing IE in Mexico based on their experiences.

2. What are some positive and negative aspects of the current system of IE as identified by CSOs?

This question aimed to learn about experiences of CSOs regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the existing education system in Mexico. It aimed to uncover what aspects of the

system work well and what areas need improvement, particularly in terms of making schools more inclusive.

3. To what extent and how do CSOs contribute to IE?

This question was to uncover the extent and nature of CSOs' contributions to IE in Mexico, in particular, the various roles and activities undertaken by CSOs to promote inclusive education, identifying their key successes and challenges.

The following chapter outlines the methodology I employed to answer these questions.

**CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

The study received pre-approval from the Internal Review Board of the University of Oregon (STUDY00000592) on June 22, 2022, and adhered strictly to the ethical considerations and procedures outlined in the research plan. During the month of July, I traveled to Mexico to sample CSOs and conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews, both in person and online. In some cases, observations of the CSO premises were also conducted to supplement the interviews. A total of 30 interviews were carried out between July and September 2022 while I was in Mexico. And 1 additional interview was conducted in November when I returned to the US. Some participants also provided further clarification, completed their answers, and shared additional information through communication channels such as WhatsApp and email.

Data transcription, coding, and analysis took place between January and March 2023. During the recruitment process and the analysis, secondary data sources were utilized, including CSO websites, annual reports, publicly available interviews, as well as databases and documents from the Mexican government and its entities, in particular, the Mexican Ministry of Education (SEP; Secretaría de Educación Pública).

**Recruitment and sampling**

To identify relevant CSOs that met the inclusion criteria, various approaches were utilized. These included conducting internet searches, exploring published and digital databases of Mexican CSOs, engaging with Facebook groups, accessing webinars and conferences on IE through platforms like YouTube, and seeking personal recommendations.

The inclusion criteria for CSOs were as follows: the organization should be based in Mexico, have existed for a minimum of 5 years, and its work should be partly or fully related to disabilities and education. While disabilities or education did not necessarily have to be

explicitly mentioned in the CSO's mission, they needed to be part of their programs. The study welcomed the participation of both formal and informal CSOs, irrespective of their local, national, international, or intergovernmental (multilateral) status. CSOs could be located in any state in Mexico and work with any and all disabilities.

I reached out to a total of 78 CSOs, utilizing various communication channels such as email, official Facebook pages, contact forms on their websites, and WhatsApp, inviting them to participate in the study. Most of the invitations were tailored to each specific CSO. It is worth mentioning that I had previously collaborated with two of the CSOs for my other projects; however, one of them did not respond to my invitation. The majority of CSOs that agreed to participate responded to my invitation as a cold contact, while 4 of them were identified through snowball sampling and 4 were recommended by individuals in my personal contacts. Approximately one-third of the CSOs requested a phone/Zoom call prior to the interview to gain a better understanding of the study's purpose and determine if their CSO would be a suitable fit.

Ultimately, I successfully recruited 28 CSOs to participate in the study (in two cases, the same interviewee represented 2 different CSOs). In certain instances, CSO representatives were affiliated with multiple CSOs simultaneously, implying that they held positions in more than one organization. For instance, one participant served as the founder of three distinct CSOs. And although she managed all three organizations, only the CSO actively engaged in IE efforts was considered for the analysis. Another participant held the position of founder in both CSOs that she represented, and both organizations have influence in the field of IE, justifying their inclusion in the analysis. Lastly, the third individual was the founder and CEO of a local CSO that produces and distributes adapted educational materials, while also serving as a director in an

international CSO dedicated to education for individuals with visual impairments. Both CSOs were deemed relevant to the research and were included in the analysis accordingly.

The study design also allowed multiple representatives from the same CSO to participate. As a result, a total of 33 CSO representatives from 28 CSOs were interviewed, with 18 of them being founders and/or CEOs. Since the study aimed to include the voices of PwD and parents of PwD, purposive quota sampling was employed. In the end, the study successfully included 4 participants who were PwD, 4 parents of PwD, and the remaining 25 CSO representatives were professionals.

**Conducting interviews**

A total of 31 interviews were conducted for this study, all in Spanish. Prior to initiating the interviews, I developed an interview guide based on the three research questions listed in the previous chapter. To address the third research question about CSO contributions specifically, I formulated several follow-up questions, some of which were inspired by the Index for Inclusion developed by Booth and Ainscow (2011), inquiring about CSOs' impact on inclusive cultures, policies, and practices. However, it is important to note that I did not limit my questions to the three dimensions of the Index, realizing that CSOs may engage in a wider range of activities beyond what the Index covers.

While the interview guide provided a framework, the interviews were conducted with flexibility, tailored to the distinct nature of each CSO and CSO representative. So, the interviews delved deeper into topics that were deemed more relevant to each CSO's work. For instance, when interviewing CSO leaders with disabilities, particular attention was given to their personal experiences with the education system and their perspectives on the most suitable approach to IE in Mexico. On the other hand, when interviewing CSOs that had well-established school

inclusion programs, the focus was on gathering specific details about their actions within

schools. Similarly, if a CSO's primary focus was accessibility, the discussion centered on that

aspect. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the experiences and

perspectives of CSOs in a way that acknowledged their individual contexts and priorities,

capturing a diverse range of insights on CSO impact on IE in Mexico.

In certain instances, follow-up interviews were conducted with the same CSOs (a total of

5). The in-person interviews took place at the premises of the CSOs, which provided an

opportunity to visit their facilities, observe their work, and even interact with some employees

and beneficiaries. This allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of their operations and

organizational structure. In the case of 1 CSO, the interview was online, but I later visited them

in person. In total, I visited 10 out of the 28 CSOs that I interviewed, 8 took place in Mexico City

and the remaining 2 in Queretaro. The average duration of an interview with each CSO was

approximately 90 minutes. The interviews varied in length, with the shortest interview lasting 50

minutes and the longest 2 hours and 20 minutes (in this case, it involved two separate sessions).

Upon concluding the interviews, virtually all participants expressed a keen interest in the

study's results, emphasizing the importance of the information for their work. They recognized

the value of the research as a resource that could supplement their efforts, as they often lack the

resources to document their own actions or learn about the work of other CSOs in the field. Additionally, some participants expressed a desire for future collaboration, indicating a potential for ongoing partnerships and knowledge-sharing. On one occasion, shortly after the interview, I had the opportunity to contribute to one of the CSOs' teacher training sessions as a guest speaker. Upon thesis defense, I intend to create a concise guide encompassing key findings, recommendations, and their practical applications. I will then email this guide along with the link to the full thesis to all CSOs that participated in the study.

**Description of sample**

The study aimed to include a diverse representation of CSOs from various states in Mexico, while also encompassing a broad spectrum of disabilities. This approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of the experiences and contributions of CSOs.

The CSOs involved in this study demonstrated geographic diversity, operating across all states in Mexico, and some even extending their reach to other Latin American countries, as well as occasionally the United States and Spain. While their physical offices or premises were often located in one or a few cities (mostly Mexico City, abbreviated in Table 1 as CDMX), the majority of these CSOs stated that they had beneficiaries, projects, and collaborative efforts spanning across all states in the country. For instance, they may conduct teacher training programs that cover the entire nation.

The study also aimed to capture the perspectives and experiences of CSOs working with all disabilities. Table 1 below illustrates that most CSOs specialize in a specific disability (e.g., autism spectrum disorder abbreviated as ASD), while a few worked across all disabilities.

| CSO | Disability | Location | Founded | Interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abriendo Posibilidades | ASD | CDMX | 2017 | Online |
| Atzan | ASD | Guadalajara | 2011 | Online |

| COTII | ASD | Monterrey, San Nicolás de los Garza, Aguascalientes, Cd. Victoria | 2011 | Online |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| APAC | Cerebral Palsy | 46 affiliated centers in Mexico, 11 of them named APAC (located in CDMX, Zacatecas, Culiacán, Fresnillo, Colima, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, etc.) | 1970 | In person |
| Nuevo Amanecer | Cerebral Palsy | Monterrey | 1978 | Online |
| CATIC | Communication disorders | CDMX | 2005 | In person + Online |
| Andale para Oír | Deaf | Querétaro | 2005 | In person |
| Educación Incluyente | Deaf | Guadalajara | 2008 | Online |
| Inclusor | Deaf | CDMX | 2013 | In person |
| IPPLIAP | Deaf | CDMX | 1967 | In person |
| Capys | Intellectual | CDMX | 1983 | Online |
| CEAA | Intellectual | Monterrey, Cancun, Puerto Vallarta | 1992 | Online |
| Gigis | Intellectual | Querétaro | 2012 | Online + in person visit |
| VIM | Physical | CDMX | 2000 | Online |
| AMADIVI, ICEVI LA | Visual imp. | CDMX | 1997 | In person (visit only AMADIVI) |
| AMEPDIVI | Visual imp. | Nationwide | 1987 | Online |
| Ilumina | Visual imp. | CDMX | 2007 | In person |
| IPACIDEVI | Visual imp. | San Luis Potosí | 1997 | In person |
| Declic | Various: intellectual, ASD, ADHD, learning | CDMX | 2008 | Online |
| Educación especial Más | Various: more intellectual, ASD; less hearing imp. | CDMX | 2010 | In person |

| | | | 1949 (globally), 1998 (Mex) | In person |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| OEI | All | CDMX | 1949 (globally), 1998 (Mex) | In person |
| AMAD | All (more intellectual and psychosocial) | Puebla | 2008 | Online |
| Unidos | All (more intellectual, less sensory) | CDMX, Monterrey, Guadalajara, Querétaro, Cuernavaca | 1987 | Online |
| Libre Acceso | All (more physical, visual, psychosocial) | CDMX | 1989 | Online |
| Punto Seis | All (more visual) | CDMX, Oaxaca | 2006 | Online |
| IDEA, PHINE | All: any educational need, but more intellectual, ASD, ADHD | CDMX, GDL | 2017, 2013 | Online |

*Table 2. Basic descriptors of CSOs in my study.*

Regarding the CSO representatives, limited demographic data was collected, consisting of only their names and positions within their respective CSOs. As previously mentioned, among the participants, there were four PwD, three of whom had visual impairments, and one who was Deaf. Three of these participants held the dual roles of founders and CEOs within their CSOs. Furthermore, four participants were parents of PwD, and all of them also served as CEOs of their respective CSOs. The rest of CSO representatives were either CEOs or professionals directing or actively involved in programs related to inclusion and/or IE.

The wide spectrum of CSOs in the study varied greatly in terms of size and scope. It included smaller grassroots organizations that were predominantly volunteer-driven and rooted within their community. The study also encompassed larger CSOs, that had a more formal organizational structure and permanent staff operating schools or offices across multiple states. Lastly, the study also incorporated renowned international CSOs such as the OEI (Organization of Ibero-American States) and ICEVI Latinoamérica (The International Council for Education of

People with Visual Impairment) that had a more extensive reach and resources to implement

their initiatives on a broader scale and facilitate the exchange of experiences among Latin

American countries.

Among the CSOs included in the study, there was a diverse range of focuses and areas of

expertise. Some CSOs primarily dedicated their efforts to providing therapeutic interventions,

while others were more actively engaged in advocacy, advisory services, and social change; a

few specialized particularly in IE. Together, these CSOs collectively cover a wide range of

responsibilities and domains directly and indirectly related to IE. Their contributions

encompassed various activities such as developing and coordinating projects at both the school

and community levels, organizing congresses and events, conducting teacher training programs,

empowering parents, assisting schools, delivering specialized courses and providing educational

support to PwD, among others.

**Data Analysis**

The audios of all interviews were recorded using my phone, after obtaining consent from

my participants. After each interview, I transferred the recordings to my laptop and deleted the

files from my phone to ensure privacy and data management. Throughout the interviews, I

maintained a notebook where I documented notes, reflections, observations, and any additional

questions that arose prior to, during, and after the interviews. These notes served as a valuable

resource for my analysis process.

Once all the interviews were completed, I transcribed them verbatim. Being proficient in

Spanish, I did not translate my transcripts and conducted coding and analysis in the same

language. However, for the purpose of reporting my findings, I provide English translations of

all the quotes in the chapters of this thesis.

After finalizing the transcriptions, I imported the data into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software program. I conducted multiple cycles of coding, employing descriptive, in-vivo, and versus coding techniques (Saldaña, 2021). Some codes were deductive, derived from my original research questions, while others emerged inductively during the analysis process. Connections between codes were established, leading to the identification of final themes. Due to the extensive amount of data collected, certain themes had to be excluded from the thesis due to limitations of time and format. Nonetheless, the data obtained was rich and provided valuable insights.

The key themes I identified can be grouped into three main categories: the present state of IE, the vision of IE, and CSO actions to attain IE. These themes serve as the cornerstone for the four chapters that present the study findings.

In preparation for exploring the contributions of CSOs to IE in Mexico, Chapters 4 and 5 will delve into the current state and the vision of IE in Mexico, as shared by representatives of CSOs. This approach was chosen to provide context for the subsequent chapters, considering the limited research available on IE. By identifying the existing barriers and successes within the current system first, we can gain a deeper understanding of the actions undertaken by CSOs to promote IE, the challenges they address, and the reasons driving their efforts. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to a thorough examination of the barriers to inclusion present in both the education system and society as a whole. While participants were specifically asked about the current state of IE (e.g., "What barriers to learning and participation do you see within schools and communities?", "What do you think about CAMs and USAERs?"), many of the themes covered in this chapter emerged during the analysis of the interviews. In many instances, participants discussed barriers while addressing other questions or sharing their experiences of collaborating

with families, government, and schools. Consequently, the chapter draws upon not only the two specified questions but the entire corpus of interviews.

After a thorough discussion of the barriers, Chapter 5 will focus on practices and factors that contribute to making schools more inclusive. This theme emerged entirely from the analysis of the interviews and was not initially part of the planned structure. The chapter will conclude by exploring how CSOs conceptualize IE and SPED. Demonstrating how CSOs understand both concepts will serve as a guide to illuminate how the current system corresponds (or does not correspond) to this ideal and what theoretical foundation CSOs use to promote the right to quality education for PwD.

Further, Chapters 6 and 7 will be dedicated to the actions undertaken by CSOs to foster IE. All themes and sub-themes in these chapters were identified through the analysis, as the interviews were approached without predetermined themes. As a result, the actions were divided into two subgroups: those that indirectly impact IE and those that directly impact the education provision process for PwD in various placements. Chapter 6 will cover the first category of actions that typically take place outside of schools but are crucial in laying the groundwork for inclusion. On the other hand, Chapter 7 will specifically focus on the actions CSOs take within schools and other educational institutions to facilitate IE.

**Considerations and positionality**

I selected Mexico as the research site due to my strong personal connections with the country. Having resided there from 2017 to 2021 and being married to a Mexican, I hold a deep affinity for Mexico.

My unique positionality as both an insider and outsider conferred certain advantages that other researchers may not have had. Although I am of Russian origin, my proficiency in Spanish

and extensive understanding of the local context, culture, and social dynamics quickly created a sense of familiarity and trust. Moreover, in Mexico, there is a certain respect attributed to individuals from countries of the Global North, including the assumption of higher education standards. As a Russian researcher coming from the United States, this perception may have opened doors and granted me greater access to participants.

Furthermore, during the interviews conducted between July and September 2022, I was in my second trimester of pregnancy. This aspect of my identity could have influenced the participants' interactions, potentially predisposing them to be more forthcoming. And overall, the combination of personal experiences with disability, a Mexican spouse, and the intention to continue working towards the betterment of Mexico created a strong foundation for trust and collaboration with the participants. I was able to demonstrate that I am genuinely invested in this research and dedicated to ensuring that the outcomes of the study positively impact Mexico, which I hold dear and consider my second home.

## CHAPTER 4: BARRIERS TO INLUSIVE EDUCATION

When discussing barriers to inclusion with my study participants, I discovered that the number of barriers far exceeded my initial expectations. In my analysis, I carefully examined all the barriers mentioned in each interview and the significance attributed to them by each participant. As a result, I classified the barriers, ultimately identifying two overarching categories: personal barriers and system-wide barriers.

Under the personal barriers category, there are three distinct groups: first, attitudes (including prejudices) towards disability; second, a lack of knowledge (both general ignorance about disability and a lack of professional expertise on how to work with PwD) and third, the emotional barriers experienced by educators, parents, and PwD themselves. On the other hand, the system-wide barriers were not grouped thematically but rather explored in the context of government, the school system, and special education services. Though these categories are not without flaws and may slightly overlap, they provided a valuable framework to demonstrate the presence of both internal and external factors hindering inclusion.

Interestingly, while existing literature tends to emphasize system-wide barriers, particularly those arising from the government and the school system, the study participants overwhelmingly emphasized that barriers originating within individuals themselves carry greater influence than those embedded within the system. This finding was surprising because I had initially expected CSOs to see the government as the main obstacle to inclusion, as often suggested in academic articles. Instead, most participants focused on barriers rooted in individuals, arising from cultural and environmental factors within the country, rather than pointing solely at laws and policies. In fact, one could further hypothesize that system-wide barriers might actually be the consequences of personal barriers existing within policymakers,

educators, and other government and education officials. This suggests a more intricate and interconnected relationship between individual mindsets and systemic challenges, making the pursuit of inclusion even more complex and multifaceted.

Given the emphasis placed on personal barriers during the interviews, they will be explored first, followed by the examination of system-wide barriers.

**Personal barriers**

*Attitude*

When I asked the participants to identify the major barriers to the participation and inclusion of students with disabilities, a significant number of them emphasized attitude as the primary factor. It is important to note that the attitudinal barrier extends beyond the scope of education, encompassing cultural beliefs and mentality. This barrier is extremely complex, as it revolves around the construction of disability in individuals' minds and the subsequent manifestation of these perspectives. It is also the most difficult barrier to overcome due to its foundation in deeply ingrained and often unconscious beliefs about disability.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, existing research has revealed that Mexican society has not fully embraced the social model of disability. This finding was confirmed by the representatives of CSOs who took part in the study. The cultural understanding of disability in Mexico encompasses elements from both the medical model and the charity model, with the latter referred to as '*assistencialismo*'. The influence of the medical model can be observed in the prevailing perception that disability is a disease and PwD are considered abnormal and unproductive members of society. Juventino, the founder of Punto Seis and a disability activist, explained, "They keep seeing us as sick people who do not function. We cannot occupy those explanatory spaces [schools and universities], the fact that we reach those spaces is impressive

for people" [*Nos siguen viendo como malitos que no servimos, no podemos ocupar esos espacios*

*explicativos [escuelas y universidades], el que lleguemos a esos espacios es impresionante para*

*la gente*]. In addition, there is a persistent emphasis on therapy, rehabilitation, and even the

requirement of medication as a prerequisite for accepting students with specific conditions into

schools.

CSO representatives highlighted that the medical model is particularly strong and

harmful for Deaf students. They mentioned that in Mexico, greater emphasis is placed on

providing hearing aids, cochlear implants, and speech therapies to Deaf children, rather than

offering sign language classes, training professional interpreters, and implementing a system of

bilingual-bicultural education within schools. There is also a lack of recognition that Deaf

individuals form a distinct cultural and linguistic community, similar to indigenous communities.

> *Abisaí:* Deaf people continue to be subjects of social interest and not subjects of rights or
> people with community rights. We continue to understand the Deaf from the perspective
> of disability and that is why there are these efforts to donate hearing aids and cochlear
> implants. With this the government thinks that it solves what they define as a problem of
> being Deaf. And the Deaf do not define themselves as having a problem, they define
> themselves as having a cultural and linguistic heritage. That is what the government has
> not understood.
> *Siguen siendo las personas Sordas sujetos de interés social y no sujetos de derechos o*
> *personas con derechos comunitarios, pues vamos a seguir entendiendo a los sordos*
> *desde el cajón de la discapacidad y por eso hay estos esfuerzos de donación de aparatos*
> *auditivos, de donaciones de implantas cocleares y es con eso piensa el gobierno que*
> *soluciona lo que ellos definen como problema el ser sordo. Y los sordos no se definen a sí*
> *mismos como poseedores de un problema, ellos se definen como poseedores de una*
> *herencia cultural y lingüística. Eso es lo que el gobierno no ha entendido.*

Abisaí further shared that this prevailing perception of Deafness as a disability often

leads parents to believe that their children need to be 'fixed'. In their arduous quest for a 'cure',

parents may refrain from exposing their children to sign language and may not learn it

themselves. As a result, there are instances where Deaf children do not encounter sign language

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until their teenage years, depriving them of the opportunity to develop their identity. This

situation leaves them in a state of limbo, where they do not fully belong to the hearing world but

also lack the chance to fully immerse themselves in Deaf culture and community.

*Assistencialismo*, or the charity model of disability, was highlighted as being even more

prevalent and influential than the medical model. The CSO representatives consistently

emphasized this issue, explaining that the majority of Mexicans tend to view PwD as 'little

angels' or perpetual children. Some respondents shared that this sentiment of pity creates a

separation between non-disabled individuals and PwD, excluding the latter from accessing

education, employment, and other social spheres. Conversely, it also motivates some PwD to

resort to begging, as they know they can evoke pity to receive support. Juventino reflected on

this situation when discussing visually impaired individuals who sing or beg in the subway.

> ***Juventino:*** Many get there out of real need. Schools do not support me and do not
> provide inclusive education, the school is of no use to me, so they decide not to continue
> studying. Besides, they don't have a decent job and so they go to the subway to ask for
> money. […] If I lost my job one day, I would end up begging in the subway as well, the
> only alternative is to appeal to pity. […] At least I'll give you a coin, five pesos to buy a
> taco because that's what society thinks and so it has become a vicious circle.
> *Muchos llegan ahí por una necesidad genuina. Es decir, las escuelas no me atienden, no
> me dan educación incluyente, no me sirve la escuela, deciden no seguir estudiando.
> Aparte no tienen un trabajo digno y entonces llegan al metro a pedir dinero. […] Si yo
> un día perdiera el trabajo, terminaría pidiendo en el metro también, es la única
> alternativa apelar a la lástima. […] Bueno, cuando menos te doy un pesito, cinco pesitos
> para que se compre un taco porque así es el pensamiento social y entonces se ha
> convertido en un círculo vicioso.*

Many participants in the study drew a clear link between prevailing perceptions of

disability in Mexico and the associated stigma, which is characterized by the belief that PwD are

unable to learn, work, and contribute to society. They also reflected on how this prejudice has

concrete manifestations on the family and school levels. For example, they mentioned that

schools often see students with disabilities as a burden and accept them only out of obligation or

as a favor to the family, rather than a genuine belief in their rightful place within the school community. As a consequence, CSOs have observed that these schools may not make real efforts to include students with disabilities in the educational process.

Furthermore, some participants noted a correlation between the attitudinal barrier and the socioeconomic status of schools. Private schools were mentioned to often prioritize academic excellence over inclusion and have parents of non-disabled students voice concerns about including students with disabilities as they fear that these students may disrupt the education of their own children.

The study participants consistently emphasized that disregarding deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about disability can undermine all other efforts to promote inclusion. They provided examples of when even well-meaning initiatives designed to include children with disabilities can lead them to feel marginalized and alienated. Usually, this occurs when their non-disabled peers interact with them from the standpoint of *assistencialismo*, treating them as objects of charity rather than as equals.

> *Mariangie:* Once a guy with Down syndrome, about 30-32 years old, shared, 'the thing is that when they took me to camps, I felt a bit like everyone's pet. Everyone was celebrating me and everyone was taking care of me, but in reality, they treated me in a weird way.' People with disabilities perceive this and realize this. 'I felt pats on the back and smiles like, 'oh, it's so great that you're here', but I didn't feel like I was one of them.' *Decía un chavo con síndrome de Down, ya debe tener como 30-32 años, 'es que a mí cuando me llevaban a los campamentos me sentía un poco como la mascota de todos. Todos me hacían fiesta y todos me cuidaban, pero en realidad pues me trataban rarito.' Ellos lo perciben se dan cuenta. 'Sentía palmaditas de la espalda y sonrisas como de, 'ay, qué bueno que estás aquí', pero no me sentía parte de ellos.'*

The attitudinal barrier was recognized as the most challenging to overcome and the most crucial to address. Study participants often expressed that overcoming this barrier can make a

significant change even if other barriers are still present because it creates a personal disposition

to work with students with disabilities.

> *Claudia:* I believe that the teacher's attitude comes first, because they are the first ones to put up that barrier by saying, 'no, since you are blind or you can't see, wait for us here […] Even if I don't have the information or the materials, but I have this attitude and this conviction that this student also can be and is part of the group, then I look for ways to work with them – I could describe verbally or trace the outline of the figure on his back, I search for options. However, if from the beginning I think that this student does not belong here, then I am not going to make an effort. So, I think first is the attitude, mainly of those who spend the most time with the student, that is the teacher.
> *Yo creo que primero es la actitud del maestro o maestra, porque ellos son los primeros que pueden poner esa barrera al decir, no, como tú eres ciego, o no ves, pues aquí espéranos […] Aunque no tenga la información o los materiales, si yo tengo esta actitud y esta convicción de que este estudiante también puede y es parte de , yo busco las formas, o le voy describiendo verbalmente o le trazo la figura en su espalda, busco, pero si yo de entrada ya pienso que ese estudiante no tiene por qué estar ahí, pues no voy a movilizar nada, entonces yo pienso primero es la actitud, principalmente de quién más convive con el estudiante, que es el maestro titular.*

The same idea was reinforced by many other CSO representatives. They emphasized that

true inclusion cannot be achieved solely through top-down mandates if the underlying mentality

remains unchanged. They explained that when schools accept students out of obligation rather

than genuine desire, exclusion persists within the classroom. Some of them also came to a

conclusion that implementing policies and conducting teacher trainings will not be enough unless

there is a collective understanding of inclusion and a personal conviction that students with

disabilities are fully capable of learning and making valuable contributions to the group.

> *Chandel:* You can give a million books to a teacher and say 'well, study all the inclusion theory, learn everything there is on disability, study each of the five disability types.' But there are teachers who do not have the awareness, who can study it and say, 'oh I have a master's degree in inclusion', but at the moment of action they get desperate, exclude, mock, and hit.
> *Le puedes dar un millón de libros a un docente y decir 'pues échate toda la teoría de inclusión, échate toda la cuestión de discapacidad, estúdiate cada una de las cinco discapacidades que están.' Pero hay docentes que no están sensibilizados, que lo pueden*

*estudiar y decir, ah yo tengo un master en inclusión, pero al momento de la acción se desesperan, excluyen, se burlan, golpean.*

So, overcoming attitudinal barriers is a crucial step towards fostering IE environments, but it is not the only one. Knowledge gaps also pose significant challenges to IE and will be explored further.

### *Knowledge*

The second most frequently mentioned barrier to inclusion was the lack of knowledge. This category encompasses two important aspects: general ignorance about disabilities and the absence of specialized teacher training. General ignorance refers to a lack of understanding about the abilities and limitations of PwD. To illustrate, study participants mentioned that, in the past, most parents and educators believed that children with disabilities did not belong in school and were incapable of learning. And while such beliefs are less common today, they still persist in rural areas and households with lower levels of education and socioeconomic status in Mexico.

Representatives of CSOs further explained that, in some instances, this general ignorance leads schools to impose conditions for admission, such as the use of sedatives. Another example is that students with disabilities are sometimes excluded from physical activities under the assumption that they cannot participate due to their disabilities.

> **Raquel:** We just had the case of a boy with Down syndrome who doesn't have any significant challenges. He may have some hypotonia and a few difficulties, but his motor skills are quite good. He can participate perfectly fine, but during PE class, he is taken out to receive extra math tutoring. So, these kinds of situations, which are often due to ignorance rather than ill intention, occur because there is no one telling them [teachers] that it shouldn't be done that way, that things can be done differently.
> *Justo acabamos de tener el caso de un chico con síndrome de Down que no tiene ningún reto, sí puede haber hipotonía, si puede haber algunos rasgos, sin embargo, su motricidad es bastante buena, puede participar perfectamente, pero la educación física es la clase en la que lo sacan para reforzarle matemáticas. Ese tipo de cosas, que hay muchas de ellas que son por ignorancia, no hay una mala intención, pero entonces, no hay quien les esté diciendo, así no, las cosas se pueden hacer de esta manera.*

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Similarly, many other CSO representatives emphasized that teachers often hold low expectations not only for physical abilities, but also for the academic achievements of students with disabilities. One such common assumption is that individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism are incapable of learning how to speak and write. Marcela from CATIC shared an example of a six-year-old boy with Down syndrome whose mother was told that children with Down syndrome don't speak, which deeply surprised Marcela. She pointed out that while this might have been a prevalent belief in the past when adequate therapies and methodologies were lacking, such misconceptions persist today due to knowledge gaps among education professionals. She concluded: "Some people think they know everything just because they studied at university and assume that's how things still are. Most of them are older individuals or extremely self-centered people who believe they already know everything." [E*s una persona que cree que sabe todo porque estudió en su universidad y ya piensa que así sigue todo. La mayoría son personas grandes o personas muy ególatras que piensan que ya saben todo*.]

A number of other participants in the study also highlighted the role of teachers' ego in exacerbating the knowledge barrier. They observed that some teachers struggle to acknowledge that what they learned during their pre-service training may no longer be relevant or that their methods may not be suitable for all students. It is often easier for teachers to attribute poor learning outcomes to their students' disabilities rather than finding the humility to accept their own mistakes or acknowledge gaps in their training.

Some CSOs argued that the division between general education and SPED careers in university programs contributes to the problem. They explained that during their time in college, future general education teachers often receive little to no information about disabilities and the teaching strategies employed in SPED. As a result, when these teachers enter classrooms, they

tend to view students with disabilities as someone else's responsibility. Marifer from IDEA further reflected.

> *Marifer:* It is still seen as an extra burden, something that is not my responsibility to handle; that's why special teachers exist. We understand that there is a lack of information on how to do it, and that teachers are terrified and prefer to have an external support teacher to handle it entirely, but that doesn't help inclusion at all.
> *Se sigue viendo como una carga extra de trabajo, se sigue viendo como algo que no me corresponde a mi hacer, para eso existen los maestros especializados. Y lo entendemos, hay mucha falta de información con respecto, a cómo hacerlo, y entonces pues me aterro, y entonces no, que venga un monitor y que lo haga completo, y eso no favorece para nada a la inclusión.*

In turn, CSOs noted that SPED teachers often lack the necessary knowledge to teach academic subjects at the same level as general education teachers. In addition, SPED teachers no longer receive specialized training in specific disabilities. Instead, they are exposed to a broad range of disabilities, methodologies, and accommodations without becoming experts in any particular area. For instance, while they may learn in general about teaching students who are Deaf, they do not receive sign language classes or training on Deaf culture and worldview. Abisaí from Educación Incluyente explained that this situation is very unfortunate and that many SPED teachers who are in the early stages of their SPED degree come to the CSO for sign language and similar subjects because they are not offered at their university.

AMEPDIVI representatives further elaborated that the changes in SPED programs were influenced by IE propaganda and a global goal to eradicate segregation in SPED, as also discussed in Chapter 2. That said, all AMEPDIVI members concurred that these new university programs only exacerbate pre-existing discrimination. And the CEO of IDEA also reflected on this situation and concluded that "we have taken two steps back from the three steps we had previously advanced." *[hemos dado dos pasos para atrás de los tres que habíamos avanzado].*

Study participants explained that this occurs because the reforms disregard the reality that disabilities cannot be generalized. CSOs emphasized that teaching strategies and approaches differ significantly across disabilities, and each disability represents a unique spectrum. As a result, there is no one-size-fits-all strategy that can be universally applied to the same disability. Laura from Libre Acceso illustrated this point with an example of Deaf education.

> ***Laura:*** The main and most serious problem is that people generally believe that using sign language alone is enough to teach Deaf individuals. However, they fail to understand that Deaf individuals have a different culture, a different identity, and a different worldview. As a result, teachers provide examples and materials designed for hearing individuals, which are not suitable for Deaf learners.
> *El problema principal y más grave es que se piensa en general que con lengua de señas ya es suficiente para enseñar al Sordo. Y pasa que no entienden que tiene una cultura diferente, una identidad diferente, una cosmovisión diferente y entonces le ponen ejemplos, le ponen materiales diseñados para oyentes.*

Like Laura, other CSO representatives working with Deaf individuals were in agreement that SPED teachers who support Deaf education must be proficient in sign language and familiar with Deaf culture. They reinforced the importance of considering the varying levels of exposure to the Spanish language and hearing culture among Deaf students, as some may use spoken language and hearing aids while others may not.

Similarly, other study participants highlighted that SPED teachers working with blind students should have expertise in Braille, the Cranmer abacus, tactile aids, assistive technology, orientation and mobility techniques, and more. Recognizing the diverse needs of different disabilities, they all emphasized that a single SPED teacher cannot be an expert in all areas. Therefore, many CSO representatives underscored that eliminating disability specializations in SPED is contrary to the principles of IE. One of the teachers from AMEPDIVI called this situation '*incongruencia de la todología*'. 'Todología' is a neologism in Spanish, derived from

'todo', meaning 'all', and 'logos' as a suffix commonly used in the names of sciences. It can be loosely translated as the 'science of knowing it all'.

> **Socorro:** So, we have called it the inconsistency of 'todología', which means trying to encompass all disabilities, all needs, academic failure, even poverty, and multiple factors that exist in schools. I believe that the role expected of special education teachers has been broken. […] Unfortunately, not everyone has access to technology, nor does everyone have the time to self-educate on the diverse needs represented by diversity. It may sound nice to have schools 'open to diversity', but without teacher training, it remains a utopia. Therefore, a school open to diversity may seem like a tavern door, that opens to let people in, but also to let them out and sometimes even worse off than before as the school is not equipped to meet the needs of the children.
> *Entonces nosotros le hemos llamado la incongruencia de la todología, o sea querer abarcar todas las discapacidades, todas las necesidades, el rezago educativo, hasta por la pobreza o por los múltiples factores que se dan en las escuelas, yo considero que se rompió el rol que se le pedía al maestro de educación especial. […] Desafortunadamente no todos acceden a la tecnología, ni todos tienen el tiempo para autoformarse ante todas las necesidades que representa la diversidad, se oye muy bonito, las escuelas abiertas a la diversidad, pero si no hay formación docente que responda ante las necesidades, sigue siendo una utopía. Y entonces la escuela abierta a la diversidad parece puerta de cantina, que se abre para que entren, pero se abre para que salgan a veces más raspados porque la escuela no está a la altura de las necesidades de los niños que están ahí.*

CSOs emphasized that addressing these shortcomings in pre-service teacher education programs can be achieved by offering professional training to all educators. However, they also noted that there is a lack of a coordinated initiative to deliver high-quality teacher training specifically focused on IE.

The lack of teacher training emerged as a central point of discussion regarding barriers to inclusion. Study participants consistently highlighted how this deficiency directly contributes to school rejections, discrimination, bullying in classrooms, and poor learning outcomes. Claudia from Ilumina shared her observation, "Many [teachers] do not agree with having any children with disabilities in their classrooms. They get very mad and show disagreement, stating that they

did not study for that." [*Muchos [maestros] no están de acuerdo, en que estén ahí los niños con discapacidad cualquiera, están muy molestos, en desacuerdo, dicen que no estudiaron para eso.*]

Others stated that teachers perceive it as an additional workload that would consume time and energy without providing any extra income. Eva Patricia mentioned that some teachers simply state, "Considering what I'm paid and the fact that I already have 40 students in my classroom, don't bring someone with a disability to me." [*Oye para lo que me pagan y tengo 40 alumnos en mi salón no me traigas a alguien con discapacidad.*]

It is worth noting that the majority of CSO representatives displayed understanding towards teachers and their resistance to inclusion. They do not place as much blame on educators as they do on the system, as teacher training is not systematically provided and is generally not easily accessible. Study participants further explained that teachers often have to juggle multiple roles and responsibilities as prescribed by the SEP, while the SEP itself does not offer adequate resources and their support is limited to mere encouragement. Mariangie from Educación Especial Más described this phenomenon as '*el échaleganismo*' (another neologism) which she further explained in the following manner: "The SEP's only message to teachers is 'do your best! You can make it work!' But that alone is not enough for my students to succeed. We don't need just 'do your best' pep talks; we need tools, training, and strategies. It's not possible to move forward without them.' [*La SEP lo único que les dice a los maestros es '¡échale ganas!¡Tú puedes sacarlo adelante! Con eso no salen adelante mis niños, no necesitamos '´échale ganas', necesitamos herramientas, capacitaciones, estrategias, así no se puede.*]

CSOs also shared that teachers frequently face the obstacle of having to personally bear the cost of trainings and take unpaid leave to participate in them. Some respondents used this situation as an example to justify the importance of addressing attitudinal barriers as a priority

before tackling other obstacles. Put simply, teachers must first be internally motivated to learn

and prioritize the needs of their students in order to find time and money to participate in

training. This applies not only to mainstream teachers but also to SPED teachers, as in the

example provided by Adriana.

> *Adriana:* DELIC receives teachers from CAM and USAER who want to learn and are
> willing to pay for the courses, workshops, or diploma programs out of their own salaries
> of 5000 or 8000 pesos. These are the teachers who want to improve, they don't wait
> around for the government to provide them with training.
> *A DELIC vienen maestros de CAM y USAER que quieren aprender y que pagan de su*
> *salario de 5000 o de 8000 pesos lo que cuesta el curso, el taller o el diplomado, entonces*
> *son los maestros que quieren hacer algo mejor, no esperan a que se los dé el gobierno.*

CSOs also raised concerns about how the absence of knowledge and professional training

is sometimes employed by teachers as an excuse to neglect students with disabilities or persuade

parents that regular schooling is not suitable for them. This practice was said to be especially

harmful because schools are aware that rejecting a student would be a violation of the law. So,

instead of openly rejecting access, they manipulate parents into believing that their child would

not benefit from attending their school. Claudia from Ilumina shared her reflections on how the

situation has evolved over time. She said that, in the past, parents could go to five different

schools and get rejected. But nowadays, it is more common for parents to hear schools say they

will not reject their child but lack sufficient training to provide adequate support. So, schools say

that they are not prepared and suggest parents take their child to a specialized center like CAM.

In addition to prejudices and attitudes of pity informed by the culture, and knowledge

gaps mainly caused by the system, personal barriers also manifest on an emotional level. These

internal obstacles play a significant role in influencing individuals' responses to IE and require a

closer examination.

*Emotions*

The emotional barrier was seldom explicitly mentioned and was only identified through interview analysis. Despite the limited consideration of emotions as a barrier to inclusion in existing literature, it is evident that emotions significantly impact PwD, families, and teachers.

CSOs highlighted that schools and teachers frequently experience fear and anxiety when it comes to working with students with disabilities, which CSOs attribute to the lack of disability-specific knowledge and training mentioned before. As a result, teachers feel anxious and preoccupied with every aspect, beginning with how to address and communicate with the student. Isabel from Capys explained, "In the end, it is challenging to step out of one's comfort zone and enter a world that can be quite daunting. For those who haven't had prior experience working with disabilities, it can be intimidating. Teachers just say, 'I don't know how to treat them or how to communicate with them." [*Al final es difícil salir de tu zona de confort para entrar en este mundo donde da mucho miedo, porque a la gente que no ha trabajado con discapacidad, da miedo, así te dicen, 'no, no sé cómo voy a tratarlo y no sé cómo hablarle'.*]

In the existing literature, teachers' role in IE is often discussed solely from a professional standpoint, disregarding their human nature. It is commonly viewed as their responsibility to accept and educate students with disabilities, as well as to promote inclusion and facilitate learning of PwD. So, I found it striking that CSO representatives embraced a more balanced perspective, emphasizing the significance of acknowledging teachers' struggles and emotions as human beings. They highlighted that many teachers are genuinely committed to going above and beyond to assist all their students. However, when they do not witness the expected progress or face challenging or unfamiliar behaviors, it can have a profound impact on them. Chandel from OEI who also used to be an educator articulated this problem very clearly.

*Chandel:* I believe that teachers cannot be seen as isolated individuals; they also have emotions, and they too feel frustrated when they don't know how to help a 6-year-old child with a psychosocial disability understand something as basic as 2 + 2 when there are 30 other children who already know the answer. Teachers often express, 'I'm desperate, I'm frustrated.' 'Or how do I handle a crisis episode with a child with autism who starts hitting, screaming, or biting themselves?'

*Creo que el docente y la docente no pueden pensarse como personas aisladas, ellos también sienten, se frustran por no saber cómo hacer que un niño de 6 años que tiene una condición de discapacidad psicosocial no pueda aprender cuánto es 2 + 2 cuando tienes a 30 niños que ya saben. Entonces que el docente dice 'híjole, estoy desesperado, estoy frustrado. ¿O cómo atender un episodio de crisis de un niño de una niña con autismo que empieza a golpear, que empieza a gritar, que empieza a morderse?*

The study participants were acutely aware of the challenging situation faced by teachers. They acknowledged that teachers are simultaneously responsible for attending to the diverse needs of their students and meeting the numerous requirements set by the school. Schools have expectations for teachers to cover specific topics, do particular assessments, make adaptations, and embrace diversity in the classroom. Additionally, teachers must navigate these responsibilities within the constraints of limited salaries and time. They often need to proactively seek training opportunities, and even after acquiring such training, they may still encounter numerous challenges when teaching students with disabilities.

*Claudia:* We also understand the educational community, as they are often given the what but not the how or the necessary support. Teachers frequently express their frustration about this. Also, when it comes to supporting students with disabilities, there is often a sense of 'you're on your own' rather than a collective responsibility or support from the educational community. It's more like saying, 'It's your responsibility, figure it out, find materials, take courses, and pay for them yourself.'

*También entendemos a la comunidad educativa, que se dice el qué pero no el cómo, ni los apoyos, las maestras se quejan mucho de eso. Además, a la que le toca el estudiante es como de 'tú te haces cargo', no es algo que la comunidad educativa acoja o acompañe, es a ver 'a ti te toca, tú te la arreglas, y consigue materiales, y metete a los cursos y costéatelos tú'.*

The study participants further emphasized that when teachers experience a sense of failure with a particular student or feel that their efforts are in vain, it can be emotionally

draining, leading them to require professional support. However, as CSO representatives pointed

out, such assistance is rarely considered and is hardly ever provided within schools. Some

concluded that if teachers were offered help in overcoming their fears and had access to a

reliable support system, they would be more motivated to actively engage in the educational

journey of their students with disabilities, rather than delegating this responsibility solely to

parents and SPED teachers. Mariangie from Educación Especial Más suggested that emotional

support to teachers must be an integral part of IE.

> *Mariangie:* It goes beyond just raising awareness; teachers need to be trained in this
> process and provided with ongoing support. We cannot expect them to fulfill their
> responsibilities without proper motivation. Therefore, we also need to address the
> emotional aspect of inclusive education for teachers. This is something that is often
> overlooked - the emotional support for teachers who have students with disabilities in
> their classrooms is rarely considered. But it is extremely important because for teachers,
> it involves feelings of frustration, nervousness, and even anger if the student does not
> make progress or acquire new skills. It can also lead to feelings of guilt.
> *Va más allá de solo sensibilizarlos, hay que capacitarlos en este proceso y hay que
> acompañarlos, porque tampoco podemos exigir sin motivar. Entonces también con los
> docentes tenemos que trabajar la parte emocional de un niño de inclusión. Y eso es algo
> que creo yo que se deja mucho de lado docente que recibe en su aula a un alumno de
> inclusión, es muy poco considerable. Y es algo sumamente importante porque para los
> maestros implica frustración, implica nervios, implica enojo, si no avanza o si no
> adquiere implica culpa.*

CSOs also acknowledged that families, especially parents, bear a significant emotional

burden when it comes to their child with a disability. Working closely with families, CSOs have

observed that many parents go through a lengthy grieving process, and some may never fully

come to terms with their life situation. In addition to the psychological challenges of accepting

their child's condition, parents also face the daily stresses of meeting their child's emotional and

physical needs, as well as providing financial support. Multiple study participants highlighted the

significant financial strain that disabilities can place on families as parents have to cover the

costs associated with therapies, assistive devices, medication, accommodations, and more.

Karina from Atzan attempted to provide an estimate of their spending: "Families are investing

around 10,000 to 12,000 pesos per month solely on school fees and a support teacher. Add to that

the expenses for therapies, recreational activities, daily living, and medical care to maintain a

good quality of life." [*Las familias están invirtiendo alrededor de 10, 11 hasta 12.000 pesos al*

*mes, solamente en la escuela y en monitor, súmale terapias, súmale ocio, vida, y médicos para*

*tener calidad de vida.*]

Study participants emphasized that similar to teachers, caregivers lack access to

information and proper mental health support, often leading them to burnout, denial, and

adopting a victim mentality. CSO representatives reinforced that these responses do not benefit

the well-being or development of children with disabilities.

CSOs also noted a significant amount of parental stress associated with the IE process.

When parents begin navigating the special or regular education systems, they often find

themselves overwhelmed and frustrated. They encounter a cycle of rejections, complaints,

accusations, and criticism that can take a toll on their emotional well-being. Some study

participants highlighted the particular challenges that arise in the case of invisible disabilities,

such as autism, where parents may not have a formal diagnosis for their child, making it difficult

for parents to comprehend the underlying reasons behind their child's behavior and needs.

Drawing on her extensive experience working with children with autism and their families,

Mariangie made a connection between the shortcomings of the system, the delayed diagnosis

process, and the significant impact on parents' emotions.

> *Mariangie:* In the public health system, it can take up to 6 years to obtain a diagnosis of
> autism. As a result, parents often go through a cycle where they are blamed and told
> things like, 'It's your fault, you don't educate them, you don't set boundaries, you spoil

them.' This leads mothers to experience deep depression. The same situation occurs in the context of inclusion.

*En el sistema público un diagnóstico de autismo te puede tardar 6 años. Entonces transitan diciéndole a la mama: es su culpa, usted no lo educa, usted no le pone límites, usted lo consiente. Entonces la mamá sale de allí para el suelo de la depresión total. Y lo mismo ocurre en la inclusión.*

In line with Mariangie's observations, other CSOs have also noticed that IE often becomes an exhausting battle for families. The journey begins with parents fighting for their child's admission into a school, then they continue to fight to find a CSO that supports the inclusion process and work to convince the school to allow external personnel to assist. Parents struggle to get teachers on board, urging them to collaborate, make accommodations, or work with a support teacher. Additionally, they face the challenge of getting other parents to understand their situation and cooperate, as some parents of non-disabled students may petition for the removal of a student with a disability from the school. All of these battles occur amidst a constant fear of bullying and exclusion that their child may experience. As an example, Karina described the emotional state of families that come to Atzan.

> **Karina:** *When families come to us, it is very common for them to arrive feeling disappointed, disillusioned, angry, and in a very bad state. They may even come in with a defensive attitude, assuming that we will also take their money, saying that we will help them, raising their hopes during initial interviews, but eventually telling them that we can no longer accommodate their child, as they have experienced in the past.*
> *Las familias cuando llegan con nosotros es muy común que lleguen decepcionados, desilusionados, enojados, muy mal; incluso llegan a la defensiva, con una actitud como de tú también me vas a sacar mi dinero, me vas a decir que sí ahorita, sí muy bonita la entrevista y todo, y ya en un mes te quiero ver diciéndome que ya no pueden recibir a mi hijo, porque ya les ha pasado.*

One of the observed consequences of the emotional turmoil and exhaustion experienced by families, as noted by CSOs, is that some eventually reach a point where they give up the fight and seek alternative solutions that may not be as beneficial for their children in the long run. As

Raquel from CEAA pointed out, this sometimes leads to situations where children end up in smaller, more segregated SPED settings with only a few students, or parents choose to work exclusively with a single teacher, potentially hindering their child's social skills. And in other cases, the fear and anxiety experienced by parents can lead them to make the difficult decision of not enrolling their child in any school at all. This choice may arise from concerns about their child's well-being, safety, and the challenges they may face in an educational setting, particularly if the child does not speak or is not toilet trained. Yosedil from Abriendo Posibilidades discussed this situation concluding that the decision to keep their child at home could have repercussions on the child's development and the crucial skills that can be fostered at that early age.

Finally, CSOs expressed concerns about the emotional barriers that affect children with disabilities themselves. These children often experience feelings of being different, rejected, and inferior to their peers, which can have a significant impact on their mental health and impede their learning process. In reflecting on this issue, the CEO of Educación Especial Más suggested that, at times, such challenges may arise from being in a regular school environment.

> *Mariangie:* We need to change these paradigms and make the inclusive model more flexible because, in reality, it may not necessarily be beneficial for everyone. And in many cases, it can be frustrating and demotivating to be in an environment where I perceive myself as unchallenged or not making the progress I need. Many students realize this and perceive themselves as incompetent in the educational setting. This also does not benefit the emotional aspect that should support the rest of their learning.
> *Hay que cambiar estos paradigmas y flexibilizar el modelo incluyente, porque entonces no necesariamente nos está beneficiando e incluso para muchos casos puede ser frustrante y desmotivador estar en un nivel donde me percibo como poco retador o que no estoy obteniendo la ganancia que necesito, que no estoy pudiendo ir al nivel. Muchos chavos se dan cuenta y se auto perciben como poco competentes en el ambiente. Eso tampoco beneficia la parte emocional que tiene que sustentar el resto del aprendizaje.*

Along the same lines, Abisaí from Educación Incluyente highlighted that Deaf students often face stigma and emotional distress when they are not introduced to sign language and the

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Deaf community. This situation arises because doctors advise parents to invest their resources

and efforts into cochlear implants and speech therapies in an attempt to 'normalize' their

children. Abisaí explained that while it is beneficial for Deaf children to socialize with their

hearing peers, sign language and the Deaf community play a crucial role in sustaining their

emotional well-being. Similar sentiments were echoed in other interviews, indicating that

belonging to a larger disability community is beneficial in shaping one's identity, self-esteem,

and various other aspects.

Finally, many CSO representatives emphasized the significance of acknowledging and

addressing the emotional barrier in IE. They stressed the need to incorporate psychological

support services and the development of socioemotional skills as essential components of IE.

**System barriers**

As mentioned in the chapter's introduction, the remaining barriers were summarized as

system-wide barriers arising from specific aspects of the government and the current education

system, both mainstream schools and SPED services. This subsection will delve into the existing

structures, policies, and practices within these systems that have the potential to hinder the full

participation and inclusion of PwD.

*Government*

In Mexico, every six years there is a change of government, leading to the development

of new programs while eliminating those created by the previous administration. This lack of

continuity in the state's discourse and actions was seen by numerous CSOs as a significant threat

to IE. They mentioned that the education system as a whole finds itself in a perpetual state of

transition, where human and financial resources are wasted on generating new programs. This

constant upheaval creates confusion among teachers and schools, as they struggle to keep up

with the continuous changes. Just as they begin to understand and implement the new program, it

is canceled, resulting in little to no progress. This cycle perpetuates a lack of stability and

hampers the advancement of IE initiatives. As Mariangie summarized, "everything ends up being

left unfinished, and the barriers become more of a 'that's just how it is'." [se va quedando todo

inconcluso y las barreras van siendo mucho de 'es lo que hay'.]

Karina from Atzan also reflected on this issue, providing a recent example of a newly

implemented reform by the SEP.

> *Karina:* They are starting to introduce a new model called the Nueva Escuela Mexicana,
> which would replace the previous model. It's complex, and I constantly feel like I'm in
> this transition. That's when I think, of course, it's frustrating for everyone because we
> were just getting used to this new model, which has all these great elements and suddenly
> they are introducing the new one.
> *Se está comenzando a introducir ya a un modelo nuevo que es la Nueva Escuela
> Mexicana, que eso estaría ya sacando el modelo anterior. Es complejo, y me siento todo
> el tiempo en esa transición, y ahí es cuando digo, claro es frustrante para todos, porque
> apenas estamos adaptándonos a este nuevo modelo, tiene todos estos elementos y ¡pum!
> ya nos están metiendo el nuevo.*

*La Nueva Escuela Mexicana*, mentioned by Karina, is a new education model introduced

by the current administration. While it is based on innovative and constructivist principles,

implementing the program would require significant reforms to the existing system. With only

two years remaining in the AMLO administration, most CSO representatives expressed

skepticism about the likelihood of successful implementation. They said that studying the

program would be a waste of time as it would be replaced with another initiative soon.

In many interviews, CSO representatives provided insights into the legal frameworks

related to IE and expressed their concerns about a lack of alignment between the written

provisions and the actual implementation. Although these frameworks utilize eloquent language

that mirrors the rights-based discourse and the principles of equity and respect for diversity

outlined in international instruments like the CRPD, they often fail to address the diverse conditions and challenges specific to the Mexican context.

Furthermore, many CSOs pointed to the fact that the current legislation concerning IE lacks practical applicability as it primarily remains in the realm of abstract concepts. Although these laws outline the fundamental aspects of IE, such as accessibility and reasonable accommodations, they fail to establish specific protocols for both the government and schools. Insufficient guidance, training, and adequate allocation of human and financial resources from the government hinder schools' understanding and implementation of inclusive practices. Consequently, when schools admit students with disabilities, they often find themselves ill-equipped to effectively support them, thereby maintaining their traditional methods. As Marcela from CATIC explained, "It's like now you speak Spanish, and overnight you're expected to speak Chinese. If I don't speak Chinese, I'll continue speaking Spanish. [...] So even though the law says what to do, it does not happen because the teacher doesn't know, so they continue doing what they know." [*Aquí es como de un día a otro, hablabas español y en el siguiente semestre tienes que hablar chino. Si no sé hablar chino, pues yo sigo hablando español. […] Entonces aunque la ley diga no pasa, porque el maestro no sabe y sigue haciendo lo que sabe hacer.*]

Additionally, some participants in the study also pointed to the lack of law enforcement as a significant issue, leading to inadequate implementation of existing legislation. I was surprised to learn from CSOs that, in many cases, schools openly deny access to students, despite explicit violations of the law. Unfortunately, such actions often go unpunished unless parents take legal action, which rarely occurs. With invisible disabilities like autism, some parents even choose to hide their child's diagnosis during the admission process to avoid rejection. However, this approach denies these students the opportunity to receive accommodations in the future.

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As pointed out by the participants in my study, there is no specific institution in Mexico responsible for overseeing the implementation of these laws. Instead, there are several separate entities, each with varying levels of authority, that address different aspects related to inclusion to some extent. As Laura from Libre Acceso explained, in each state, there is a People with Disabilities Directorate (*Dirección de Atención a Personas con Discapacidad*), which lacks legal power and can only provide recommendations. On the other hand, the State Human Rights Commission (*Comisión Estatal de Derechos Humanos*) possesses legal power but is unlikely to address issues specifically related to disabilities. She concluded that in the end "They pass the ball among themselves, like saying, 'Well, yes, I can oversee this, but that's your responsibility, and this is not my concern, it's yours.'" [*entre unos y otros se avientan la bolita, como de 'pues sí, yo puedo vigilar esto, pero esto te toca a ti, pero esto no me toca a mí, esto te toca a ti'.*]

Abisaí from Educación Incluyente attempted to provide further clarification regarding the lack of oversight, emphasizing how it is rooted in historical factors.

> ***Abisaí:*** It has been like a pendulum. At first, there were no rights, they could disregard the law without consequences. Then came a time with many laws, many reforms, but now the reality, the midpoint of the pendulum, is that nobody monitors it, nobody punishes it. Unfortunately in Mexico, if it is not punished, it is not followed up on. Institutions are not obligated to do anything when there are laws that require that public institutions provide education through the bilingual bicultural method, train professional interpreters, and teach sign language institutionally. But without anyone monitoring it, everyone disrespects the law, and there are no consequences.
> *Ha sucedido como un péndulo. Al principio no había derechos, podían brincarse la ley y no pasaba nada. Y después llegó el momento en el que muchas leyes, muchas reformas, pero ahora la realidad, el punto medio del péndulo es que nadie lo vigila, nadie lo castiga. En México al no castigarse es algo que no se le da seguimiento. Y las instituciones no se ven obligadas a hacer nada cuando hay leyes que piden que sean las instituciones públicas las que eduquen bajo el método bilingüe bicultural, las que formen a intérpretes profesionales, las que enseñen lengua de señas de manera institucional, pero al no haber quien lo vigile todo el mundo le falta al respeto a la ley y no pasa nada.*

Other CSOs reinforced that both federal and local legislations related to IE fail to establish penalties or sanctions for violating the law. As a result, the law becomes mere words on paper, and the actual implementation of inclusion relies solely on the willingness (or lack thereof) of individuals working within the school system. Consequently, the decision to accept or reject a particular student is often based on the discretion of the school principal and, in some cases, individual teachers.

In addition to admissions, the lack of law enforcement extends to specific services and other essential provisions necessary for achieving IE. For instance, The General Law for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities clearly states that it is the responsibility of the SEP to provide sign language interpreters (DOF, 2023a, Art. 12, VI). However, in practice, CSOs reported that interpretation services are neither provided nor covered. Parents often have to independently find and pay for interpreters themselves, or in some cases, schools may request mothers to accompany their children to classes and interpret for them. However, my respondents highlighted that most parents lack the proficiency to use sign language for academic purposes.

CSOs also shared experiences where in certain instances, schools may partially cover the costs of a professional interpreter as a favor, but this is done on a case-by-case basis and is neither guaranteed nor regulated. Compounding the issue is the absence of an official certification process for sign language interpreters in the country. Consequently, there are instances where fraudulent individuals pose as interpreters and are hired to work in schools.

> ***Laura:*** No authority is checking if there are professional interpreters because there are many impostors. So, no one is monitoring it, no one is censoring or penalizing them. Anyone can claim to be an interpreter just because they know the alphabet, and that's it. There is no review of documents, no verification of their background or sign language proficiency. The officials, not knowing any better, end up hiring just anyone.
> *Ninguna autoridad está revisando que haya intérpretes profesionales porque hay mucho charlatán. Entonces nadie lo vigila, nadie lo censura, ni lo multan ni lo castigan.*

*Cualquiera puede decir, soy intérprete porque me sé el abecedario y ya, no hay una revisión de documentos, de dónde vienes, cómo sabes seña, no hay nada. Y la autoridad como no sabe, pues contrata a cualquiera.*

Numerous CSO representatives attributed the lack of oversight and absence of punishment to the prevailing political agenda, suggesting that the government simply lacks interest in addressing the issues faced by PwD. This argument can be reinforced by examining the management of financial resources by the SEP. For instance, during my fieldwork in Mexico in July 2022, the SEP drastically reduced the SPED budget by 95%, leaving PwD and schools in a precarious situation (Anderson, 2022). Similarly, Abisaí was vocal in his criticism of the SEP, saying that in the state of Jalisco, the local SEP allocates the budget intended for the inclusion of students with disabilities to expenditures that have little to do with this population.

> *Abisaí:* They spend it on toilet paper rolls, on cleaning staff, and they use it to pay off debts owed by the payroll department to teachers from previous months or even years. So, for the SEP, the most feasible option is to spend the disability and inclusion budget on anything other than its intended purpose. In other words, they simply don't care.
> S*e los gasta en papel de rollo, en personal de limpieza, y se los gasta en pagar deudas que tenía la propia secretaría de nóminas de otros meses o incluso de otros años de profesores que les debían dinero. Entonces lo más factible para la Secretaría de Educación es gastarse el presupuesto de discapacidad y de inclusión gastárselo en cualquier otra cosa que cualquier otro presupuesto, es decir, no les importa.*

Lastly, this disregard and lack of interest was also seen by CSOs in the attempts to downplay SPED services. For example, in the past USAER used to consist of a team of specialists, which recently has been reduced to just one teacher. This reduction in personnel was interpreted by some study participants as a demonstration of a diminished commitment to adequately support and address the needs of students with disabilities.

> *Claudia:* Previously, each school had a psychologist, a social worker, a SPED teacher, someone specialized in language and communication, visual impairment, intellectual disabilities, and I can't remember the other professions, but it was a multidisciplinary team. But now that's not the case anymore. Now, there is only one teacher per school,

and that teacher is not assigned to a specific school. They may have to cover multiple different schools, going to one school on one day, two on another, and three on yet another day. So, the school is not consistently covered or supported.

*Antes en cada escuela estaba un psicólogo, un trabajador social, alguien especialista de la normal, en lenguaje y comunicación, en visual, en intelectual, y no me acuerdo que otra profesión había, pero era un grupo multidisciplinario, y ahora no. Ahora ya nada más hay una maestra por escuela, y no que esté fija en una escuela. A esa maestra le pueden tocar muchas escuelas distintas, y le toca ir un día en una, dos en otra, y tres en otra, entonces no es que siempre esté cubierta la escuela.*

### *Regular schools*

During our discussions on barriers, CSOs frequently highlighted various aspects of the mainstream school system as major obstacles for students with disabilities. These challenges range from overcrowded classrooms to a lack of accessibility, and the presence of rigid and outdated practices. Some of these barriers are rooted in laws and regulations, while others are heavily influenced by the human factor. For instance, according to SEP regulations, students' grade level is strictly determined by their age, which denies many students with intellectual and other disabilities the opportunity to receive adequate time to consolidate their skills and knowledge before progressing to the next level.

Age-based placement was told to be connected to another SEP regulation that mandates schools to promote students to the next grade level even if they have failed some or all subjects. Consequently, students with disabilities can spend more than 10 years in school and graduate with a high school diploma without having acquired basic literacy and other skills and having little to no understanding of any subject matter. Raquel from CEAA, a CEO and mother of a PwD, expressed her strong criticism of the system.

> **Raquel:** It is unacceptable that it takes 13 to 15 years from the time they enter preschool until they finish third year of secondary school, and they graduate without knowing how to read, which is the bare minimum they should learn in school. I understand that if they didn't learn the chemical elements from the periodic table or all the rivers of America,

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that's one thing, but they should at least be able to read. And they can't achieve that; they graduate being illiterate, and that is terrible.

*No es posible que transiten 13 a 15 años desde que entraron a primero de preescolar, terminan tercero de secundaria y salgan sin leer que es lo mínimo que deben de aprender en una escuela. Entiendo que si no salieron con los elementos de la tabla química, o si no salieron con todos los ríos de América aprendidos, ni modo, pero sí que salgan leyendo mínimo, y no lo logran, salen analfabetos y eso es terrible.*

This situation applies to students with various disabilities, as during the interviews, I heard about similar experiences involving students who are Deaf, blind, have Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy, and other conditions. For example, one of the representatives of AMEPDIVI shared anecdotes about blind students who reach university level being illiterate. "Since the educators themselves lack knowledge about blindness and how to address it, they prefer to let them pass to the next grade level. It's not that they are acting with ill intent, the thing is that we were sent to war without weapons." [*Como ellos no saben nada de ciegos, mejor los pasan y no es que estén actuando de mala voluntad, es que nos mandaron a la guerra, pero sin armas.*]

CSO representatives often attributed serious challenges to rigid and somewhat irrational school policies. They mentioned problems that could be easily overcome if schools were more flexible. For instance, schools that have students who use wheelchairs may refuse to move their classes to ground-floor classrooms. Similarly, convincing schools to allow students to use technology for essential tasks like writing can be difficult, which is the experience of CATIC.

> *Marcela:* I have many children with motor difficulties, and they are forced to write with a pencil. I tell the teachers, 'But there's the iPad,' and they respond, 'No, they have to learn with their hand.' So, they are struggling to make scribbles while others are already writing paragraphs. It becomes a major battle to convince schools to allow them to use a computer, a keyboard, or an iPad. We have faced challenges because many schools do not permit any technology in the classroom, claiming it would distract other students or be used for playing. We have to explain, 'I will only use it for this purpose', and gradually they start granting them more access.
>
> *Tengo muchos niños con un problema motor y a fuerza quieren que escriban con lápiz y les digo 'es que ahí está el iPad', 'No, iPad no, tiene que aprender con la mano' y yo… Y*

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*los obligan a que escriban con la mano, están haciendo rayas mientras los demás ya escriben un párrafo. Entonces ahí es mucha pelea de que les dejen meter una computadora, un teclado, un iPad. Hemos tenido problemas para eso, muchas escuelas no permiten que lleven nada de tecnología al salón porque distrae a los compañeros, porque va a jugar, pues tenemos que explicar 'solo lo voy a usar para esto…' y entonces ya les van dando más acceso.*

Another observation made by CSOs was that the current education system continues to uphold a traditional teacher-centered approach, where uniform materials, instruction, and expected learning outcomes are imposed on all students. As a consequence, students with motor difficulties are expected to write by hand, Deaf students are expected to take tests in Spanish, and students with visual impairments are expected to learn chemistry through verbal descriptions and memorizing abstract concepts. This approach not only fails to meet the needs of students with disabilities but also contradicts the fundamental principles of IE.

> *Marifer:* Under the traditional, formal, restrictive, and rigid frameworks and standards, it is impossible to achieve IE. For us, one of the fundamental principles of inclusive education is flexibility. It means thinking outside the box. [...] This approach offers us much more than simply knowing how to add 2 + 2 or identify a triangle or a square. *Bajo los esquemas y los estándares tradicionales, formales, limitantes, cuadrados, no hay manera que se pueda llevar a cabo una educación inclusiva. Para nosotros uno de los principios básicos de la educación inclusiva es la flexibilidad, es el salirnos de la caja* [...] *[eso] nos da muchísimo más que saber 2+2 o que saber si un triángulo es un triángulo y un cuadrado es un cuadrado.*

Many CSO representatives used the word *simulación* [simulation] to describe the implementation of IE in Mexico. Due to varying interpretations of the laws, most schools simulate inclusion by merely placing a diverse group of students together in the same classroom. However, these schools and teachers do not make any meaningful changes to the educational process, methodologies, or take action to address the needs of students with disabilities. As a result, these students simply turn into *adornos* [decoration] or *muebles* [furniture], physically present and sharing space with their non-disabled peers but not gaining any knowledge. As

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Raquel reflected, "it's so high the price that we pay for having them go to a social club every day" [*es tan alto el precio que pagamos todos, para que vayan a un club social todos los días.*]

In some cases, as study participants shared, schools may have a Deaf student attend classes without providing an interpreter or expect a student with an intellectual disability to use the same textbooks as their peers. Consequently, these students struggle to understand the teacher's explanations and participate in classroom activities, and teachers end up relying on parents, asking them to provide support at home.

In some other cases, teachers were reported to go so far as to use their own interpretation of inclusion to justify and engage in discriminatory practices. Claudia from Ilumina shared an anecdote as an illustration. During her visit to a school, the teacher distributed photocopies to all the students, but one student with low vision struggled to discern the overcrowded and faint text on the page. When Claudia pointed out the issue and suggested making the image larger for the student's benefit, the teacher openly refused, claiming that all students should be treated equally, and they wouldn't discriminate.

> *Claudia:* It's perverse because in this supposed effort to avoid discrimination and be egalitarian, the teacher is actually impeding the fulfillment of the student's needs. So, they can wave their inclusive flag, claiming not to discriminate, but at the same time, they do it for their own benefit. Even as a government, I can save by not making the necessary accommodations that my students truly need. So, there's a very fine line that separates all of this.
> *Entonces fíjate que perverso, porque en este afán supuesto de no discriminar y ser igualitario, justo está truncando el que se satisfagan las necesidades de él, y entonces yo puedo navegar con mi bandera inclusiva de no discrimino, pero justo porque eso me ahorra, incluso como gobierno me ahorra hacer las adecuaciones que realmente necesitan mis estudiantes. Entonces sí es una línea bien delgadita lo que separa todo eso.*

Another significant barrier to inclusion within schools that was discussed by many CSOs is the issue of accessibility, which encompasses both physical infrastructure and academic materials. For example, many students with physical disabilities often require ramps, elevators,

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and accessible bathrooms, but can still use the same textbooks as their non-disabled classmates.

On the other hand, students with visual disabilities may require minor adaptations in the

infrastructure to enhance their movement, but their need for adapted materials is much greater.

Regrettably, the study participants consistently reported and shared anecdotes showing that the

majority of schools in Mexico are not accessible to students with disabilities.

In their experience, overcoming architectural barriers often forces students with

disabilities to compromise their dignity and independence to navigate school facilities. The

typical solution proposed by most schools is to assign a person to carry the student with a

physical disability, which not only poses risks but also leads to feelings of humiliation.

> *Marcela:* No building or school is constructed with the consideration of accessibility
> from the beginning. Instead, accessibility features are often integrated over time. As a
> result, students with disabilities are forced to adapt to the school environment, making it
> extremely challenging for them to access various facilities such as laboratories or
> physical education classes. In some cases, carrying them becomes dangerous or even
> impossible. It is also distressing for them to witness the lack of accessibility in areas such
> as bathrooms.
>
> *Ningún edificio, escuela está construida pensando en… sino que con los años los fueron
> integrando, entonces ellos [estudiantes] se tienen que adaptar a la escuela, se vuelve
> muy complicado que accedan a todo… laboratorio, a la clase de deporte, los tienen que
> cargar, pero muchas veces ya ni siquiera se puede cargar, es muy peligroso, también es
> penoso que estén viendo como los baños.*

In certain situations, parents take it upon themselves to create or finance the

accommodations needed for their children, which adds to the financial and emotional burden

discussed earlier in the chapter. As Janette from VIM shared, some parents can afford to

construct a proper ramp, using materials like cement, wood, or metal, while others may

improvise with whatever they can find, such as random boards, to create makeshift ramps.

Due to disability not being a priority for the state, CSOs have observed that proactive

measures to address accessibility are rarely taken. Even in new schools that claim to be inclusive,

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the criterion of accessibility is often not considered during construction. Study participants also

noted that making alterations to existing structures is often hindered by bureaucratic procedures,

cost implications, and time constraints (as it can take months and even years). As a result, many

schools opt not to make any changes to their buildings, subjecting their students to the

aforementioned humiliating experiences.

When it comes to adapted and accessible materials, CSOs highlighted that although not

as costly and complicated as accessible buildings, they are also lacking in availability. They

shared that some of the adapted materials created and printed by the SEP are poorly designed and

often reach schools towards the end of the school year. This means that students with disabilities

spend the entire year without receiving the most basic adaptations guaranteed under the law.

Another issue that was brought up in interviews is the simplistic understanding of

disability, which leads the SEP and schools to focus on a limited range of adaptations that may

not always be the most effective. For instance, when it comes to students with visual

impairments, the predominant focus is on producing Braille books. However, it may be more

efficient and cost-effective to provide the same texts as accessible PDFs. The resources allocated

for printing Braille could then be utilized to create tactile learning materials, which are essential

for working with abstract concepts in subjects such as biology, physics, and mathematics.

> ***Claudia:*** While there may be things that I can describe and the student who has never
> seen can form a mental image, there will be other things that require tactile exploration.
> Take the DNA chain as an example. How do you explain it in a way that allows the
> student to develop a closer concept of reality? It requires touch and tactile engagement
> for them to truly grasp these concepts, so that their learning goes beyond mere
> memorization or repetition. They need to understand and comprehend the essence of
> what they are learning, not just memorize definitions.
> *Habrá cosas que a lo mejor yo pueda describir y que el chavo que nunca ha visto se
> pueda hacer una imagen mental, pero habrá otras en las que si requiera palpar. La
> cadena de ADN por poner un ejemplo, ¿cómo le explicas a que realmente él pueda
> hacerse un concepto más cercano a la realidad?, pues se necesita palpar, tocar, para*

*que esos aprendizajes sí los tenga, y no se quede nada más en algo memorístico o repetitivo, o que se aprenda solo la definición de memoria, pero no comprenda que es.*

Some CSOs have observed that accessibility can be achieved without significant financial investment, by applying simple changes in teacher instruction and on-the-spot adaptations. Eva Patricia, a mother of a daughter with Down Syndrome and CEO of Gigis, shared an anecdote about her daughter and the simple adaptations teachers miss. During a public class, all the children were asked to draw three eighths. Eva's daughter felt lost, unable to understand how to do it. Eva suggested that teachers could have given her daughter a small ball of playdough or an apple and asked her to divide it into eight pieces, then give back six pieces. This kind of adaptation would have made the task accessible for her daughter.

Similar to Eva Patricia's experience with her daughter, other study participants also discussed instances where teachers were not attentive to their students' needs. This lack of mindfulness extends even to basic and simple accessibility adaptations for visually impaired students, such as verbalizing when writing on the board or properly scanning books for handouts. Cristal reflected on this issue, pointing out that teachers rarely scan study materials properly to create accessible PDFs, instead they simply scan them as images that cannot be read by any software program, making them totally inaccessible for students with visual impairments.

### *Special education services*

The interviews showed that the topic of SPED is indeed contentious, as also evidenced by the literature review. There was a wide range of opinions among different CSOs, but the majority of them agree on one point: some SPED services are necessary to support inclusion but the current design and provision of these services in Mexico are flawed.

Many CSO representatives agree that there is a significant gap between the theory and implementation of SPED services. While CAM and USAER are intended to provide crucial

support beyond what regular schools can offer, they often fall short in practice. Among some positive features, as argued by Claudia from Ilumina, CAMs offer a smaller and more controlled environment that has the potential to benefit students facing additional challenges or health issues since these centers are theoretically designed to offer personalized attention.

Similarly, Noelia from Nuevo Amanecer highlighted the capacity of USAER to support mainstream teachers, assist in designing accommodations for students, and even raise awareness about disability. And Raquel, CEO of CEAA and a mother of a person with Down Syndrome, in her reflection reached the conclusion that the methodology, structure, and objectives of CAM and USAER closely align with the needs of students with disabilities, but, similar to other respondents, she added, "I believe that the translation of the theory, methodology, and strategies is not the most appropriate, therefore, they do not effectively reach the students." [*Creo que la traducción de la teoría, la traducción de la metodología, la traducción de las estrategias no es la más adecuada, por lo tanto, no llega como tal a los alumnos*].

### *Centros de Atención Múltiple (CAM)*

As discussed in Chapter 2, CAMs are designed to function as special schools accommodating students with all types of disabilities who are either unable or opt not to enroll in regular schools. It is important to differentiate between two types of CAMs: those operated by the government (vast majority) and those run by CSOs. The former will be examined in this section, while the latter will be addressed in Chapter 7 focusing on the impact of CSOs. Although both types adhere to the same laws and regulations and are accountable to the SEP, the level of services, attention, and overall organization vary between them.

The most recurring criticism of CAMs revolves around the practice of mixing students with intellectual, sensory, psychosocial, physical, and multiple disabilities in the same classroom.

This approach, according to many participants, hinders the students' development and educational progress. In line with the previously discussed deficiencies in SPED pre-service training, the majority of CSO representatives highlighted that CAM teachers lack the knowledge and capacity to support their students in a meaningful way. Given that each disability requires specialized knowledge, distinct accommodations, and specific strategies, it is not possible for one person to be an expert in all disabilities. As Raquel expressed, "How do they teach a child with autism with severe sensory needs, together with a child with hearing impairment who requires different stimulation or teaching methods, together with a child with severe intellectual disability? There is no way, there is no way." [*¿Cómo le enseñan a un chico con autismo con unas necesidades sensoriales terribles, con un chico con una hipoacusia que él necesita otra estimulación u otra forma de enseñanza, con un chico con una discapacidad intelectual moderado severa? No hay manera, no hay manera".*]

Cristal, a CEO and a person with a disability, was particularly outspoken in her criticism of CAMs, also highlighting the issue of mixing students with different disabilities and the challenges it poses in providing effective education.

> *Cristal:* I am absolutely against CAMs. For me, they have been the worst thing that could have happened in our country in terms of education for children with disabilities. You cannot attend to children with different disabilities in the same classroom because each disability has its specific needs; these children are not even receiving proper schooling. They are placed in CAMs without even following an educational program, mixed together, picking up bad habits from each other. Sometimes parents have to be present because the teachers are too overwhelmed. It's terrible, it's terrible.
> *Los CAMs voy total y absolutamente en contra, para mí ha sido lo peor que pudo haber pasado en nuestro país en torno a la educación de niños con discapacidad. Tú no puedes atender en un salón a chicos con diferentes discapacidades porque cada discapacidad tiene sus necesidades específicas y porque ni siquiera son niños escolarizados. Los tienen en un CAM ni siquiera cumpliendo con un programa educativo, mezclados unos con otros, recibiendo mañas los unos con los otros, a veces los papás tienen que estar ahí porque los profesores no se dan abasto, es terrible es terrible.*

Following the same line of discussion, another CSO representative, Laura from Inclusor, shared that Deaf students attending CAMs go as far as to acquire an additional disability. Being highly visual, they tend to mimic the body language and actions of those around them. It has been observed that many Deaf children in CAMs begin to exhibit unusual behaviors such as lumping or drooling, imitating their peers, even though they do not have any motor or swallowing difficulties themselves.

Another major problem, as identified by the participants, concerns the fact that most CAMs ultimately turn into daycare centers where parents can simply leave their children to go to work. Instead of acquiring knowledge, children play, do crafts, and socialize. Most CSO members learned about this from parents, students, or teachers they work with, while others observed it firsthand. For example, Marcela from CATIC shared her impressions of CAMs that she visited after graduating from university. She found it difficult to see what they do there because instead of education provision they merely functioned as daycare centers for working parents. Students would spend their time doing crafts, even those with limited hand mobility.

Marcela was not the only one to point to the absence of real education within CAMs. The topic of simulation of the education process emerged again when study participants reflected on CAMs and the way they approach learning. Mariangie summarized it in the following way:

> *Mariangie:* There are no adapted textbooks from the SEP. There are books with large print and in Braille, but there are no easy-to-read books with pictures. So, what kind of inclusion game are we playing? I open the door for you, you are welcome. I give you with a chair and simulate that you are learning something, and then I leave you in your comfort zone. If you know how to color, then color Miguel Hidalgo, the revolution, anything you want, but just color because that's what you can do. But we don't accomplish anything else.
> *No hay libros de la SEP adaptados. Hay con macrotipo, con letra grande, hay Braille, pero no hay libros de lectura fácil, con apoyos pictográficos. Entonces realmente ¿qué tanto estamos jugando a una inclusión? Te abro la puerta, eres bienvenido. Te pongo una silla y hago una simulación de que algo estás aprendiendo y entonces te dejo en tu*

*zona de confort, sabes colorear, colorea a Miguel Hidalgo, a la revolución, lo que sea, pero colorea porque eso es lo que sabes hacer. Pero no llegamos a más.*

CSO representatives also shared specific anecdotes about their beneficiaries who had come to their organization after years of studying in a CAM. Mariangie talked about an 11-years-old boy who came to Educación Especial Más with a primary school certificate but without recognizing his own name. Ofelia from Andale para Oír discussed Deaf students who had graduated from CAMs and entered a regular high school only to realize that, academically, they were still at the primary school level, not being able to read or write. And one of the teachers from AMEPDIVI shared that she is currently working with a blind girl who came from a CAM and started secondary school without any knowledge in math, without reading Braille or knowing where is right and left, up and down.

The last example also serves as a reminder that education provision is only one of the functions of CAMs. CSO representatives underscored that CAM teachers are expected to have expertise in teaching students the additional skills required for their independence and learning, but due to a mix of students with diverse needs in a single classroom, they often lack the opportunity to provide specialized attention to individual students. A teacher from AMEPDIVI even visited CAMs to count the time teachers spent on one student, specifically focusing on mobility, reading, and writing. The results were concerning, as teachers were unable to dedicate even 15 minutes per workday to work on these essential skills with a visually impaired student. She concluded: "wanting to cover everything ended up not covering anything." [*el querer abarcar todo, dejó sin abarcar nada.*]

Representatives from three distinct CSOs situated in different states also shared their knowledge about misconduct and violations occurring within CAMs. They discussed how some CAMs allow practices that would be deemed unacceptable in regular schools. They also pointed

out a lack of sufficient oversight and control, with some CAMs even restricting access to parents and external individuals, making it impossible to know what is happening behind the walls of these institutions. Two people even mentioned cases of violence and sexual assault.

Ultimately, as highlighted by numerous study participants, CAMs become a last resort for many families. Despite their shortcomings in terms of human and financial resources, as well as other external support, families often have no alternative but to enroll their children in CAMs due to the absence of other viable options. Guadalupe from APAC reflected, "It is what it is, it is the response of the Mexican State to this population, which is actually a quite limited response because it does not provide a solution to the entire issue, but it is the effort we see at the governmental and state levels". [*Es lo que hay, es la respuesta del Estado mexicano a esta población, que realmente es una respuesta muy acotada porque no es una respuesta que dé solución a toda la problemática, pero es el esfuerzo que hay a nivel gubernamental y estatal*].

### *USAER / UDEEI*

Generally, study participants held a more positive view of USAER. While CAMs are often associated with segregation and discrimination, USAER, in its conceptual framework, aligns with the ideal of IE as these are the support services created to facilitate the integration of PwD into schools and supporting teachers in organizing an educational process that caters to the needs of all students.

Having said that, most CSO representatives raised concerns about the inability of USAER to fulfill its purpose due to limited resources and overwhelming demand. Specifically, there is a shortage of USAER teachers compared to the number of schools, resulting in one teacher being responsible for multiple schools and attending to around 15-20 students throughout the academic year. Furthermore, these teachers are required to assess and develop strategies for

students with various disabilities. As Mercedes from IPPLIAP expressed, it is highly unlikely for them to adequately address the needs of students with language and learning difficulties, for example, as they are forced to prioritize those with more significant challenges. She concluded by saying, "They go to the classroom, give the teacher three guidelines, and do you think that's enough? No. So, the system is ineffective." [*Van al salón, le dan 3 pautas al maestro ¿y tú crees que con eso? pues no. Entonces el sistema es inoperante*].

Along the same lines, respondents in the study noted that USAER teachers face limitations in personalizing strategies and addressing individual student needs due to time constraints and lack of specialized knowledge about specific disabilities. As a result, they often provide general recommendations that prove ineffective as they do not account for the specific needs of individual students. In some cases, USAER teachers do not even reach the stage of offering recommendations, dedicating the entire year to evaluation. Ofelia from Andale para Oír shared her observations, stating that some USAER teachers spend around 6 months solely on evaluations. With the requirement to evaluate at least 50 students and the need to visit multiple schools in a day, these teachers struggle to find time to handle the overwhelming paperwork. As a result, actual intervention or support for students is limited to just three sessions, leaving many needs unmet by the end of the academic year.

In light of this, the insights shared by Juventino deserve special attention. Due to his profession and degree in education, he has personally interacted with both regular teachers and USAER teachers, enabling him to offer a balanced analysis of perspectives from both sides. Juventino shared that regular teachers are often frustrated with USAER because their involvement mostly consists of repetitive evaluations without practical recommendations or assistance. He said: "I've heard the same argument from hundreds of teachers, USAER is

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useless, it doesn't serve any purpose. They just keep filling out forms and forms and forms, but they don't provide any solutions." [*Yo llevo cientos de maestros escuchando ese mismo argumento, USAER no sirve, no sirve para nada, o sea solamente se la viven llenando formatos y formatos y formatos y no dan solución.*]

Conversely, Juventino's conversations with USAER teachers revealed their own limitations due to serving multiple schools with limited staff. The focus on paperwork and assessments hinders their ability to provide hands-on support and guidance to students and regular teachers alike. Ultimately, Juventino drew a connection between both sides. On one hand, there are regular teachers who lack the necessary knowledge and require support in educating students with disabilities. On the other hand, USAER struggles with limited resources, making it difficult to provide the needed support and forcing them to prioritize paperwork over targeted interventions. This connection underscores the complex systemic issues that impede the effective implementation of IE in Mexico.

It is noteworthy that, once again, the majority of CSO representatives did not assign blame to CAM and USAER teachers, instead focusing their critique on the educational system itself. They acknowledged that the challenges teachers face surpass their capacities. As Yosedil aptly stated, "It is a crisis situation because CAM and USAER do not have the means to respond." [*Es una situación de crisis, porque el CAM y USAER no tiene con qué responder*].

Study participants consistently expressed feelings of empathy and admiration for SPED professionals, using phrases like '*pobre maestro*' [poor teacher] or '*mis respetos a las maestras*' [my respect to these teachers] to recognize that these teachers often exert their best efforts to help students. Even when teachers receive appropriate training and approach their work with utmost dedication, their ultimate failure is almost inevitable due to constraints imposed by the SEP.

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However, certain aspects seem to rely more on the teachers themselves rather than the system. Specifically, several participants highlighted the lack of collaboration and the underlying tension between regular and USAER teachers. The CEO of IDEA acknowledged that schools may perceive USAER as a threat and consequently restrict their ability to perform their duties. This perspective was echoed by Ofelia, who shared that personal feelings often play a role, determining whether a USAER teacher is allowed to enter a public school and provide support. If a school likes a particular USAER teacher, access is granted, but if not, it may be denied.

Raquel, CEO of CEAA, also offered her analysis of the underlying issues in collaboration between regular and USAER teachers. According to her, regular teachers have the perception that USAER is solely there to monitor their performance, which causes them discomfort. Second, some teachers falsely believe that USAER is in charge of students with disabilities, disregarding the shared responsibility of all teachers in supporting these students. Lastly, Raquel emphasized that regular teachers often rely on the USAER team solely for discipline and behavior management solutions, without considering broader strategies for helping the child learn effectively.

Finally, CSO representatives hold differing opinions regarding the most effective approach for USAER in fulfilling their responsibilities. There is debate about whether they should take students to resource rooms for targeted support or implement interventions within the regular classroom setting involving all students. In the past, USAER teachers used to take specific students to a separate resource room for instruction. However, the previous administration recognized the potential for segregation and shifted the expectation for USAER teachers to work within the regular classroom.

CSO representatives have contrasting views on this change. Marifer from Educación Especial Más expressed her discontent with the new regulation, stating, "Currently, the only thing they can do is observe and provide strategies to the teacher. This certainly limits their ability to take action and implement strategies one-on-one." [*Actualmente lo único que pueden hacer es observar y dar estrategias al docente. Entonces por supuesto que eso los ata de manos en el que hacer y las estrategias que ellos pueden emplear uno a uno*]. Raquel from CEAA also advocated for the availability of separate spaces where USAER teachers can work temporarily with students. Similarly, Claudia from Ilumina emphasized the value of resource rooms as they facilitated individualized support, allowing for targeted interventions and addressing specific needs that might be difficult to meet within a regular classroom setting. She mentioned that now their interventions are limited to fostering socialization.

In contrast, Marifer from AMAD believes that instead of taking students to resource rooms, USAER teachers should focus on training regular teachers to foment an inclusive classroom community that can address the needs of all students. On a similar note, Adriana from Declic emphasized the importance of USAER teachers collaborating with regular teachers to develop inclusive interventions for the entire class. Adriana suggested that resource rooms primarily provide convenience for SPED teachers, without necessarily bringing significant benefits to students: "It is more convenient, much more convenient to think that these are my children and that I work with them, and the others do not matter to me, the others belong to the regular teacher." [*Es más cómodo, mucho más cómodo pensar que estos son mis niños y que yo los trabajo y los demás no me importan, los demás son del maestro regular*].

**CHAPTER 5: UNDERSTANDING INCLUSION AND THE FACILITATING FACTORS**

Having explored the barriers that hinder the implementation of IE, it is also important to examine what works in the current system. Understanding both the obstacles and the achievements can inform the design of effective interventions and programs that promote IE. Although this subsection was not initially planned, it naturally emerged from the data analysis, revealing certain factors cited by CSOs that contribute to creating more inclusive schools. So, while the previous chapter delved into the negative aspects and challenges, this chapter will shift its focus to the positive factors of IE and the ideal of IE and SPED as conceptualized by CSOs. This final subsection dedicated to the vision of IE will serve as an important transition between the background of IE in Mexico and the actions undertaken by CSOs in this field.

### When Inclusion does happen

#### *Human factor: goodwill & age*

Remarkably, an overwhelming majority of CSO representatives identified the human factor as the primary determinant for inclusion, specifically highlighting the importance of '*buena voluntad*' or goodwill among teachers and school principals. This finding aligns with the discussion on the importance of overcoming attitudinal barriers. According to the study participants, the initial positive attitude of schools predisposes them to believe in the learning potential of students with disabilities, which further leads to their admission into the school and efforts to include them. For example, Eva Patricia, the CEO of Gigis and a mother of a child with a disability, has firsthand experience with including her daughter in a regular school. She shared that although her daughter's school may still lack expertise in tailoring teaching strategies, their good attitude, willingness to accept children, and efforts to do the best they can make a difference.

Yosedil from Abriendo Posibilidades also argued that inclusion goes beyond external factors such as policies, financial resources, location, or educational approaches; it ultimately relies on the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of the people working within the school.

> ***Yosedil:*** I believe that this is definitely not a matter of legality, government policies, or budget. It is human, just human. In other words, if there are people in the school who truly live according to the principles of inclusion, then it will be an inclusive school. I have seen incredibly luxurious schools where you think, 'wow, this is a palace.' Let's say a Montessori school, with all the beautiful tangible pedagogical work it has, and you think, 'God, here the children must be happy.' But it doesn't work, it just doesn't work. *Yo creo que definitivamente esto no es un tema ni de legalidad, ni de políticas gubernamentales, ni de presupuesto, esto es humano, definitivamente humano. Si en la escuela hay gente que vive directamente desde lo que es un mundo inclusivo, va a ser una escuela inclusiva. He tenido escuelas lujosísimas, que tú dices 'Dios, este es un palacio'. Pon tú, una escuela Montessori con todas las bellezas que tiene, de trabajo pedagógico tangible y dices 'Dios, aquí los niños tienen que ser felices', y no funciona y no funciona.*

In these discussions, many respondents specifically underscored the role of school principals and their disposition to be inclusive. Adriana from Declic pointed out that principals have the power to declare the school as inclusive and protect students with disabilities even when faced with opposition from other parents. Claudia from Ilumina further emphasized that principals who embrace the inclusive mindset have the ability to inspire the entire educational community. Conversely, in schools where principals themselves question the presence of students with disabilities, the entire process of inclusion is bound to fail.

Noelia from Nuevo Amanecer also reinforced that principals play a pivotal role in promoting IE practices within schools as they have the power and authority to make decisions.

> ***Noelia:*** For me, a fundamental factor is the head, that is, the principal. If the principal has an inclusive mindset, they lead the entire team to have that inclusive perspective; they shape situations, activities, and everything with an inclusive approach, regardless of whether there is a USAER team or not. [...] To be honest, in my opinion, the principal plays a significant role because from the moment a parent approaches the school to enroll their child, there are principals who, regardless of the time of year, say, 'Bring them in, of course, and if the teacher is hesitant, I'll convince them, and if you need something…'.

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*Para mí un factor primordial es la cabeza, o sea, el directivo, si el directivo tiene una mente inclusiva, hace que todo su equipo de trabajo tenga esa mirada inclusiva y hace las situaciones, las actividades, todo mirando hacia la inclusión, independientemente si hay equipo de USAER o no. […] La verdad para mí el directivo si tiene mucho que ver, muchísimo, porque desde que la mamá toca la puerta para poder inscribir a su hijo hay directivos que no importa que sea medio mitad de ciclo escolar, dicen, 'usted tráigaselo, claro que sí, y si la maestra no quiere yo la convenzo y si le hace falta no sé qué'.*

Embracing an inclusive mindset as a principal can manifest itself in various ways, ranging from acts as simple as taking the time to understand the student and their needs to dedicating countless hours to continuously learning about IE. On that note, Adriana, CEO of Declic, shared a compelling anecdote about a CAM principal in Balancán, Tabasco, a small town where CAM becomes the last resort for families, as there are no other options available. Despite the challenges, this dedicated principal would travel for 12 hours on a bus every weekend to attend courses offered by Declic. He diligently learned various teaching methods, including math instruction with rods, behavior management techniques, Troncoso reading approach, etc. He then shared this knowledge with his teachers and continued to spread it further. Adriana concluded, "he didn't wait for things to be handed to him; he came, searched, and inspired his teachers." [*El no esperó a que se lo dieran, el vino, buscó, contagio a sus maestras*].

While principals hold responsibility for organizing and overseeing the inclusive process, it is the teachers who directly engage with the students and serve as the channels of IE. Teachers who embrace an inclusive mindset were frequently mentioned as being more inclined to accept and support students with disabilities and be open to collaboration with other specialists; this concerns both regular and SPED teachers.

More importantly, this personal commitment to IE motivates teachers to seek professional development opportunities which help them bridge the knowledge gap discussed in the previous section. Several respondents shared examples of committed teachers they have collaborated with,

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who willingly invest their time and resources to participate in training programs and courses provided by CSOs. As Adriana from Declic pointed out: "You know what gives me hope? It's seeing teachers who, regardless of the government in power, the corruption, or nepotism, still say, 'Tell me how to teach, I want to learn.' […] Truly, that's why Mexico doesn't crumble". [*Fíjate que a mí lo que no me quita la esperanza, es ver a los maestros que no importa el gobierno que esté, del color que sea, el nepotismo y la corrupción, hay maestros que dicen, 'dígame como le enseño, yo quiero'. […] De verdad, por eso México no se cae.*]

Adriana also shared inspiring stories about devoted teachers she knows who consistently go the extra mile to support their students, taking actions that exceed their job responsibilities and do not yield any financial benefit. For instance, one teacher would stay with specific students after classes, working at the cement tables outside because classrooms needed cleaning. Another USAER teacher from a small town would personally pick up a blind student to take her to school. With her mother having passed away and her siblings and father working in the fields, this teacher became the vital link for the student to access education. Adriana concluded her reflection: "And these are teachers from public schools, teachers who truly have vocation." [*Y son maestros de escuela pública, de verdad hay maestros de vocación*].

Some respondents also mentioned age as part of the human factor that can influence inclusion. Specifically, they noted that older generations, due to their traditional training and ingrained paradigms, may be less likely to open their minds to innovative ideas of inclusion. In contrast, young professionals are often more willing to learn about and engage in IE practices. For example, participants discussed how older teachers often adhere to rigid teaching practices while younger teachers seek innovative methodologies. Similarly, older educational authorities,

who hold managing positions within the SEP, schools, and SPED services, may impede the work of younger teachers who possess a more inclusive mindset and are eager to promote IE.

Some CSO representatives also brought attention to the negative aspect of the human factor, acknowledging that influencing someone's will can be challenging, and that a person's access to education can ultimately be a matter of luck, which is difficult to control. As Mariangie reflected, "So, inclusion is dependent on whether you get a teacher who is cool, trained, and enthusiastic. The SEP cannot guarantee that to you; it's just a matter of luck whether you get a good teacher." [*Entonces aquí está supeditada la inclusión, a que te toque una maestra buena onda o una maestra capacitada o una maestra con ganas y con carácter. Eso no te lo garantiza la Secretaría de Educación Pública, es la suerte de que te toque una maestra*].

### *Breaking rules*

Another important factor that was reported to make schools more inclusive concerns breaking rules, especially the ones that prevent teachers from delivering quality education to their students. For example, Karina from Atzan shared that some teachers register their students according to their age-grade correspondence, as mandated by the law. However, in practice, these students attend a different grade that aligns better with their individual learning needs.

While Karina focuses on autism in Guadalajara, I also learned about a similar practice from Raquel, who works with intellectual disabilities in Monterrey and other states. Raquel shared with me that when the new regulation was implemented stating that students could not repeat grades and had to start primary school at the age of 6, she addressed this issue with the Director of the Special Education Department of Nuevo Leon. They reached agreements with individual schools where students were kept in the same grade to reinforce their knowledge, even though they were officially registered in a different grade. She recalled a particular case, "His

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sixth-grade certificate was already there, but he was still in the fourth grade" [*Ya estaba listo su certificado del sexto de primaria y él estaba apenas en cuarto*]. Raquel recently discovered that there is a possibility of obtaining specific paperwork to carry out this practice legally, but this information is not publicly available.

Likewise, other participants in the study shared instances where they would enter into clandestine agreements with certain schools in order to observe classes or provide interventions as CSO representatives. According to the law, external personnel are not permitted to enter classrooms, particularly in public schools. This regulation is frequently broken, especially in the case of support teachers who are either affiliated with CSOs or hired directly by parents. According to most CSOs, support teachers play a crucial role in assisting students with disabilities during classes, which has proven to be beneficial and even essential for many students. While private schools may have more flexibility in hiring support teachers, the practice is strictly forbidden in public schools, and there are no specific regulations governing this matter. As a result, the existing laws are being violated. As Mariangie explained, in public schools "there are two options. The majority either do not have a support teacher or assign someone from the team who is available or they find a way to have a support teacher by bypassing protocols and taking risks." [*Hay dos opciones. La mayoría no tienen maestra sombra o ponen a alguien del equipo que esté desocupado o buscan la forma para tener una sombra, se brincan protocolos, corriendo riesgos*.]

Finally, even USAER teachers sometimes find themselves compelled to deviate from prescribed procedures to provide support. For instance, they may take students to a resource room to reinforce certain topics, despite it being currently prohibited. In more extreme cases, as shared by Ofelia from Andale para Oír, USAER teachers may even involve parents during the

evaluation process, which is not legally allowed. Ofelia told me about a case in a rural community where an USAER teacher would invite parents to participate in the evaluation and provide them with instructions. During the evaluation, she would inform parents about their child's abilities and limitations, and suggest strategies to practice at home. The reason behind this approach was that she would not see the child again for another six months, as she had another 50 children assigned to her across different locations. Ofelia explained that the USAER coordinator allowed those teachers to engage in such practices because, otherwise, they would not accomplish anything with their work. Ofelia concluded, "They have their tricks, their ways out, for better or for worse." [*Sí tienen sus trucos, sus salidas para bien y para mal*].

### *Special schools catering to specific disabilities*

During our discussions, many study participants recognized the potential benefits of SPED schools for certain students but emphasized the importance of organizing these schools according to specific disability types. They shared examples of both private and public SPED schools that adhere to this model. Private SPED schools are typically operated by CSOs and specialize in a specific disability from their establishment. In the case of public SPED schools, known as CAMs, if they aim to specialize, they have to disregard existing legal regulations that require them to accommodate all disabilities; sometimes it is an intentional decision, sometimes it just occurs naturally. As Laura from Inclusor shared: "It even happened in a CAM here in Iztacalco, where everyone is Deaf. The number of Deaf students at the secondary school level who came to that CAM was so high that they took it over, and now there are no other disabilities present, only Deaf students." [*Inclusive pasó en un CAM de aquí de Iztacalco en el que todos son sordos, porque fue tanto tanto tanto a nivel secundaria, son tantos los sordos que llegaron ahí que se adueñaron del CAM y ya no hay otras discapacidades, solamente hay sordos.*]

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Adriana from Declic also said that "many CAMs, under good leadership, develop their own distinctive focus" [*los propios CAMs, bajo un buen director o directora, van adquiriendo como su sello particular*]. She shared an example of a CAM in Puebla where the presence of a teacher fluent in sign language led to an increase in the number of Deaf students. Ofelia from Andale para Oír shared a similar experience, mentioning a specific CAM in Querétaro known for its specialization in Deaf education, where teachers exclusively use sign language throughout the day, regardless of whether students have hearing aids or can speak.

> ***Ofelia:*** Technically, they have the obligation to accept any child, but they prioritize Deaf children, and all the CAMs in Querétaro know this. So, when a Deaf child goes to another place, they say, 'Welcome, because I can't say no to you, but there's a CAM specialized in Deaf education.' You can suddenly see a classroom full of Deaf students and one child with Down syndrome or autism, so yes, this CAM may have other disabilities, but I believe around 90% are Deaf."
> *Prácticamente, ellos tienen la obligación de recibir a cualquier niño, pero dan prioridad a los sordos y todos los CAM de Querétaro lo saben, entonces llega un sordo a otro lugar les dicen, bienvenido porque no te puedo decir que no, pero hay un CAM de sordos que se especializa en eso, entonces de repente sí ves en el salón todos sordos y un niño con síndrome de Down o con autismo, o sea sí hay, pero yo creo que igual 90% son sordos.*]

Some CSO representatives have mixed feelings about the cases when CAMs become specialized. For example, Claudia from Ilumina expressed that while this practice can have its benefits, it can also lead to the exclusion of certain students.

It is worth noting that respondents who work with the Deaf population also expressed positive views about private and public SPED schools specialized in Deaf education. For instance, Abisaí mentioned CAM 7 in Guadalajara, as well as private schools Clotet and IPPLIAP in Mexico City, acknowledging their success in providing quality education despite the 'segregation' of Deaf students. Mariangie from Educación Especial Más even used the examples of successful SPED schools to emphasize that these institutions offer students the opportunity to

receive quality education, unlike mainstreaming where they are physically included in classrooms but do not acquire knowledge.

It is also worth noting that certain CSOs who participated in the study operate their own CAMs (such as APAC and Nuevo Amanecer) or private SPED schools (such as IPPLIAP and IPACIDEVI), and their work and impact will be examined separately in Chapter 7.

### *Other factors*

School philosophy and values were also identified as minor factors contributing to inclusion. For instance, religious schools, as well as schools following the Montessori or other constructivist pedagogical models, were identified as more conducive environments for fostering IE or at least where individuals might be more receptive to it. However, it is important to note that this is not a universal rule. For instance, Isabel from Capys shared that many of their beneficiaries have attended Montessori schools, and these schools have made adjustments to meet the needs of these students. Conversely, Adriana mentioned that Declic has had good and bad experiences in both public and private schools, and Montessori schools are no exception. "Just because it's Montessori and there is freedom, this child would just go to the garden and stay there all month long – no, that's not right! They haven't understood inclusion." [*Como es Montessori y había libertad, siempre el niño se iba con la granjita y ahí todo el mes. No, pues no. No han entendido la inclusión.*]

Another factor mentioned by several respondents is the presence of support teachers and well-established inclusion or psychopedagogy departments in schools [*departamento de inclusión/ psicopedagogía*]. However, this applies only to private schools, as public schools do not have such departments and are not legally permitted to have support teachers.

The inclusion department refers to specific departments within schools that comprise a multidisciplinary team of specialists, similar to the previous structure of USAER. These departments are dedicated to providing support and addressing the diverse needs of students, with the goal of fostering their inclusion within the school community.

Support teachers tend to be SPED educators whose role is typically to support a student with a disability within a regular classroom and also provide help to general education teachers. Throughout the interviews, representatives of CSOs utilized various terms to denote support teachers, including '*sombra*', 'auxiliar *académico*', '*monitor*', '*maestro de apoyo*', '*maestro individual*', '*asistente de inclusión*', and '*asistente o maestro de intervención terapéutica*'. However, Marifer from AMAD and some other CSOs highlighted that the term '*sombra*' [shadow] carries negative connotations as it implies someone who constantly follows the student like a literal shadow, not only within the classroom but also in other settings such as bathrooms and elsewhere. Raquel from CEAA also discussed that shadow is somebody who simply takes care and watches the student, relieving some workload from regular teacher. So, most CSOs deliberately avoid the term sombra and refer to them as '*monitores*' or '*auxiliaries*', but for the sake of simplicity, the term 'support teacher' is used throughout this thesis.

For example, Karina from Atzan shared successful cases in which students with disabilities received high-quality education, in part, due to the presence of a support teacher.

> *Karina:* I have seen students with specific diagnoses whose progress and development in regular schools have been phenomenal. However, it is important to note that these cases occur in schools with extensive experience in IE. These schools have consistently provided academic support or support teachers throughout the students' educational journey. I must express my admiration for these support teachers, as they excel in planning and guiding the entire process. These students have received exceptional attention in all aspects, and the necessary measures have been taken to ensure their success in the right environment.

*He visto chicos con un diagnóstico en específico, y que su proyección y su desenvolvimiento en la escuela regular ha sido fenomenal; pero te estoy hablando de que es una escuela que tiene muchísimos años de experiencia en educación inclusiva, que ha llevado auxiliar académico o monitor durante todo el tiempo, y que estos monitores han sido personas que de verdad, mis respetos, son buenísimos para planear y para llevar todo el proceso, entonces son niños que han estado sumamente atendidos en todos los sentidos y se ha hecho lo necesario y se ha estado en el lugar correcto.*

Eva Patricia, a CEO and mother of a child with a disability, also shared a positive experience and expressed her appreciation for a particular type of support teacher that helped her daughter during preschool years. This teacher would only visit the school once a month to carefully observe her daughter's behavior, monitor her progress, engage in discussions with other teachers, familiarize herself with upcoming topics, and offer valuable insights and advice on making adaptations and addressing specific behaviors. Moreover, this teacher provided specialized materials for her daughter, which regular teachers were not even aware of.

Support teachers will be further examined in Chapter 6, where I will delve into the various ways in which CSOs collaborate and interact with them. And as I transition from the background of IE in Mexico to the initiatives implemented by CSOs, in the final subsection of this chapter, I will explore how CSOs perceive and approach the concepts of IE and SPED.

**Ideal of inclusive and special education**

As the literature suggests, one of the challenges of IE lies in its conceptualization. In the case of Mexico, diverse stakeholders, including scholars, government officials, schools, and civil society, hold distinct interpretations of IE. Gaining insights into how CSOs define IE and SPED can provide valuable understanding of their approach to implementing IE and the underlying reasons behind it.

At the beginning of our discussions, I requested study participants to provide their own interpretations of IE and SPED. And while I initially observed stark differences in their

perspectives, upon closer analysis, I discovered that their ways of thinking are remarkably similar, albeit expressed through different terminologies. As anticipated, the majority associated IE with positive connotations and expressed strong support for the IE paradigm. But surprisingly, a significant number of individuals also expressed strong support for SPED and, what is more, did not perceive it as a system that contrasts with IE.  This brief subsection aims to summarize these noteworthy findings.

Upon considering and examining all the responses collectively, the majority of participants defined IE as being synonymous with education for all (N=13) and the right to education (N=14) as it stands. It was commonly characterized as a system that acknowledges and accommodates diverse needs (N=12), providing flexibility (N=4), adopting a student-centered approach (N=3), and delivering high-quality education (N=2). Moreover, IE was viewed as a system that respects and responds to diversity (N=7), taking into account the family dynamics, emotional well-being, economic circumstances, and other contextual factors (N=6), while also recognizing the importance of well-informed and qualified teachers (N=6).

Naturally, each CSO representative offered slightly different definitions and emphasized various aspects of IE. For instance, Raquel underscored the significance of respecting diversity and creating an environment where students have the opportunity to cultivate essential life skills and autonomy. In contrast, Abisaí from Educación Incluyente emphasized in his definition the importance of flexibility and adaptability in IE, ensuring that it caters to the diverse needs of all students.

> *Abisaí:* Inclusive education is a methodology that takes into account the needs of all students, the individual needs of each of them, and adapts to their unique characteristics. This is not limited to disability; in fact, it extends beyond disability. As teachers, we understand that not all students learn in the same way, not all read in the same way. Each person learns differently, and therefore, we need to employ methods that include everyone, regardless of their learning styles or backgrounds.

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*La educación inclusiva es una metodología que considera las necesidades de todos los alumnos, las necesidades de cada uno de ellos y que por supuesto se adapte a las características individuales de cada uno. Esto no es algo propio solo de la discapacidad, es más, pasa fuera de la discapacidad. Los que somos profesores sabemos que en un grupo de alumnos no todos aprenden igual, no todos leen igual, cada quien aprende distinto y entonces tienes que hacerte de métodos que los incluyan a todos independientemente de sus formas de aprender, independientemente de su contexto.*

Several study participants also conveyed the viewpoint that the term 'inclusive education' itself should not exist, as inclusion should be the norm without the need for a dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion. For example, Marifer from AMAD argued that true inclusion cannot be achieved as long as we continue to use the term 'inclusion' itself. She stated: "It is the right to education for all. The utopia is that the term 'inclusive education' no longer needs to exist, the fact that it is still seen as a parallel system seems to indicate that we have not truly taken the step forward." [*Es un derecho a la educación para todos. La utopía es que no tenga que existir ya el término educación inclusiva, o sea, al final el hecho de que se vea de manera paralela todavía me parece como que no hemos dado el paso realmente.*]

Some other CSO representatives also utilized the term 'utopia' when discussing IE. However, they employed it in a more pessimistic sense, expressing that IE is unachievable due to its strict rejection of SPED and the consequent emphasis on addressing general barriers to inclusion rather than providing targeted support for students with disabilities. This is how Alfredo from AMEPDIVI, who is also a PwD, summarized this perspective: "We talk about utopia, IE sounds very nice, but at the same time, in the pursuit of inclusion and the idea of encompassing everything together, such as 'we are all equal' etc., we neglect this other aspect of the specific needs of each disability." [*Hablamos de la cuestión utópica, suena muy bonito, pero al mismo tiempo en esa búsqueda de la inclusión de abarcar todo junto, de todos somos iguales, etc. se desatiende esta otra parte de las necesidades específicas de cada discapacidad.*]

This quote introduces a significant point of divergence in opinions among CSOs, which, upon closer examination, are not fundamentally different at all. It is crucial to recognize that this perspective of IE as a system that rejects SPED and specific accommodations for students with disabilities is just one of many ways to conceptualize IE. This extreme viewpoint has gained traction in recent official discourse and practices in Mexico, as discussed in Chapter 2, and its negative manifestations have been explored throughout Chapter 4. And because this extreme form of IE tends to make PwD less visible and fails to adequately address their needs, certain CSOs, such as AMEPDIVI, did not express support for IE as a paradigm.

That being said, if we adhere to the description of IE provided in The General Comment No. 4 of the CRPD, as well as the definitions provided by various CSOs, we can observe that IE is more commonly conceptualized as a system that requires schools to be accessible for PwD and utilize diverse formats and reasonable accommodations that cater to the specific needs of each student with a disability, while also addressing the needs of other non-disabled students.

Therefore, what may initially seem like two conflicting opinions are essentially similar perspectives that emphasize the importance of providing targeted support for students with disabilities. The difference lies in some CSOs associating this support exclusively with SPED, while others including it within the framework of IE.

The reconciliation of IE and SPED, including their definitions and approaches to implementation, emerged as one of the most intricate conflicts during the interviews. Consistent with literature review provided in Chapter 2, SPED is commonly linked to negative connotations of discrimination and marginalization. When participants were asked to define SPED, some CSOs characterized it as a system that reinforces segregation (N=4), perpetuates prejudice and

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stigma (N=1), fosters exclusion (N=2), and involves providing separate education, separate

curriculum, and separate physical spaces for PwD (N=4).

What I observed from the various responses is that many of the participants associated

the negative aspects of SPED with specific SPED services present in Mexico, particularly

highlighting examples of CAMs. It is interesting to note that when discussing SPED not solely as

a placement, but as a methodology, most CSOs talked about its importance and necessity.

For example, Cristal, a CEO of AMADIVI who is also a PwD, initially stated that

"special education cannot be inclusive", aligning with global discourse, and expressed strong

opposition to the system of CAMs. However, she went on to share her personal experience of

attending a SPED school for the visually impaired, noting that she was fortunate to have had that

opportunity. She then advocated for a return to SPED schools based on disability type, not as a

permanent placement, but as a preparatory phase to transition into the regular school system.

> *Cristal:* I would advocate for a return to special education schools, but with controlled
> durations of stay for children with visual impairments. [...] If you enroll a child in a
> special school at the age of 4, by the time they are seven or eight years old, they should
> be able to read Braille, write with a Perkins Brailler, use a slate and stylus, and have skills
> in orientation and mobility, as well as the use of assistive devices.
> *Yo iría por regresar a las escuelas de educación especial, pero controlados los tiempos
> de estancia de los chicos en este tipo de escuelas, hablando de ciegos y con baja visión.
> [...] metes a un niño a los 4 años en una escuela especial donde a los siete-ocho años, el
> niño salga leyendo Braille, escribiendo con la máquina Perkins, con regleta, sabiendo
> utilizar orientación y movilidad, dispositivo móvil.*

Central to this discussion is the global context and the way it has informed IE and SPED

policies in Mexico.  In this regard, Juventino, a founder of his own CSO and a PwD with a

degree in education, strongly criticized the IE discourse, highlighting that it originated in the

Global North and failed to consider the unique context of Mexico.

> *Juventino:* I don't really agree with inclusive education. I, Juventino, can tell you that at
> least primary and secondary education should be special education because it requires

personalized attention to provide pedagogical and didactic tools to students with any type of disability. That should continue, but currently, in Mexico, it doesn't exist. We let ourselves get carried away by the current coming from the West, from Europe, Canada, and the United States, to make us believe that inclusion was the solution. I can tell you that inclusion is not the solution today because Mexico lacks the infrastructure and budget to support inclusive education. For me, special education is a panacea.

*Yo no coincido mucho con la educación inclusiva. Yo Juventino te puedo decir que por lo menos educación primaria y secundaria debiera ser educación especial porque se necesita prácticamente una atención personalizada para darle las herramientas pedagógicas, didácticas a los estudiantes con cualquier tipo de discapacidad. Eso debiera de continuar y hoy en día en México no existe. Nos dejamos llevar por la corriente que venía de la influencia occidental, de Europa, de Canadá, de EEUU, en México para que creyéramos que la inclusión era la solución. Yo puedo decirte que la inclusión no es la solución hoy en día porque México no tiene ni la infraestructura ni el presupuesto para hablar de una educación incluyente. Y la educación especial para mí es la panacea.*

Teachers from AMEPDIVI also reflected on the broader global context of changes in the education provision for PwD in Mexico. One teacher expressed her belief that the Mexican government exploited global initiatives related to IE as a means to cut costs, leading to the elimination of SPED programs. She stated: "They took advantage of the Salamanca Statement and the international stance of countries with economic power, absorbing what suited them, but they did not have a comprehensive understanding of the implications of removing special education schools." [*Aprovecharon la coyuntura que les dio la declaración de Salamanca y toda esa postura internacional de países que sí tienen poder económico y absorbieron lo que les convino, pero no dieron una lectura completa de lo que implica quitar las escuelas de educación especial.*] This argument finds support in the consistent reduction of the SPED budget, downsizing of the USAER team, and other related incidents examined in previous chapters.

A surprising discovery was that all the PwD who were interviewed in this study expressed strong support for SPED and a desire to return to SPED schools based on disability type. That said, they all held slightly different opinions on the exact implementation of such a

system. As mentioned earlier, Cristal suggested that students with visual impairments should

attend SPED school for a period of 3-4 years before transitioning to regular schools, while

Juventino believed that students should enter regular schools no earlier than the high school

level. Juventino further justified his reasoning through his own experience.

> ***Juventino:*** I studied secondary school with non-disabled teenagers, and it was torture to
> be in a regular school because nothing is adapted, teachers have no idea how to teach
> you, and subjects like English, math, chemistry, and physics are honestly passed blindly.
> I'm being ironic, but it's true. You pass through them blindly because teachers don't
> know how to teach you the content. That's why primary, secondary [in a SPED school].
> *La secundaria la estudié con jóvenes adolescentes sin discapacidad, es una tortura estar
> en una escuela regular, porque nada está adaptado, los maestros no tienen ni la más
> remota idea de cómo enseñarte, y materias como inglés y matemáticas química física las
> pasas sinceramente a ciegas. Así, estoy de irónico. Las pasas a ciegas, que los maestros
> no saben cómo enseñarte los contenidos. Es por eso yo digo – primaria, secundaria.*

Haydee, another participant in the study who is Deaf, also supports the idea of separate

schools for Deaf children, viewing it not as segregation but rather as a means to ensure the

fulfillment of their right to education. Haydee strongly advocated for Deaf students to have

access to bilingual-bicultural education, highlighting the importance of incorporating both sign

language and written/spoken language in their education. She believes that Deaf students should

only integrate into mainstream schools starting from the secondary school level or higher, but

with the condition that they have access to sign language interpreters in those settings.

> ***Haydee:*** Deaf students should study together from kindergarten to primary school, this is
> what I feel is important because Deaf individuals acquire knowledge and information
> more comprehensively through their natural language. However, this should not exclude
> the Spanish language; rather, we should pay attention and focus on creating a bilingual
> environment. As the Deaf child consolidates both languages, it will be easier, in my
> opinion, for them to be included by combining Spanish reading and writing skills with
> proficiency in their natural language. Moving forward, they can then be included
> alongside their peers.
> *Juntar los sordos desde jardín de niños hasta primaria porque el sordo adquiere el
> conocimiento y la información de manera más completa con su lengua natural, es lo que
> yo siento, pero tampoco haciendo a un lado el español, también poniendo la atención y*

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*concentrándonos en que sea bilingüe. En la medida de que el niño sordo consolide sus dos lenguas ya para adelante en mi opinión va a ser más fácil que se incluya con una combinación de lectura en español y una escritura bien del español y también de su lengua natural. Y ya para adelante pueda incluirse junto con los demás.*

Initially, I was surprised by these findings as I had not anticipated such strong support for the SPED system. However, through numerous interviews and conversations, it became evident that there is not a clear-cut dichotomy between IE and SPED, as often depicted in existing literature. The endorsement of SPED schools by all study participants with disabilities did not imply a rejection of IE as a paradigm. Rather, it revealed a rejection of how IE is currently promoted and implemented in Mexico, which resembles integration rather than inclusion, as it simply places PwD in classrooms without changing the environment and methodologies.

Reaching the ideal of IE, where buildings and study materials are universally accessible, UDL is widely used, and teachers are well-versed in disability and adaptations, while meeting all students' needs, may take considerable time. Unfortunately, in Mexico, the transformation was abrupt, as the SPED system was dismantled without first reforming mainstreaming. Given these circumstances, it is understandable that PwD are calling for a return to SPED schools based on disability types. The reality is that the present system, which attempts to combine regular schools with SPED services, falls short of delivering true education and support to PwD.

In addition, the insights shared by various CSO representatives in the study demonstrated that SPED and IE are not opposing forces; instead, they complement each other. Participants expressed this notion in different ways. For instance, Marifer from Educación Especial Más stressed that IE cannot exist without SPED, as SPED knowledge sustains inclusion. Adriana from Declic highlighted that SPED and IE are not two separate worlds but interconnected components within the same system. And Karina from Atzan shared a perspective that SPED is an integral part of IE, where IE encompasses both regular education and SPED.

Although expressed differently, the final analysis of all the interviews revealed the prevailing view among CSOs that SPED plays a crucial role within the broader context of IE. SPED teaching strategies can benefit a wide range of students with and without disabilities in advancing their education, and SPED placement can serve as a transitional phase for some PwD, allowing them to acquire disability-specific skills and develop their identity before entering the mainstream education system.

Having considered the context and the vision of IE in Mexico, the following two chapters will delve into the actions undertaken by CSOs to address the existing barriers and ultimately advance IE in the country. Chapter 6 will cover actions that indirectly influence IE, laying the groundwork for inclusion. On the other hand, Chapter 7 will be wholly dedicated to CSOs' work within educational institutions, in particular, how they include students with disabilities in mainstreaming, how they create transformative change within schools, educate students with disabilities themselves, and facilitate their participation in higher education. Both chapters establish a connection between the barriers discussed in Chapter 4 and the strategies employed by CSOs. Chapter 6 more explicitly showcases their work on attitudinal, knowledge, and emotional barriers, along with certain systemic barriers like accessibility and legislature.

## CHAPTER 6: CSOS TAKING ACTION – PREPARING GROUND FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

This chapter will explore various actions undertaken by CSOs to pave the way for IE. Although this thesis does not cover all their actions due to length limitations, I categorize and explore the most significant ones, with emphasis on those frequently mentioned, linked to the barriers discussed in Chapter 4, or highly impactful for IE.

The first section delves into fostering an inclusive culture, directly addressing the attitudinal barrier often viewed as vital to achieving IE. It will be covered first due to its significance, the fact that all CSOs engage in creating cultural change, and the broadest scope, ranging from individuals to schools, to society at large.

The subsequent section addresses bridging the knowledge gap among educators, involving diverse initiatives from teacher training to national congresses and degree programs. A specific project is also briefly discussed as a case example. Continuing the focus on collaborating with educators, the next section will center on support teachers. Although I initially anticipated CSOs to engage in awareness campaigns and teacher training, I was not aware of the significance of support teachers and the extent of CSOs' commitment to this area. This subsection will shed light on the nature of their involvement, ranging from remote partnerships to direct recruitment and thorough training of support teachers.

The chapter then explores actions related to enhancing school accessibility as a response to system barriers outlined in Chapter 4. This exploration will highlight how infrastructure and material accessibility improve as a result of collaborative efforts involving CSOs, schools, and families. Families frequently play an active role in implementing these changes, setting the stage for the subsequent section centered on CSO engagement with families. This portion will delve

into the many ways in which CSOs assist families as clients, partners, and beneficiaries. The

section will conclude with a brief discussion on the significance of empowering families – an

important theme emerging from the analysis and one of the key findings in this study.

In a broader exploration of advocacy and empowerment, the final segment will examine

how CSOs work with both federal and local government entities. This part will underscore the

limited nature of such engagements, reaffirming the point made in Chapter 4 – that CSOs often

prioritize personal barriers over systemic ones. Lastly, this section will briefly touch upon the

topic of activism. Although I initially anticipated a significant focus on activism in the study, my

interactions with CSOs during interviews brought to light the complexities of activism in

Mexico. This concluding subsection will provide some details on these nuances.

Overall, this chapter effectively showcases how CSOs 'connect the dots', closely

engaging with all key stakeholders in the realm of IE. These stakeholders include regular and

SPED teachers, support teachers, school staff, principals, students with and without disabilities,

families, government entities, and society as a whole.

**Creating an inclusive culture**

*Raising Awareness*

All CSOs that took part in the study are actively involved in raising awareness and

fostering an inclusive culture surrounding disability. Without exception, every organization

embraces these practices. While typically these efforts are concentrated within schools, often

aiming to involve the entire school community, they can also extend beyond educational

institutions and take place in public spaces, thus encompassing a broader reach within society.

During the interviews, CSO representatives employed various terms to describe these

actions. Some referred to it as 'concientizacion/concientizar' [raise awareness], while others used

'sensibilizacion/sensibilizar' [sensitize]. Some participants used either one or the other term exclusively, some employed them interchangeably, and others utilized both terms to encompass distinct activities. Additionally, certain respondents highlighted the distinction between the two activities, emphasizing their preference for one over the other within the context of their work. For example, Cristal from ICEVI Latinoamérica provided the following explanation.

> *Cristal:* In both inclusive education and labor inclusion, I always talk about how sensitization is temporary. You see a dog on the street, it gets run over, and your heart aches, but after two hours, you move on. You watch a sad movie, you cry, but after a couple of hours, you get over it. However, raising awareness or conducting awareness workshops allows society to change and develop an understanding, a culture towards disability. So, if young people in universities, regular primary or secondary schools, or any other educational institutions are not made aware, then there is bullying and mistreatment towards children with visual impairments, starting with the teachers. *Tanto en la educación inclusiva como los temas de inclusión laboral, siempre hablo de que la sensibilización es pasajera. Tú ves un perro en la calle, lo atropellan y ya te dolió el corazón, pasaron dos horas y ya se te pasó; ves una película triste, ya lloraste, dos horitas y ya se te pasó. Sin embargo, la concientización o el generar talleres de concientización permite que la sociedad cambie y genere una conciencia, una cultura hacia la discapacidad. Entonces si los chicos en las universidades, en las escuelas regulares primarias secundarias, lo que sea, no se concientizan, por eso hay tanto bullying y tantas situaciones hacia los niños con discapacidad visual, empezando con los maestros.*

It should be noted that the respondents were not directly asked about these distinctions, making it challenging to ascertain whether they all perceive this difference in a similar manner. As a result, this section will utilize the terms 'awareness' and 'awareness raising', regardless of whether the respondents used the terms 'sensibilización' or 'concientización'.

CSOs engage in diverse approaches to carry out awareness raising work within schools. Some opt for general presentations addressed to the entire school community, while others prepare separate sessions targeting specific stakeholders, such as students, teachers, and parents. The design and structure of these sessions vary among CSOs. The context in which these

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sessions take place also plays a role. For instance, if the sessions are organized prior to the enrollment of a specific student with a disability, the awareness raising efforts often revolve around that student and their characteristics. However, when CSOs conduct sessions in schools where they do not have any beneficiaries, the focus tends to be more generic, encompassing broader topics of disability awareness.

Awareness raising among teachers is perceived differently by various CSOs. Some consider it unnecessary and focus solely on providing teacher training, equipping educators with strategies to effectively teach students with disabilities. On the other hand, some CSOs believe it is crucial to first raise awareness and provide an understanding of disability and inclusion before conducting such training. There are also CSOs that combine both approaches, conducting awareness raising sessions while simultaneously teaching educators how to work with students with disabilities, modify teaching strategies, and create accommodations.

Some CSOs utilize awareness raising workshops as an opportunity to provide additional information to teachers that they may find useful in a classroom. For example, Marcela from Catic shared that, as part of awareness sessions, they create a copy of the child's vocabulary, which is then laminated and displayed in the classroom, enabling teachers to understand how to ask questions, what the child can respond, and what they might need to guess.

Other CSOs shared that awareness raising workshops serve as a valuable entry point for them to establish connections with schools and cultivate trust between the educational institution and the CSO. This trust opens up opportunities for the CSOs to offer additional services, including teacher training programs, courses, and other forms of intervention. For example, Gigis follows this approach, starting with awareness raising and then offering practical courses, such as behavior management in Down syndrome, to educators who express interest in further learning.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are CSOs, such as IDEA and Unidos, that primarily prioritize awareness raising and allocate fewer resources to teacher training. Mariana from Unidos explained: "We do not provide teachers with training on reasonable accommodations and similar topics because we are not experts in the field. Instead, we take a step back, focusing on how we can be empathetic with all our students. We place a great deal of emphasis on promoting diversity." [*A los maestros no les damos capacitación de los ajustes razonables que tienen que hacer y demás, porque no somos expertos en el tema, sino es un paso atrás como esta parte de cómo logramos ser empáticos con todos nuestros alumnos y alumnas, ahí nos centramos muchísimo en esa parte de diversidad.*]

IDEA adopts this approach as a fundamental philosophy. Instead of focusing on teaching strategies, they prioritize creating a culture of inclusion within schools to advance IE. This involves educating about the ABC of IE, addressing prejudice, and cultivating openness and positive attitudes. They believe that true change in teaching can only occur when there is a shift in the mindset and willingness of teachers to work with disabilities, allowing them to acquire specialized knowledge and apply it in the classroom. Marifer explained their approach:

> *Marifer:* We have decided to focus extensively on creating a cultural change within institutions, going beyond discussing strategies and accommodations. There are plenty of courses available, with specialized individuals who have expertise in different conditions and disabilities. There is a wealth of resources in that regard, but despite this abundance, why is real change not happening? It is because they are not being allowed entry, or when they are granted access, the objectives are vastly different from what we need.
> *Decidimos enfocarnos muchísimo en crear un cambio cultural dentro de las instituciones más allá de hablar de estrategias, de adecuaciones, para eso hay un chorro de cursos, gente especializada que de hecho se ha especializado, en las diferentes condiciones, las diferentes discapacidades, hay mucho de eso, pero al final si hay mucho de eso, ¿por qué entonces no está sucediendo?, porque no se les está permitiendo la entrada, porque se les permite la entrada pero con objetivos bien distintos a los que nosotros buscamos.*

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Marifer further elaborated that once they observe a shift in attitude, they initiate a collaborative effort to develop specific strategies that can help the school become more inclusive. This involves working closely with the inclusion department, teachers, and therapists, ensuring that all parties are actively involved in the process and share the same mindset and goals. She concluded by sharing a recent success story. IDEA conducted a full day awareness raising session in a school that had many fears about having students with disabilities. After the session, the school reached out to the parents of a girl with Down syndrome, whom they had previously rejected, saying, "We've changed our minds, bring her in, and let's learn together." Marifer recalled: "With that, we realized that everything is worth it, and now the idea is to support them [the school] throughout this process, not to leave them on their own, but to be with them every step of the way." [*ya con eso dijimos todo vale la pena. Y ahora la idea es acompañarlos en este proceso, no dejarlos ahí ya botados, sino estar con ellos en el proceso*.]

Some CSOs mentioned that their efforts to raise awareness go beyond just the teachers and also involve the entire school community, including administrative staff, janitors, security guards, and others. Marcela from Catic emphasized that this approach was not initially considered, but through their work and experience, they recognized the significance of including all staff members. Students interact with various individuals in different areas of the school, and it is crucial for everyone to be aware and knowledgeable about how to treat them.

As part of their workshops, Catic introduces the child to the school community, sharing their age and diagnosis and addressing common misconceptions. They pay attention to explaining that the child understands everything, that they should be spoken to like any other child their age, that they should be addressed directly and not through their support teacher. They also take the time to explain the child's unique communication methods, whether it involves the

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use of a communication board, an iPad, or switches. Additionally, they focus on non-verbal cues, such as making eye contact to indicate 'yes' and not moving to indicate 'no'.

Ilumina also takes a holistic approach by involving the entire school community in their awareness raising sessions – teachers and staff responsible for opening the school door, cleaning, and working in the cafeteria. During these sessions, which last for two hours, Ilumina engages participants in interactive activities and reflective discussions. The aim is to help them recognize the strategies they can employ to provide effective support for students with disabilities and overall create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

> *Claudia:* Through these workshops, participants work with simulators that simulate blindness or low vision. They engage in activities such as copying from the board, going to the bathroom, participating in physical education, or solving math problems using these simulators. This allows participants to experience firsthand the needs of their students and how they can address them effectively. Participants are asked to share their feelings and experiences during these activities. For example, someone might say, 'I couldn't see anything from there, I could only make out a number, and eventually, I even got a headache.' This helps them understand why a student like Juanito may struggle to copy from the board and why it is important for them to verbalize what they write. Throughout these workshops, there are reflective discussions and activities where sighted guides are used to teach participants how to guide students with visual impairments. For instance, if someone mentions they didn't see a step, the recommendation may be to paint the edge of the step yellow. Through these experiences and discussions, participants gradually come to understand the reasoning behind these strategies.
> *A través de estos talleres que les ponemos simuladores, ya sea ceguera o la baja visión, y los ponemos a hacer actividades en copias, o de ir al baño, o de educación física, o de copien esta operación y resuélvanla con los simuladores para que justo ellos vean las necesidades de su estudiante y como pueden resolverlas, y ahí se les dan las estrategias. Les preguntamos, a ver que sintieron, uno dice por ejemplo, yo ni pude ver desde ahí, veía un número pero ya después incluso hasta me dolió la cabeza; justo por eso Juanito no alcanza a copiar del pizarrón, y por eso necesitamos que ustedes verbalicen lo que escriben, se va reflexionando en estos talleres sobre esto, se hacen dinámicas de guías videntes para que sepan como guiarlos, si nos dicen, yo no alcancé a ver ese escalón, les decimos, por eso recomendamos que se pinte la orilla de amarillo. Entonces se va a ir reflexionando, como que les cae el veinte de porque se recomiendan esas estrategias.*

Some CSOs emphasized the significance of raising awareness among parents of non-disabled students as well. Mariangie from Educación Especial Más pointed out that inclusion efforts sometimes encounter obstacles due to parental concerns; parents may have reservations about their children studying alongside students with disabilities. Parents worry that their child may be subjected to physical harm or that the presence of students with disabilities may divert the teacher's attention away from their own child. Additionally, there is a fear that their child may imitate certain behaviors exhibited by students with disabilities.

Mariana from Unidos shared their experience conducting such workshops targeting parents where they engage in discussion and combat prejudices. The CSO prompts them to share their experiences and talks to parents about the concept of shared responsibility, explaining that there are certain actions teachers can take at school and parents can take at home to foster inclusion. Mariana further shared some insights about this approach.

> *Mariana:* Working with mothers and fathers has been very interesting; they often bring many prejudices and fears about their child interacting with PwD, viewing disability as an illness, and so on. These prejudices are addressed during the workshops. However, we also observe a genuine interest in wanting their children to continue interacting with PwD. We then invite parents who are interested to learn about the other programs we offer. This shift from fear of interaction to a desire to strengthen this contact is the main change we observe, as parents begin to recognize the multitude of skills their children can develop through embracing diversity in their daily lives.
>
> Con las mamás y los papás ha sido muy interesante, traen muchos prejuicios muchos miedos de que convivan con personas con discapacidad y si es una enfermedad, etc., todo esto de los prejuicios. Pero después sí vemos esta parte de interés de 'quiero que siga conviviendo con personas con discapacidad.' Luego los invitamos a la otra parte de los programas que hacemos a las mamás y los papás que estén interesados. Ese es como el principal cambio que vemos, del miedo a la convivencia, a, 'no, lo quiero seguir fortaleciendo' porque además ven todas las habilidades que pueden desarrollar sus hijos cuando hay diversidad en su día a día.
>
> Other participants also shared their experiences in raising awareness among parents and

offered practical advice based on their experience. Raquel from CEAA, for instance, mentioned

that they do not gather parents specifically for these sessions, rather they take advantage of occasions when parents go to school for various reasons. For example, when parents go to yearly meetings to receive their children's grades, CEAA takes the opportunity to talk about disability and raise awareness. Another CSO representative, Mariangie, emphasized the importance of conducting these workshops prior to the inclusion of a student with a disability. This proactive approach allows for addressing concerns and preparing parents to be accepting. She elaborated.

> *Mariangie:* It is much easier when you inform parents in advance that there will be a student with a disability, rather than make it a surprise and then receive complaints. So, it is much easier to anticipate and tell them what we're going to do. 'We need your help. We need you to assist us in talking to the children about respect, tolerance, and diversity.' Then parents take it differently. Typically, the suggestion is to anticipate."
> *Es mucho más fácil cuando tú les anticipas que va a haber un alumno de inclusión, a cuando ellos se topan con la sorpresa y empiezan las quejas. Entonces es mucho más fácil anticipar y vamos a hacer eso, necesitamos su ayuda, necesitamos que nos ayuden a hablar con los niños sobre el respeto, sobre tolerancia, sobre diversidad. Lo toman distinto. Normalmente la sugerencia es anticipar.*
> One CSO, APAC, specifically indicated that they do not do awareness raising with

parents, as they believe that it is through their children that parents can develop a more inclusive mindset. They explained: "We work with young people because we are convinced that they will be the agents of change in their parents' mindset when they witness the abilities of their peers with disabilities. We firmly believe that if we work with these young people, everything else will follow naturally. We don't specifically work with parents of non-disabled youth." [*Trabajamos con los chicos porque estamos convencidos de que estos jóvenes van a ser los promotores del cambio en los padres de familia al ver las propias habilidades de los jóvenes con discapacidad y el que es su par. Entonces estamos convencidos de que si trabajamos con ellos lo demás vendrá por colofón. No trabajamos con los padres de familia de los jóvenes sin discapacidad.*]

When it comes to raising awareness among school students, the respondents generally talked about two approaches: targeting all students in the school or specifically focusing on those

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who are in the same group as the CSO's beneficiary. These workshops are typically designed as interactive activities, allowing non-disabled students to have hands-on experiences related to different aspects of disabilities. After which, students have an opportunity to ask questions, engage in reflection, and have group discussions.

Eva Patricia from Gigis explained that fun and engaging activities are more effective with children, as traditional lectures and theories may not resonate well with them. For example, Gigis asks students to wear six gloves and attempt writing, providing insight into the challenges faced by individuals with Down syndrome who have hypotonia. Then through reflective exercises, like discussing emotions when encountering someone with Down syndrome at a movie theater, students have the opportunity to confront and address their fears and biases. Ultimately, Gigis' core message is that people who happen to have Down syndrome are not defined by their condition; they are individuals with their own unique identity, like Pepito or Juanito.

IPACIDEVI raises awareness about visual impairments by asking students to spend the entire morning blindfolded as they work with specific material and navigate the schoolyard using a cane. Ilumina, another CSO that works with the same disability, also engages in simulations with students, followed by reflective discussions about their experiences. For instance, students may share incidents where they tripped and fell during the activity because a backpack was left on the floor. Through group discussions, they collectively realize that everyone should always hang their backpacks on the chair or place them under the chair. This natural process of reflection helps them become more aware that their peers with low vision may not be able to see objects on the floor, fostering a sense of consideration and inclusion.

Vida Independiente Mexico adopts a similar approach, but they usually divide the sessions into two parts. In the first part, a person with a physical disability representing the CSO

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engages in a dialogue with students, providing explanations about their disability and answering

questions that children may have. And in the second part, students are invited to use a wheelchair

and learn how to maneuver it. They may be asked to try it on the basketball court, or navigate

ramps, or go on a tour around the school, entering classrooms, restrooms, etc.

Unidos, as a cross-disability CSO, also conducts simulations to raise awareness.

However, what sets them apart is that these sessions encompass a range of disabilities.

> *Mariana:* We organize a mini rally where participants move from station to station,
> experiencing different types of disabilities firsthand. Another simulation we do is putting
> labels on them with prejudices such as 'treat me like a child', 'hold my hand all the time',
> 'say yes to everything' – things that we often do with PwD. Then they have to plan, for
> example, 'organize a trip while treating that person with the given label.' I think that one
> is even more impactful because they realize, 'Oops! I've been saying 'yes' all the time.'
> This way, we bring it down to a practical level, and when they interact with people with
> disabilities, they catch themselves in those attitudes that we may normally exhibit.
> *Hacemos como un mini rally, en dónde van pasando de estación a estación con los
> diferentes tipos de discapacidad para que lo vivan. Y otra simulación que hacemos es:
> les ponemos una etiqueta con un prejuicio, 'trátame como niño', 'agárrame de la mano
> todo el tiempo', 'dime que sí a todo' – cosas que hacemos con las personas con
> discapacidad normalmente. Y tienen que planear. Por ejemplo, 'organicen un viaje pero
> mientras tratan a esa persona con esa etiqueta que trae'. Creo que esa todavía es más
> fuerte porque se dan cuenta de ¡chin! todo el tiempo le dije que sí. Entonces ya lo vamos
> aterrizando y así ya cuando conviven con las personas con discapacidad se cachan en
> esas actitudes que normalmente podemos tener.*

CATIC, as a CSO specializing in AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication),

often uses awareness raising sessions to introduce the communication device that a student will

be using prior to their inclusion. This allows their peers to see it, try it out, ask questions, and

enables the CATIC staff to address any curiosity. Later, when the student joins the group, their

classmates already know the purpose and functionality of the device, thereby eliminating initial

barriers. What sets CATIC apart is their commitment to involving the students with disabilities

themselves in these sessions. Typically, they record a video of the student introducing

themselves with their communication device and sharing something about themselves with their future classmates and other students in the school.

In a similar vein, Claudia from Ilumina highlighted their practice of engaging in conversations with students who have visual impairments and will be joining a regular school. They inform these students about the upcoming awareness raising workshops and tell them that the CSO is going to discuss their disability with their future classmates. Ilumina offers the opportunity for the students with disability themselves to be present and contribute to the conversation. Claudia emphasized that they inquire whether the CSO should speak on their behalf or if they would prefer to explain things themselves, noting that students often express a desire to participate actively.

Several CSOs mentioned that they often visit schools to raise awareness on specific occasions, such as during the week of inclusion [*semana de inclusión*] or global celebrations dedicated to specific disabilities. Inclusor is one of those CSOs. Haydee, one of the founders of this CSO and a Deaf individual, shared that they usually work with specific groups or gather all students in the schoolyard. As representatives of Inclusor, they educate the students about their language, identity, and culture, aiming to raise awareness and provide understanding about Deafness. Occasionally, they bring along an interpreter to facilitate communication.

Raquel from CEAA mentioned that they typically schedule their visits during the month of October, which is Down Syndrome Awareness Month, as well as in early December to coincide with World Disability Day on December 3rd. Additionally, they aim to visit schools around March 21st, which is recognized as World Down Syndrome Day. She explained: "On those three occasions, we directly engage with the student population because they are the ones who need to know, as they are the future senators, government officials, and entrepreneurs. We

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want them to have a different mindset, and that's what we are aiming at." [*En esas tres ocasiones, vamos directamente con la población estudiantil porque son ellos los que necesitan saber, porque son los futuros senadores, gobernantes, empresarios, son el futuro. Entonces queremos que ellos vayan con una mentalidad diferente, y ahí vamos, ahí va lográndose.*]

Raquel also talked about the specific activities they do to explain Down syndrome; during the interview, she even showed me the toy chromosomes they utilize in those sessions, using biology as a tool to raise awareness and cultivate respect for diversity. She explained that they bring a transparent container where children place chromosomes from both parents, and then pair them up. In pair 21, they add an extra chromosome to demonstrate Down syndrome. Additionally, they use small bags filled with characteristics and qualities, such as 'fair-haired', 'intelligent', and there is an extra one for pair 21. This concrete approach helps children and young people comprehend this biological diversity more clearly. They also show and discuss how every individual, whether fair-haired or someone with Down Syndrome, has their own unique strengths and challenges.

Another CSO, Declic, also takes advantage of special occasions to raise awareness. However, unlike CEAA, they focus on utilizing public spaces in Mexico City and expand their reach from the school community to society as a whole. Adriana, the CEO, mentioned that before the pandemic, they actively participated in events commemorating World Down Syndrome Day organized by different CSOs, often held at prominent locations such as the Zócalo Square. During these events, Declic would organize games and engage in discussions about the significance of incorporating play in learning.

Similarly, Claudia from Ilumina shared how their CSO celebrates the White Cane Day on October 15th by organizing activities in public squares or libraries, where PwD themselves get engaged in raising awareness.

> *Claudia:* We work closely with the Mexico Library, where we set up three banners. On one of them, we display 'Learn to write your name in Braille', on another one, we have 'Use a white cane' and we use a blindfold, and on the third one, we showcase the game Gol-Gol. So, as people pass by, the children with disabilities themselves, along with their families, invite them by saying, 'Hey, look, we're celebrating White Cane Day. Come, would you like to try some activities?'
> *Trabajamos mucho con la biblioteca México, ahí ponemos tres banners y en uno ponemos 'aprende a escribir tu nombre en Braille', en otro ponemos 'usa bastón' y entonces les tapamos los ojos y en otro el juego gol-gol. Entonces a toda la gente que va pasando, los mismos chavos con discapacidad y sus mismas familias los van invitando, les dicen 'oye, mira, fíjate que estamos celebrando el día del bastón blanco, ven, ¿quieres probar algunas actividades?*
> Ilumina also takes the opportunity to raise awareness and make disabilities visible to the

general public in natural situations and public environments outside of specific celebrations. For example, Claudia shared insights about their summer program called *'Ilumina tu verano'* where they organize outings to various parks, the zoo, and other public locations for children with visual impairments to participate in recreational activities. Claudia expressed her enjoyment in observing the reactions of others during these outings. People often stare, wondering if these visually impaired kids can really go down the slide. Some people try to offer their help, but Ilumina's team explains to them that the children can do things independently. These activities help others see them as any other kid who can walk, play on the playground, buy their snacks.

The use of public spaces for awareness-raising purposes was frequently mentioned in conversations with other CSOs as well. Janette from Vida Independiente Mexico mentioned that their community, mainly composed of wheelchair users, actively organizes outdoor activities to increase PwD visibility in society, for example, by engaging in games and races. Or Noelia from Nuevo Amanecer shared that organizing activities outside of the CSO is an essential part of their

work for inclusion. She specified, "We visit parks, museums, ETV, Wal-Mart, with educational objectives in mind, but at the same time, all of this helps us raise awareness about everything we need for our children. It has truly helped us bring about many changes in various spaces." [*Vamos a parques, museos, ETV, Wal-Mart, igual con objetivos educativos, pero a la vez todo esto nos ayuda a visibilizar todo lo que necesitamos para nuestros chicos. Eso en verdad nos ha ayudado un montón para que se hagan muchos cambios, en muchos espacios.]*

For broader outreach, some CSOs talked about utilizing public events, publications, presentations, and digital platforms such as social media to raise awareness and engage with a wider audience. Certain CSOs also actively reach out to companies, restaurants, public institutions, and other establishments to organize workshops that focus on raising awareness and fostering a culture of inclusion. It is worth noting that most of these initiatives are conducted without directly involving PwD, but rather advocating for their rights and needs on their behalf.

Finally, it was mentioned by several CSOs that they actively engage in awareness work within universities, targeting either the general student population or students from specific programs that will likely have careers involving interactions with PwD. For instance, Janette from VIM mentioned that their CSO frequently receives invitations to universities, particularly those offering health-related programs such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, nursing, and more. In these sessions, VIM focuses on bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and the lived experience of individuals with disabilities. The goal is to cultivate an inclusive mindset among these young professionals who will be later working with PwD.

### Convivencia

Many CSOs also discussed the significance of activities that involved *convivencia* as a means to foster a culture of inclusion. *Convivencia* as a noun encompasses the idea of social

interaction, sharing space and experiences with others. Within the context of this research, CSO representatives highlighted different scenarios in which individuals with and without disabilities come together to engage in shared activities and spend time with one another.

Unidos is a unique CSO in this respect as their whole approach to work they do is grounded in the idea that "greater interaction leads to greater normalization." [*entre mayor convivencia mayor normalización*]. The principle of *convivencia* is at the core of their work and they usually organize a wide range of recreational activities, such as going to ice rinks, cinema, parties, or bars, depending on the age of individuals and their interests.

To facilitate these activities, Unidos conducts an introductory talk for individuals without disabilities to explain the program's objectives. They also conduct interviews with PwD to understand their specific needs and make appropriate accommodations. Participants enroll in the program and gather every Saturday in small groups led by group leaders, engaging in various activities. The organization's goal is to transition from these structured activities to more natural social experiences, allowing smaller groups to independently visit venues like clubs or theaters on days of their choosing, promoting social skills development and cultivating an inclusive culture. Unidos often partners with both SPED and mainstream schools to invite students to join their program. Mariana also emphasized the long-lasting effects of the program.

> *Mariana:* These young people [without disabilities] become agents of change for us. We have had cases where they contact us after 3 or 4 years, saying that they are now working and they want to promote workplace inclusion in their offices. They also reach out to us outraged when they witness discrimination in certain places. They become the seeds of inclusion in various areas, including family, social, labor, and educational spheres. That is the ultimate goal of Unidos: to cultivate them as agents of change.
> *Estos chavos se vuelven agentes de cambio para nosotros. Ha habido casos que nos hablan después de 3 / 4 años, que ya están trabajando y nos dicen, oye, quiero que en las oficinas en el trabajo en el que estoy haya inclusión laboral, o nos hablan enojadísimos porque vieron discriminación en tal lugar; se vuelven como estos semilleros de inclusión*

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*en otras áreas tanto en la parte familiar, en la parte social, en la laboral, en educativa, es decir, ese es el fin último de Unidos, que ellos sean semilleros en inclusión.*

Another CSO that implements a similar program is Inclusor. While Unidos is a cross-disability CSO, Inclusor is dedicated specifically to fostering interaction between Deaf and hearing population. Haydee highlighted, "Almost all of Inclusor's activities are done together with both Deaf and hearing individuals. We also believe that we have achieved success because the Deaf community has always been very closed-off. But here at Inclusor, we consistently demonstrate that *convivencia* between Deaf and hearing individuals is possible." [*Casi todas las actividades de Inclusor son juntos sordos y oyentes. También creemos que hemos logrado muy bien los sordos siempre es una comunidad muy cerrada. Pero aquí en Inclusor siempre mostramos que es posible la convivencia de oyentes y sordos*.]

Haydee mentioned a past program implemented by Inclusor that involved organizing groups of hearing and Deaf children, aged 6 to 13. These groups would visit the National Museum of History in Chapultepec Castle and engage in art and history-related activities using both Mexican sign language and Spanish. In recent times, Inclusor has introduced a new program called *Círculo Joven*, where young people, both Deaf and hearing, actively contribute their ideas and interests. Based on their input, Inclusor assists in organizing activities such as museum visits or inviting university professors to give presentations on topics of interest to the group.

In the case of CSOs that operate their own CAMs or special schools, *convivencia* often takes place within their own facilities rather than in public spaces. They may establish agreements with regular schools and invite their students to visit or organize visits for their students with disabilities to regular schools. Mercedes from IPPLIAP mentioned that they used to arrange such visits for preschool and primary school children before the pandemic, and it

proved to be successful. These visits helped children become more aware of their differences and learn how to play and interact with their peers.

APAC that operates its own CAM also has corporate volunteering where employees from different companies visit them and spend time with their students with cerebral palsy. APAC representatives explained that "the idea is that anyone who comes to APAC and sees and experiences it, should pass on that message. It's not just about getting to know the institution, but about saying, 'I saw this, and I understand how crucial awareness is. I see the importance of recognizing that we are all equal, and the need for genuinely inclusive spaces.' Ultimately, this is the message we want to convey." [*La idea es que cualquier persona que llegue aquí a APAC y vea y conozca, pase ese mensaje, no solamente conocí una institución, sino que digan vi esto, veo lo importante que es la sensibilización, veo lo importante que es el que todos conozcamos que todos somos iguales, la necesidad de los espacios realmente inclusivos, que es al final el mensaje que queremos dar*.]

Other CSOs integrate *convivencia* in their awareness-raising workshops in schools. They actively invite students with disabilities from their community to participate in these workshops, showcasing through practical examples their capabilities. IPACIDEVI, for instance, emphasizes sports within their CSO, and their visually impaired students have achieved national champion titles. As part of their workshops in mainstream schools, they organize sports activities, such as blindfolded soccer, where both non-disabled and blind students play together. Mariana shared that such *convivencia* can have a profound impact on students, "It changes their perception because they admire and value them. They say, 'Wow! How do they do it? It's cool that they scored a goal with just jingle bells ringing.' So automatically, all of that makes the students accept them much more quickly." [*Les cambia la percepción porque los admiran, los valoran y*

*dicen ¡wow! ¿cómo le hace?, qué padre metió gol y la pelota solo con cascabeles sonando.'*
*Entonces todo eso en automático a los chavos los aceptan mucho más rápido.*]

Similarly, VIM actively involves students who use wheelchairs in their school workshops. They strongly believe that this engagement provides a great opportunity for empowerment, as the child with a physical disability enters this space as a valued member of a larger community and gains the chance to demonstrate their unique abilities. Janett, a representative of the organization, pointed out that during activities like wheelchair racing, children with disabilities are the ones who demonstrate impressive speed and excel, while others are still learning to navigate the wheelchair.

Fostering an inclusive culture is fundamental as it directly addresses attitudinal barriers – a challenge that all CSOs actively tackle. These efforts tend to have the broadest scope, involving multiple actors and spaces. However, the rest of this chapter will be dedicated to exploring other impacts that are more targeted, focusing on specific stakeholders or particular topics within the realm of IE.

**Imparting knowledge to teachers**

*Teacher training*

Many CSOs emphasized their consistent involvement in teacher training, with some organizations focusing primarily on this aspect. CSOs employ various methods such as in-person and online courses, workshops, conferences, observations, university programs, publications, and national congresses. The scope of these initiatives varies greatly, as they can be implemented within specific schools where teachers work directly with students associated with the CSO, or they can be open to all teachers nationwide, aiming for broader outreach.

COTII, located in Nuevo Leon and dedicated to supporting individuals with autism, is one of the CSOs with a robust teacher training program whose outreach extends even beyond Mexico's borders. COTII's training initiatives encompass IE in general, with a particular focus on autism. They organize training sessions independently and also respond to requests from public school teachers, where local state governments facilitate the arrangements. In such cases, the process involves teachers reaching out to COTII for a training plan, presenting it to their principals for approval, and sometimes the courses are funded by the SEP or the teachers' union. However, in other cases, interested teachers have to cover the costs themselves.

In Declic, it is also common for teachers to personally cover the costs of the courses they attend. Adriana pointed out a positive aspect of this practice - it guarantees their active involvement and motivates them as they make a personal investment in their professional development. She said, "We attract teachers who are not waiting for the government for solutions. While it may not be the majority, we are reaching out to a small number of schools. However, if you visit our website, you will see that we have trained over 2000 teachers. It may have taken many years, but it still counts, and we intend to continue doing so." [*Atraemos a los maestros que no esperan a que se lo resuelva el gobierno, no es la mayoría y no estamos llegando a la mayoría, estamos llegando a muy poquititas escuelas, pero si ves en nuestra página hemos capacitado más de 2000 maestros. Claro en muchos años, pero ya cuenta, y queremos seguirlo haciendo*.]

Another CSO, AMAD, often arranges tailored training sessions based on the specific requests they receive. Marifer explained that when a family pays for training aimed at school teachers, the emphasis is placed on addressing the specific needs of their child. On the other hand, if it is the school itself that seeks knowledge about a particular condition like Down

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Syndrome, AMAD organizes more general sessions on IE and specifically covers topics related to Down Syndrome.

Another CSO, ICEVI Latinoamérica, takes the initiative to organize courses throughout Mexico, focusing on IE and other pertinent topics related to individuals with visual impairments. Typically, ICEVI Latinoamérica develops a course and opens online registration for interested participants, including teachers, parents, and other professionals. The courses may be offered free of charge or require a nominal fee. An influential figure within the CSO, Cristal Vargas, who is blind herself, actively travels to different states and even leads certain courses. She provided an example of an upcoming course where she is going to equip teachers in effectively teaching computer literacy to children with visual impairments. It will start with teaching touch typing to learn the keyboard as the foundational skill and after the introductory 40-hour course, participants will progress to Windows and then Word, and so forth. These skills are essential for children with visual impairments to progress in their learning and independence.

In contrast to ICEVI, Raquel from CEAA expressed her preference for avoiding general sessions and instead focusing on delivering hands-on tailored trainings during her visits to different locations. Her target audience includes parents, teachers, and school principals.

CEAA has a dedicated Department of Continuing Education that consistently provides courses, with a specific focus on teachers. These courses aim to equip educators with the necessary knowledge and strategies to effectively address various topics related to intellectual disabilities. As an impressive example, she mentioned having conducted training sessions for the entire state of Tabasco, encompassing every municipality within it. Some schools collaborating with CEAA undergo a complete training cycle and even do observations to see those strategies in action. Raquel shared an anecdote about a school in Cancun that had participated in all CEAA

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courses and visited a school in Monterrey, La Salle College, where CEAA helped implement inclusive practices. She concluded: "They were determined to do it right and came to learn, observe, and gain knowledge. Today, they have successfully established a strong inclusion practice within their school." [*Dijeron sí, lo queremos hacer bien, y vinieron, se capacitaron, observaron, y hoy por hoy tienen una muy buena práctica de inclusión dentro de esta escuela*.]

CEAA is not the only organization facilitating observations. Eva Patricia, the CEO of Gigis, also mentioned that families sometimes ask them to allow their children's teachers to come to Gigis. Gigis welcomes such teachers and shows them how they teach math and other skills to children with intellectual disabilities within the CSO.

And in other CSOs, training can also go from observations to active participation. For instance, APAC invites students studying SPED to undertake their professional practice within the CSO. This hands-on experience allows aspiring educators to gain practical skills while contributing to the work being done at APAC.

While most CSOs charge for teacher training, some choose to offer it for free, aiming to reach as many schools as possible. Nuevo Amanecer exemplifies this approach by extending invitations to teachers from all schools that have students with cerebral palsy. The training covers various topics, explaining cerebral palsy, the role of communication in learning, and practical accommodations that can be implemented at both the school and classroom levels. They usually receive about 70, and in the previous academic year, they trained 82 teachers. An additional advantage of the broad reach, as highlighted by Mariana, is that numerous schools learn about Nuevo Amanecer. Consequently, if they receive a new student with cerebral palsy, they can refer them to this CSO for assistance.

Some CSOs shared their commitment to shifting the focus of teacher training from a specific disability to encompassing diversity, with a particular emphasis on integrating UDL principles. These initiatives are still in their early stages, as UDL can be challenging for teachers to grasp and implement effectively. To facilitate the process, CSOs strive to introduce strategies that not only benefit their beneficiaries but also serve as a means of promoting UDL across classrooms. Isabel from Capys shared how they approach such training.

> ***Isabel:*** We are working towards the universal design for learning, and since we primarily engage with teachers, we approach it through cognitive accessibility. One of our key strategies is teaching about easy reading or understandable language. While it may not always be feasible to implement easy reading procedures in schools due to resource limitations, understanding the concept of understandable language is crucial. We make pictograms more visible and provide resources such as easy dictionaries to help teachers explain difficult words in a simpler way. Our focus is on cognitive accessibility, which benefits all students by making complex knowledge more accessible and understandable for everyone.
>
> *Vamos en camino al diseño universal de aprendizaje y como nos dirigimos mucho a los profesores lo hacemos a través de la accesibilidad cognitiva. Entonces una de nuestras claves es enseñar lo que es la lectura fácil o el lenguaje comprensible porque al final no se va a hacer una lectura fácil, porque requiere de un procedimiento y la escuela no va a brindar esos recursos, pero sí entender que es un lenguaje comprensible, hacer visible los pictogramas, recursos como el diccionario fácil para que sepan cómo explicar una palabra que es difícil en un sentido más fácil. Damos recursos, sobre todo orientados a la accesibilidad cognitiva que al final es un recurso que es para todos porque lo que haces es hacer lo más sencillo un conocimiento difícil, sirve para todos los alumnos.*

Certain CSOs prioritize teacher training in rural areas, recognizing that these regions often lack information and comprehensive inclusion practices. Punto Seis emerges as a notable example of this approach. One of their main projects concerns the development of a community center called *Centro de Formación Integral Ayuuk* in Rural Oaxaca, with the goal of fostering IE and inclusive culture within the community. Punto Seis takes the initiative to identify schools, provide training, raise awareness, and engage in various activities to promote inclusion. This project holds particular significance for the CSO's founder, Juventino, as he is an indigenous

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individual with a visual impairment. Juventino perceives this undertaking as his crucial mission, driven by the desire to make a meaningful impact in his native community.

Another CSO representative and a blind person, Cristal, also highlighted her efforts as part of ICEVI to visit underprivileged states and rural areas where inclusive practices for children are lacking. She mentioned that ICEVI provides training sessions to teachers and donates materials in these areas. Cristal shared exciting details about an upcoming collaborative project between ICEVI and another international CSO called FOAL: "I am planning to organize a teacher training program in Chiapas with FOAL, where we will train educators who can then act as facilitators to train parents and teachers in regular schools to support children with disabilities. The aim is to address the lack of professional training in the region and empower local educators to enhance inclusive practices." [*Estoy planeando con FOAL llevar una formación de formadores a Chiapas, donde se tenga docentes formados que sean replicadores para formar a papás y formar a profesores de la escuela de educación regular para apoyar a los niños porque no hay una formación profesional ahí.*]

Several CSOs also discussed challenges associated with teacher training. One of them is the annual rotation of teachers which poses a difficulty in ensuring continuity in the training efforts. Juventino discussed this issue within the context of his rural community in Oaxaca, while Mariangie echoed the same concern for schools in Mexico City. The constant turnover of staff makes it challenging to sustain the impact of training initiatives from year to year.

Another challenge highlighted in the interviews revolves around the tendency for SPED teachers and support teachers to be more proactive in seeking out training opportunities compared to regular teachers. It was observed that regular teachers generally display less interest in learning about disability topics and pursuing professional development in IE.

*Congresses*

Apart from smaller sessions and courses, some CSOs organize big congresses once a year or once a few years where they invite teachers, principals, parents and other interested parties to learn about various topics pertaining to disability and inclusion. Instead of a general discussion, I would like to highlight 2 particular cases – congresses organized by COTII and by IPPLIAP.

Rosy the CEO of COTII shared the story of their annual congress, which was initiated in honor of her late spouse who was a passionate activist and father of a child with autism. After his passing, many people worldwide reached out to Rosy to offer condolences and inquire about his legacy. In response, a conference was organized in his memory in 2009, which attracted over 800 participants from various countries. The conference became a recurring event, transitioning to an annual format in 2015 due to demand. It is usually attended by 700-800 individuals, with some instances exceeding a thousand participants.

COTII extends invitations to teachers from all states to attend the congress and provides a limited number of stipends to support both teachers and parents in their attendance. One of the key components of the congress is the TEA Talks section, which primarily focuses on raising awareness. COTII actively invites individuals with autism to participate in these talks, creating a platform for their voices to be heard. Rosy, the CEO, added, "it has been two years since we started doing TEA Talks, and during these two years, children with ASD have participated and shared their experiences, which is very beneficial for all the families who listen to them." [*ya van dos años que lo hacemos y en los dos años han participado chicos con TEA y ellos hablan sobre algo lo que ellos viven y es muy muy bueno para todas las familias que escuchan*.]

Mercedes, the CEO of IPPLIAP, shared another impactful example of their annual congress called *Señalees* and designed as a week-long training event for teachers in the country.

IPPLIAP invites experts from Mexico and other countries to deliver conferences and workshops.

Initially, it solely focused on Deaf education, but they recently expanded the scope and now they

alternate between dedicating one year to Deaf education and the next year to IE for all

disabilities. An interesting insight shared by Mercedes is that in the early congresses, they mostly

invited speakers from the US to share their experiences, but then they shifted their focus to Latin

American countries because their experiences and contexts are more compatible with Mexico.

> *Mercedes:* Initially, we invited a lot of people from the United States, such as teachers, Deaf schools' principals, and Deaf individuals, to give lectures and workshops. However, as we gained more experience, we realized that the reality portrayed by the United States was very different from our own. So, we started looking into how this same model was being implemented in other Latin American countries. We began inviting specialists in Deaf education from Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile. Through these interactions, we also got to learn about experiences that could be more easily replicated by teachers here in Mexico.
>
> *Primero invitábamos a mucha gente de Estados Unidos (maestros, directores de escuelas de Sordos, Sordos de Estados Unidos) para dar las conferencias, los talleres. Y luego con la experiencia nos fuimos dando cuenta 'bueno sí, pero Estados Unidos nos pinta una realidad muy lejana a nuestras posibilidades.' Entonces empezamos a ver qué pasa, cómo estaban implementando este mismo modelo en otros países de Latinoamérica. Y empezamos a invitar especialistas en educación Sorda de Brasil, de Colombia, de Argentina, de Uruguay, de Chile. Y empezamos a también conocer esas experiencias que a lo mejor podían ser más replicables por los maestros aquí en México.*

The majority of teachers invited to the congress are from public schools, and in 2021,

there was a notable increase in the attendance of regular school teachers, accounting for

approximately 55% of participants. This was unusual as previous congresses typically had a

higher percentage of SPED teachers. Overall, throughout the CSO's history, they have

successfully trained over six thousand teachers across the country.

### Study programs

Several CSOs also discussed their experiences in developing and launching diverse study

programs. In most cases it concerns diploma courses offered either independently by the CSOs

or in collaboration with universities. The topics covered range from specialized subjects like communication and UDL to training support teachers for mainstream classrooms. Marifer from IDEA shared their past experience with a diploma program they launched in Guadalajara dedicated to addressing specific needs in the classroom. Initially, the program faced challenges getting support from schools and teachers, with parents, support teachers, and therapists joining as participants instead. However, eventually, a school approached IDEA and enrolled 10-12 teachers, offering their venue for classes and the program turned out to be a big success.

In addition to diploma programs, I also learned about two other types of study programs developed by other CSOs. One of them is a Massive Open Online Course (or MOOC) on IE offered by the OEI. The OEI took charge of the instructional design and was planning to offer it through the National Technological Institute of Mexico (*Tecnológico Nacional de México*). Chandel, Education and Culture Coordinator, shared the concept and purpose of the course.

> *Chandel:* We want the content to no longer reproduce stereotypes or romanticize inclusion. We are working with disabilities, but we also work in terms of inclusion with indigenous people, people with exceptional abilities, visual and hearing impairments, and I believe there's one on migrants. The goal is to create a MOOC for people who are not experts in inclusion topics, so they can take this self-paced course on inclusive education. *Queremos que los contenidos no reproduzcan más estereotipos, o que romanticen la inclusión, estamos trabajando con discapacidad, pero también trabajamos en término de inclusión con personas indígenas, personas con aptitudes sobresalientes, discapacidad visual, auditiva y creo que hay uno de migrantes. Y lo que se busca es que sea un MOOC para personas que no son expertas en temas de inclusión que puedan tomar ese curso autogestivo sobre educación inclusiva.*

The second example is a comprehensive university program developed by AMEPDIVI. It is a Specialization in Visual Disability, Interculturality, and Education designed as a postgraduate program, comparable to a master's or a doctorate degree. After a rigorous approval process, the program has been authorized for three cohorts of students. The first cohort has already begun at the research and teaching center in Chihuahua, and AMEPDIVI has aspirations

to expand and replicate the program in other universities. The specialization addresses the question of what knowledge and skills a regular school teacher should possess to provide quality education to individuals with visual impairments. The curriculum encompasses various areas, such as early intervention, parent support, education ranging from primary to university levels, and ultimately focuses on achieving labor inclusion. By providing essential tools, the program seeks to ensure equal opportunities for employment, recreation, and further education for visually impaired individuals. Importantly, through this postgraduate program AMEPDIVI aims to address the knowledge gap resulting from the current absence of specialized educators proficient in visual impairments.

### *Unique project: creating a national network of teachers*

In this chapter, special attention should be given to the pilot project called *Aulas Incluyentes* [Inclusive Classrooms] that is currently being developed by the OEI. This project stands out for its unique approach, as it deviates from traditional frameworks like teacher training courses, study programs, or congresses. The aim is to establish a nationwide network of teachers in Mexico, facilitating the exchange of experiences and best practices in IE. This should allow to bridge the knowledge gap among educators by connecting individuals from diverse regions and social backgrounds. For instance, teachers from Zacatecas and the State of Mexico will have the opportunity to collaborate, share their experiences, and exchange their strategies.

During the interview, Chandel mentioned that the project was going to be launched in 2023 and at the moment of the interview the OIE already had some schools interested in participating, located in Nuevo León, Querétaro, and the State of Mexico. Initially, the project will involve 6-10 schools from various states. Teachers will come together to share their experiences during the pandemic and beyond, followed by comprehensive training in IE. The

goal is to empower these teachers to disseminate their knowledge and practices among other educators in their schools, creating a cascading effect of IE.

The OEI future plans include expanding the project's scope by involving schools from other Ibero-American countries such as Uruguay, Cuba, Argentina, and Colombia. This expansion would facilitate the exchange of knowledge regarding IE and foster a broader network for ongoing collaboration and support. The project envisions the establishment of a platform where teachers can engage in idea exchange, seek guidance, and share best practices.

**Working with support teachers**

The impact of CSOs also extends to the collaboration with support teachers. Some CSOs choose to partner with support teachers of their beneficiaries to aid in developing curricular adaptations. Others extend their engagement by including support teachers in courses, training workshops, and conferences discussed in the previous subsection. Certain CSOs also recruit and train support teachers for specific students. Finally, there are also CSOs that embrace a multifaceted approach, encompassing some or all of these actions.

For example, CATIC not only works closely with specific support teachers to provide assistance in class adaptations, but also organizes training courses. Sometimes, these training sessions coincide with CATIC's camps for PwD, their siblings, and friends. During these camps, support teachers and regular teachers attend courses while the children engage in camp activities. Then the teachers put their learning into practice with the children with disabilities, while the siblings and friends attend separate workshops. Afterward, everyone gathers for a meal and participates in afternoon activities together.

Similar to CATIC, many other CSOs engage in training support teachers, some of them even go the extra mile by arranging specialized diploma programs explicitly designed for support

teachers. One notable example is the diploma program created by CEAA, which was designed to

develop support teachers referred to as MIT – *maestro de intervención terapéutica* [therapeutic

intervention teacher]. Raquel, the CEO, shared that at some point schools began admitting

students with disabilities under the requirement that they have a personal assistant or shadow

constantly present to monitor and assist them. Raquel emphasized that these assistants primarily

focused on managing the students' behavior to ensure they did not disrupt classes. So, parents

began hiring assistants solely for the purpose of monitoring their child while at school. Raquel

went on to share how they saw a unique opportunity in this situation and used it to benefit

children with disabilities.

> ***Raquel:*** I started looking around and said, 'Wait a minute. So many schools, and all of
> you pay for an assistant, and what are they doing? Just looking after them? No, send them
> over here, I'll educate them, to make the most of the time the assistant spends with the
> kids at school. I said, if we can work wonders with just one or two therapy sessions a
> week, imagine what someone who is therapeutically trained can do with six hours a day.
> And that's where it all began, and the diploma program was conceived.
> *Empecé a voltear para todos lados y dije espérate, tantas escuelas y todos ustedes pagan
> un asistente ¿y qué están haciendo? ¿Nadamas cuidándolos? Ah no, mándalas para acá,
> las voy a educar, para aprovechar el tiempo el que la asistente está con los chicos en la
> escuela. Dije si nosotros con una sesión o dos sesiones a la semana de terapias podemos
> hacer maravillas, imagínate, alguien formado terapéuticamente, con 6 horas diarias
> muchas maravillas más. Ahí empezó y se gestó el diplomado.*

In their diploma course, CEAA began training shadows to become effective support

teachers, using the time they spend with the children to enhance their educational progress.

CEAA provides training on creating curricular adaptations and accommodations, familiarizing

teachers with the curriculum of each academic grade, teaching them how to develop individual

student profiles, and ensuring they understand the specific health needs of the children they

support. Raquel emphasized that this comprehensive diploma program is open to all, including

parents, principals, and teachers, many of whom have already participated and benefited from it.

Five generations of support teachers (about 30 people in each one) have graduated from the program. Importantly, teachers are encouraged to share and multiply their knowledge rather than holding onto it. Raquel highlighted that CEAA promotes a mindset of giving and sharing, with the understanding that true wealth lies in imparting knowledge and not merely possessing it. Raquel also expressed her willingness to share the program's complete design and content with a university one day, hoping that they would adopt it as their own.

Some CSOs also talked about their involvement in the search and recruitment of support teachers for their students, followed by comprehensive training. For instance, Educación Especial Más identifies support teachers based on each student's unique profile and specific needs. To provide an example, Mariangie, the CEO, explained that if a child struggles with self-regulation and displays challenging behaviors, they actively seek out a support teacher who is an expert in emotional and behavioral management. On the other hand, if a student excels in behavior regulation but faces difficulties in expressing themselves, they search for a support teacher with strong language and communication development skills. Following the recruitment process, the CSO proceeds with training. The training includes both generic and personalized aspects. Initially, it focuses on approaches to strategies and shaping teachers' perspectives on disabilities, encouraging them to play an active role in reinforcing an inclusive view of disability. Subsequently, the training becomes tailored to individual cases, addressing specific needs like toilet training, handling epileptic seizures, or dealing with emotional and behavioral crises.

Similar to Educación Especial Más, IDEA takes a meticulous approach when it comes to recruiting support teachers. They offer their services to both families and schools, meaning that either the school can request a support teacher for a particular student or the family can do so for their child. Through their careful selection process, IDEA ensures a good match between the

support teacher and the student's needs. Marifer reflected on the significance of this work, "It is incredibly rewarding to witness the relief that families experience when they find the right person who can support their child. Even more gratifying is when they reach out to us again to share the news that 'my child is doing great, my child is happy, my child is learning, we have been with the support teacher for two years now.'" [*Es muy gratificante ver el alivio de las familias cuando encuentran a la persona indicada que pueda acompañar a su hijo, y es más gratificante cuando nos vuelven a hablar para decir 'mi hijo va súper bien, mi hijo está feliz, mi hijo está aprendiendo, ya llevamos dos años con la monitora'*]

In some cases, CSOs do not undertake the task of searching and recruiting support teachers themselves. Instead, it is the parents who take on this responsibility, while the CSOs focus on training the support teacher selected by the family. COTII is one of those CSOs. They not only instruct support teachers on disability awareness and adaptations for students with ASD but also emphasize the importance of open communication with the classroom teacher to ensure shared responsibility for the child's progress and reduce dependency on the support teacher.

Dependency on support teachers was a topic that emerged in several interviews. Yosedil from Abriendo Posibilidades also touched upon this issue, stating: "The support teacher is a transitional process to help the student eventually recognize the regular teacher as an authority figure and engage with the rest of the group. So, it is a serious mistake when this doesn't happen. Unfortunately, it is quite common, very common, sadly." [*El maestro sombra es un proceso de transición para que eventualmente el alumno reconozca el docente como figura de autoridad, se involucre con el resto del grupo. Es un gravísimo error cuando no sucede. Pero es bastante común, lamentablemente es bastante común.*]

Sometimes, the threat of this dependency is the very reason why certain CSOs choose not to collaborate with support teachers and instead concentrate on training regular teachers. These CSOs believe that true inclusion cannot be achieved if we continue to perpetuate the presence of support teachers in classrooms. Additionally, some CSOs, like APAC, decline to work with support teachers as they view it as unfair for families to bear the financial burden of this service. They argue that the government should take responsibility for covering this need, ensuring that parents do not have to hire additional teachers to support their child's school education.

Marifer from AMAD also acknowledged the concern of parents having to bear the cost of support teachers. However, they took a different approach to address this issue. While many CSOs train and supervise support teachers because they recognize that regular teachers will not implement necessary adaptations, AMAD trains support teachers to collaborate as a team with regular teachers and ensure the inclusion of all students, both with and without disabilities. So, their support teachers do not create adaptations specifically for a student with a disability, rather they strive to create an inclusive environment where every student is equally involved. Marifer clarified: "A child with a disability may require more attention, and we cannot deny that. That's why there is an additional adult in the classroom, not just to attend to the child, but to assist the teacher as well." [*Un niño con discapacidad necesita más atención, no lo vamos a negar, pero por eso hay un adulto más en el salón, pero para todos, no nada más para atender al niño.*]

This approach is relatively uncommon, with only one other CSO, CAPYS, mentioning that they adopt a similar strategy when working with support teachers. CAPYS also emphasize the importance of promoting collaboration between regular and support teachers within the classroom. Isabel explained that when support teachers assist regular teachers rather than solely

focusing on the individual student, it helps to diminish the visibility of the intellectual disability of the student included in that classroom.

Marifer from AMAD also explained that with this approach they aim to shift the mindset and demonstrate to schools that support teachers are essential and should be part of the permanent school staff, rather than external experts hired by parents. Such systemic change could be very beneficial to students with disabilities.

**Improving accessibility**

While only a limited number of CSOs address the issue of accessibility, their efforts play a crucial role in fostering inclusive environments by improving infrastructure and providing accessible materials in schools. Among these CSOs, Libre Acceso stands out due to its dedicated mission and work in promoting and ensuring accessibility. What also sets them apart is that they do not cater to a specific disability; instead, as a cross-disability DPO, they focus on enhancing accessibility for individuals with any disability.

Generally, there are two processes through which Libre Acceso initiates their work on accessibility in schools. The first is when schools themselves make a request for assistance, indicating a genuine interest in making necessary changes and becoming more accessible. In such cases, the inclusion department of the school contacts Libre Acceso to conduct an evaluation of their infrastructure and provide recommendations for improvement.

Laura, the President of Libre Acceso, shared that during their evaluation, they thoroughly examine the overall accessibility features of buildings, ranging from basic aspects like parking lots and entrances to more specific elements such as Braille indications. Their assessment encompasses various factors such as circulation between floors, determining the necessity of ramps, platforms, or elevators, as well as evaluating the type of flooring to ensure it is not

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slippery. Additionally, they assess the accessibility of classrooms, focusing on equal

participation opportunities for children with different disabilities. This involves examining if the

classroom doors are wide enough to accommodate wheelchair users and if desks are of suitable

height for individuals of shorter stature. Furthermore, they scrutinize signs, tactile maps,

evacuation routes, and various formats and procedures, ensuring they are inclusive.

Following the initial evaluation, Libre Acceso generates a report plan outlining the

specific requirements for compliance with current regulations. Laura clarified that the

determination of compliance/non-compliance is based on the existing legislation, not the CSO's

judgment. Once the school receives the assessment results, they can plan their budget and make

necessary preparations to implement the required adaptations. Libre Acceso can also offer

guidance on budget planning and assist in identifying priority changes or those that can be

implemented more easily. Moreover, they assist in finding specialists who can provide expertise

in specific adaptations. For instance, they can connect schools with civil safety specialists who

can help develop safety infrastructure and processes that are inclusive of PwD.

The procedure is similar when the process begins through a formal complaint to

CONAPRED (National Council to Prevent Discrimination) or the Human Rights Commission. In

such cases, CONAPRED oversees the process, ensuring that the necessary changes are

implemented in compliance with the law. The collaboration with CONAPRED is highly

significant for the work carried out by Libre Acceso in both public and private educational

institutions. Laura shared information about past projects as examples.

> *Laura:* We provided support to CONAPRED by conducting accessibility assessments of
> all the high schools in Mexico City. We also participated in assessing buildings of
> various private education institutions, including elementary, middle, and high schools,
> where access to education for PwD was being denied. Additionally, we accompanied
> CONAPRED when they received complaints regarding the violation of access to certain
> departments at UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico). We collaborated

with CONAPRED and the National Human Rights Commission to conduct accessibility assessments of different campuses and departments at UNAM to ensure that these buildings were accessible for students with disabilities. Some notable examples include the departments of Architecture, Psychology, Social Work, and the Language Center. *Hicimos el acompañamiento a CONAPRED de hacer una emisión de diagnóstico de accesibilidad a todos los planteles que conforman el colegio de Bachilleres a nivel Ciudad de México. Hicimos también la participación en distintos inmuebles de educación privada, de primaria, secundaria y preparatoria donde se negaba el servicio a personas con discapacidad en ámbito educativo. También estuvimos haciendo un acompañamiento a CONAPRED cuando recibió algunas quejas de violación a ingreso a determinadas facultades de la UNAM. Estuvimos haciendo una colaboración con CONAPRED y también con la Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos en hacer un diagnóstico de accesibilidad de diversos planteles de la UNAM para garantizar que estos inmuebles fueran accesibles para estudiantes con discapacidad. Por ejemplo, arquitectura, psicología, trabajo social, Centro de Idiomas; estos son las quejas emblemáticas.*

While Libre Acceso is a CSO dedicated to accessibility issues, other CSOs often address accessibility as part of their broader interventions in schools. Some CSOs acknowledged that they become aware of accessibility challenges only when they begin working to include specific students in regular schools. During their school visits, they identify certain barriers to address.

For example, Claudia from Ilumina shared that students with visual impairments may require Braille signs and brightly colored paint for better visibility. If there are steps or curbs, the CSO recommends painting them in bright yellow to help students with low vision distinguish them and avoid potential accidents. Claudia specified that the CSO proposes changes, and typically families collaborate with the school or implement the modifications by themselves. Many of these adaptations are homemade, like adding foam to posts to enhance safety. In cases where expensive or complicated accessibility accommodations are not feasible, Ilumina focuses on empowering students with skills to navigate such inaccessible spaces independently. For instance, they create specific routes for students to memorize and follow on their own.

Other CSOs mentioned that awareness-raising sessions, particularly those involving simulations, along with cultural change, can effectively highlight accessibility barriers for schools. Noela from Nuevo Amanecer shared that, after participating in disability simulators, some principals notice inaccessible areas in their schools, such as poorly constructed ramps or pathways obstructed by trees. In response, they express a commitment to implement changes and make the school more accessible for students with disabilities. The key benefit is that school staff realize and notice the barriers themselves as they put themselves in the shoes of PwD, which fosters a more proactive approach to creating accessible environments.

Another CSO, VIM, approaches infrastructure accessibility in a very unique way. Instead of focusing on modifying the physical environment to make it accessible, they prioritize teaching wheelchair users to navigate their wheelchairs in a way that enables them to overcome barriers independently. Empowering wheelchair users to be autonomous and adapt to the world as it is, is one of the distinctive features of this CSO. As Janett clarified, "Speaking of architectural aspects, it's easier for us with our approach to help our users navigate the world and adapt to it, rather than expecting the world to adapt to them. If the elevator is out of order, what do you do? You go down the stairs [in a wheelchair]." [*Hablando de la cuestión arquitectónica, es más fácil que nosotros con el modelo logremos que ellos se desenvuelvan en el mundo, se adapten al mundo a que el mundo se adapte a ellos. Si el elevador no sirve, ¿qué haces? Te bajas por las escaleras.*]

When it comes to accessible study materials, CSOs also make a contribution. While some CSOs are primarily dedicated to producing accessible materials, others engage in this work sporadically; most of them work with visual impairments. For instance, Cristal Vargas established her own CSO with the specific aim of creating and distributing a wide range of materials tailored for people with visual impairments. During our interview at their office, she

showcased an impressive collection of materials designed to facilitate the study of various

subjects, including math, geography, biology, and many others.

> *Cristal:* We manufacture a wide range of materials, from canes and styluses to rulers, geometry sets, and training kits like this one. This is our collection of educational support materials, ensuring that children have all the necessary tools. For example, we create storybooks that are available in both print and Braille, especially for children who are just starting to read. This way, reading can be a shared experience with parents, siblings without disabilities, classmates, and the materials are not limited to those specifically designed for children with disabilities.
>
> *Fabricamos desde bastones, punzones, regletas, juegos de geometría, cajas entrenadoras como esta, este es nuestro material didáctico de apoyo que el niño tenga todas las herramientas. Por ejemplo, los libros de cuentos que puedan ser en tinta y Braille, sobre todo para los niños que están empezando a leer, para que la lectura sea compartida con los papás y sus hermanitos que no tienen discapacidad, sus compañeros de clase y que no sean estos materiales o estos juegos específicos para niños con discapacidad.*

Continuing the conversation, Cristal emphasized that one should approach accessibility

work with universal design principles in mind. Universal design involves creating adaptations or

constructing structures with a range of characteristics that make them accessible to everyone,

including individuals with and without disabilities. For instance, easy-to-read books or subtitled

videos could benefit students with and without disabilities, or ramps should be constructed with

the understanding that they benefit not only wheelchair users but also pregnant women or parents

using strollers. By adopting universal design, accessibility becomes inclusive as it benefits a

broader spectrum of individuals.

Cristal also expressed her aspiration to make their accessible materials available in states

that lack the resources to acquire them. She intends to seek out a foundation that could enable her

to donate these materials to schools and establish a comprehensive database organized by grade

level and individual needs. This way, students and parents would have the opportunity to borrow

specific materials tailored to their requirements without additional financial investment.

In addressing the same challenge of families spending money on accessible materials, Ilumina has developed a unique solution. They introduced a course that teaches mothers how to create and modify materials themselves. While their children are attending therapy or specialized courses like Braille, Ilumina guides the mothers in crafting materials. For instance, if the children are studying parts of a flower or the rivers in Mexico, Ilumina teachers instruct the mothers on how to create tactile materials that can aid their children's comprehension of these subjects.

**Supporting families**

Almost all CSOs recognize the vital role parents play in the inclusion process and consequently engage with families to varying degrees. The dynamics of this collaboration are intricate, as families can serve as clients, equal partners, and beneficiaries. For example, CSOs have to respect and accommodate family's needs and wishes when they look for a school for their child. Simultaneously, CSOs build partnerships with families, assuming shared responsibility for the child's well-being as equals. CSOs also play a supportive role as they provide guidance and advice to families regarding their child's education and overall development. They impart knowledge, offer emotional and informational support, and even equip families with essential skills. Additionally, CSOs empower families by encouraging their active involvement in their child's education and advocating for their needs.

In Mexico, parents of children with disabilities frequently encounter a lack of support, leaving them with limited resources. CSOs often step up to address this gap and provide much-needed assistance in the absence of organized government services. These CSOs establish specialized programs, commonly referred to as 'Escuela para padres' [*School for Parents*], serving as a vital support system and a source of guidance for families.

> *Mariangie:* Families usually receive a diagnosis and are left adrift, with doubts and uncertainty. Only a few specialists take the time to thoroughly explain what they need in

a clear and understandable manner. Therefore, the establishment of the School for Parents, a containment workshop that allows caregivers to interact and support each other, has provided us with very good results. Caregivers can receive guidance and ongoing support from a specialist, while also benefiting from mutual feedback and support among themselves.

*Las familias, normalmente reciben un diagnóstico y quedan a la deriva, tienen dudas y quedan a la deriva, y muy pocos especialistas se toman el tiempo a con palitos y bolitas enseñarles qué es lo que requieren. Entonces esta apertura de Escuela para Padres, un taller de contención entre cuidadores, donde ellos mismos se pudieran retroalimentar, se pudieran contener siempre con la guía y el seguimiento de un especialista.*

Mariangie further explained that when families approach Educación Especial Más for the first time, the CSO prioritizes assessing their emotional well-being, as caregivers often experience burnout. Subsequently, the CSO offers an extensive training program to parents, given that many of them arrive with little to no knowledge about managing their children's emotions and behaviors, as well as handling aspects like nutrition and other health-related matters. Mariangie concluded by emphasizing the significance of empowering families to better navigate their challenges and build a more positive environment for their children.

Along with Educación Especial Más, various other CSOs also administer comparable programs and provide informational support and courses to parents. An example of this is CATIC, a CSO dedicated to AAC, which assists families in understanding various types of assistive devices. They allow parents to try out these devices and provide information on where they can be purchased. Yosedil from Abriendo Posibilidades further added that parents often seek their advice on a wide range of topics. These inquiries may vary from simple questions about the best pencils and crayons to purchase for their child, to more complex concerns on how to educate their child's classmates about the concept of neurodiversity.

When it comes to CSOs that work specifically with Deaf students, they typically offer specialized courses in Mexican sign language and various workshops designed to assist families.

Haydee, one of the founders of Inclusor, reiterated the importance of these initiatives, emphasizing their positive impact on enhancing communication and understanding within Deaf students' families.

In certain instances, CSOs also create materials such as videos and webinars with the intention of supporting parents. These resources are designed to be distributed to multiple families, allowing them to study and utilize them at their own convenience and pace. For instance, ICEVI creates technical documents or guidebooks that support professionals and parents in implementing IE. These resources encompass videos on rehabilitation, Human Rights, Orientation and Mobility, and learning the Braille system. Cristal highlighted the flexibility and accessibility these resources provide to parents seeking information and guidance, which is especially beneficial for communities situated in remote areas.

CSOs also play a vital role as allies for families in the process of including their children with disabilities in regular schools. They provide guidance on selecting an appropriate school, making initial contacts, and navigating any obstacles or complaints within the system. Rosy from COTII shared that they advise parents on fostering effective communication with the school to prevent stigmatization and low expectations for their children.

Furthermore, Adriana from Declic expressed the importance of integrating parents and education professionals in the same training courses, instead of separating them. She explained that this approach facilitates improved understanding, as it mitigates situations where professionals may unjustly blame parents for their child's behavior or lack of progress. By studying together, parents have the opportunity to grasp the strategies employed by professionals, while professionals gain insight into the experiences and challenges faced by

parents. Declic's experience underscores the positive impact of a collaborative learning environment, as it promotes empathy, mutual understanding, and better support to PwD.

Ultimately, according to many CSOs, empowering families and involving them as active participants in the field of IE is crucial for achieving true inclusion. Without them, the process remains incomplete and the goal of IE cannot be fully achieved.

> *Ofelia:* I believe that parents are the most important factor. If we reach the parents, if they understand what we are doing, regardless of the school they are in or whatever happens, if the parents understand and support us, then the school becomes less relevant.
> *Creo que lo más importante son los papás. Si llegas al papá, si el papá entiende lo que estamos haciendo esté en la escuela en la que esté, pase lo que pase, si el papá lo entiende, si los tenemos a ellos, ya la escuela ya no nos importa.*

Andale para Oír, like many other CSOs, have arrived at this realization based on negative experiences with parents who were not actively involved in their child's progress and inclusion. CSO representatives emphasized that when parents take a passive role and rely solely on the CSO to handle everything, true inclusion of their children with disabilities becomes nearly impossible to achieve. As a result, many CSOs actively work to encourage parents to be more involved, not only in their child's education but also in various aspects of their lives, such as getting to know their friends or supporting their child' skill development at home.

CSOs like AMAD, for instance, actively engage parents in tutoring and activities they undertake with their children with disabilities. By doing so, parents are encouraged to view the process as a shared responsibility rather than solely relying on the CSO.

> *Marifer:* In supporting families, the idea is to overcome the medical model of 'you bring your child to therapy, I fix them, and after an hour, I hand your child back to you and you leave.' Here in the tutoring sessions, parents are present, and what they do is learn with their child and observe their skill development. So, they are actively involved during the session, and it becomes a session for the entire family rather than just for the child. Agreements are made to prioritize specific skills, such as learning to tie shoelaces, and it is done together so that parents can continue teaching and practicing it in their daily lives.

*En el acompañamiento a las familias, la idea es superar el modelo médico, de 'tú me traes a tu hijo a terapia y yo te lo arreglo y luego después de una hora te entrego a tu niño y te vas.' Aquí en las tutorías los papás están presentes y lo que hacen ellos es aprender con su hijo a ver la adquisición de habilidades. Entonces están presentes durante la sesión y más que una sesión para los chicos es una sesión para la familia. Entonces se hacen acuerdos para que 'ok ahorita nuestra prioridad es que se aprenda a amarrar las agujetas', 'okay, vamos a hacerlo juntos para que tú en el día a día lo enseñes a amarrarse las agujetas y ver en qué momentos tienes que practicarlo'.*

Various CSOs recognized the value of involving parents in therapies and other aspects of their child's development. However, unlike AMAD, these CSOs arrived at this realization as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, when they were compelled to adapt their working methods. As CSOs were unable to provide in-person therapies and services to PwD, parents became the crucial connection between CSOs and PwD. And as CSOs observed positive outcomes through this collaboration, they recognized the potential of working with parents.

For instance, in COTII, therapists facilitated joint sessions with parents and children during the pandemic, guiding them through exercises and activities. Many parents got actively involved and were surprised to discover that their children were already capable of certain things they were unaware of. This practice proved so beneficial because it ensured consistent parental involvement, which was often challenging to achieve in traditional one-on-one therapy sessions due to time constraints or limited attendance from parents.

Rosy, the CEO of COTII, concluded that the close collaboration with parents during the pandemic led to remarkable outcomes. Based on their assessment, 90% of the children with ASD showed significant progress compared to their previous levels. COTII was able to quantitatively measure and track these advancements. Notably, the few cases where progress was limited were attributed to a lack of parental involvement or willingness to participate in the process.

Claudia from Ilumina also expressed that the pandemic served as a catalyst for recognizing the significance of family empowerment, although they had already initiated steps in

that direction a couple of years earlier. She shared that, during the pandemic, they had to adjust their approach and materials, encouraging families to engage with their children on their own. This adaptation made the organization more flexible and helped them recognize the hidden opportunities of involving caregivers in the child's development.

The recognition that families have the capacity to actively contribute to IE was one of the key findings related to the pandemic. Families themselves also came to understand the importance of their involvement, realizing that they cannot and should not solely rely on CSOs for ongoing support. Noelia from Nuevo Amanecer pointed out, "Now, for us, families are like our right arm and our left arm because we don't want to create dependency on the organization. Instead, we want them to see us as a transitional place, a stepping stone in their journey." [*Ahora sí que para nosotros las familias son nuestro brazo derecho nuestro brazo izquierdo, porque no queremos crear una dependencia con el instituto, sino que nos vean como un lugar de paso*.]

In addition to engaging parents in therapies and tutoring, empowering parents can encompass various other forms and approaches. It can involve providing parents with a theoretical foundation to understand disability and disability rights, enabling them to advocate effectively for their child. It can also encompass the process of setting boundaries and assisting their child in developing the skills necessary to navigate social norms, as shared by Raquel from CEAA. In some cases, it may involve profound emotional work, where CSOs support parents in processing their child's disability and fostering acceptance and active engagement.

For instance, Marifer, the CEO of IDEA and a mother of a child with a disability, is also one of the cofounders of PHINE (*Padres de Hijos con Necesidades Especiales*), a CSO that serves as a network for parents of children with disabilities. Within PHINE, parents come together to exchange experiences, provide support, and collectively take action to enhance their

children's lives. Marifer stressed that family empowerment should not be about instilling a

fighting mentality, but rather creating a sense of support and solidarity.

> *Marifer:* If families were more educated and empowered in a positive sense, not in a confrontational sense, but in terms of being confident in acceptance of their children, there would be many more opportunities for families themselves to make changes within institutions. It shouldn't solely rely on CSOs; families are the primary drivers of change. That's where PHINE comes into play. Its purpose is precisely to transform parents, to move away from a victim mentality and egocentrism of 'Why me? Now give me, solve my problems,' to reach a point where they say, 'This is how it is, and what can I do to make it better?' and then actually taking action and achieving changes for their own family. It's not about conquering the world but transforming things for their own child and family. That's one of the main challenges.
> *Si las familias estuvieran mucho más capacitadas, empoderadas en el buen sentido, no en el sentido guerrillero, sino estar seguros en la aceptación de sus hijos, habría muchas más oportunidades de que la propia familia lograra cambios dentro de las instituciones, no dejarlo todo a las asociaciones y a las organizaciones, o sea, las familias son las principales promotoras de los cambios. Te hablo un poco de PHINE, la razón de ser es justamente poder transformar a los padres, dejar de estar en el victimismo y dejar de estar en el egocentrismo, de ¿porque a mí? ahora denme, ahora resuélvanme, ay la vida como sufro' a realmente llegar a un punto en el cual digas esto así es, y ¿qué tengo que hacer para que esto sea mejor? y hacerlo y lograr cambios para la propia familia, no se trata de ir a conquistar el mundo, pero transformar las cosas para mi propio hijo y la propia familia, ahí está uno de los principales retos.*

PHINE also serves as a platform for parents to advocate for their children's rights and

engage in political action. However, the specific topic of activism and the impact of CSOs on

policy and other forms of engagement with the government will be examined in greater depth in

the following and final section of this chapter.

**Political engagement and activism**

Collaborating with the government and governmental institutions is a significant aspect

of the work undertaken by CSOs, as they recognize the crucial role of policymakers in the field

of IE. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the relationship between CSOs and the government in

Mexico has historically faced challenges. Understanding this context is vital to comprehend the limited engagement of CSOs with the government as a means to advance disability rights.

In general, most CSOs tend to play a consultative role with government officials and institutions. They often participate in conferences, roundtables, and advisory meetings, providing their expertise on specific topics. For instance, Libre Acceso has established a strong relationship with the government, and government entities often turn to them for their insights and recommendations regarding accessibility. Laura, the President of the CSO, further clarified.

> ***Laura:*** As CSOs we act as allies to fulfill what is established by law and also as advisors to the authorities, without necessarily labeling ourselves as being against the authorities. […] For the past 33 years, our goal has been to work as a team, not in complicity, but as a team. When a transportation service project is proposed, we verify its accessibility because the authorities are not necessarily obliged to know everything. They should always seek advice from experts who can provide input from people with disabilities. By collaborating, we can develop projects that take into account different perspectives. *Las organizaciones fungimos como aliados para cumplir lo que está en ley, pero también como asesores para la misma autoridad porque no necesariamente etiquetarnos de que estamos en contra de la autoridad. […] Estos 33 años lo que hemos buscado es hacer equipo, no complicidad, sino equipo. Se emite un proyecto de servicio de transporte, verificar que sea accesible, porque la autoridad tampoco está obligada a saber de todo, siempre debe acercarse de asesores que le digan: 'oye, voy a hacer tal insumo, ¿qué opinan persona con discapacidad? Okay. ¿Qué opinas experto?*

Specifically in the field of IE, Libre Acceso has been providing consultation to CONADIS (National Council for the Development and Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities) and has actively engaged in numerous meetings with the SEP to collaborate on various projects, including those related to educational infrastructure.

In addition to addressing accessibility concerns, CSOs are also actively involved in curriculum discussions. As an example, the OEI was recently invited to take part in the initial stages of determining a new curriculum framework, which included engaging in conversations and roundtable discussions. This way the CSOs get to contribute to shaping education policies.

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Claudia from Ilumina highlighted that although their main focus is not political activism, they understand the importance of active involvement in advising, advocating for rights, and contributing to laws and policies. For instance, she mentioned their participation in roundtable discussions during the education reform process. Additionally, Ilumina is actively involved in ensuring the timely and appropriate provision of accessible books for students with disabilities. Claudia shared that students often face delays in receiving their books, with some not even receiving them until halfway through the school year or later. To address this issue, Ilumina has taken proactive steps to push CONALITÉ and the SEP to provide books promptly and in suitable formats. They have also assisted families in filing complaints with the National Human Rights Commission. As a result of their efforts, by the time of the interview, many students had already received their books on time for the school year 2022-2023.

As another aspect of collaboration with the government, several CSOs shared their involvement in shaping specific disability-related laws. For instance, Rosy, the CEO of COTII, is a member of the Autism Law Commission in Monterrey. She had played a role in drafting autism law that was adopted in certain states of Mexico, although rejected at the federal level. Rosy further elaborated on the challenges faced in getting the legislation approved at the federal level: "they always find reasons to oppose it, mainly due to the financial investment required. Accepting this necessity implies allocating resources specifically for this population. As the government does not want to accept its responsibility, they reject it. It has been rejected three times already." [*siempre le están viendo 'peros' por el hecho de que implica inversión de dinero. El aceptar que existe esa necesidad implica que haya un recurso que se dedica directamente a esta población. Como el Gobierno no quiere aceptar su responsabilidad la rechazan. Ya van tres veces que la rechazan.*]

Abisaí from Educación Incluyente also emphasized their active collaboration with state and municipal governments to safeguard the rights of Deaf individuals. They have been also involved in advocating for reforms to the Education Law of Jalisco, specifically focusing on ensuring IE for Deaf individuals.

It is worth noting that collaborations between CSOs and the government, as seen in the case of COTII and Educacion Incluyente, as well as through interviews with other CSOs, mostly take place at the local level, with minimal engagement at the federal level. A few CSOs explained that it is due to the fact that, unlike local governments, the federal government is often inaccessible and reluctant to collaborate with the third sector, a finding consistent with the literature review presented in Chapter 2.

That said, there are some exceptional cases where CSOs engage at both the local and federal levels. One such example is AMAD directed by Marifer. At the federal level, AMAD actively participated in the creation of the Strategy of Inclusive Education, discussed briefly in Chapter 2. They also conducted training sessions on disability for the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of the Congress) and submitted two legislative initiatives to the Senate, specifically focusing on the inclusion of support teachers as part of the school staff (their perspective on support teachers will be explored further in Chapter 7). At the state level, AMAD participates in networks of disability CSOs and proposes initiatives. For instance, they advocated for the establishment of a regulation for the disability law in the state of Puebla, where AMAD is based.

During COVID-19, there were also significant collaborations between CSOs and the government, particularly in the form of webinars and conferences related to IE. For instance, Declic was approached by the SEP to deliver free lectures and talks on inclusion. They also

organized webinars for the Heads of Special Education Departments across the country. Similarly, the OEI collaborated with CONAPRED to conduct three cycles of seminars on IE.

CSOs were also invited by the government to contribute to the content development for *Aprende en Casa* [Learn at Home], an initiative aimed at providing distance education through television, internet, radio, and free books in response to school closures during the pandemic. As an example, interpreters from Inclusor, including Laura who participated in the study, actively took part in *Aprende en Casa* by making the content accessible in sign language. Additionally, other CSOs created specific content and classes for the *Aprende en Casa* platform. One of these CSOs was the OEI, and Chandel mentioned that they collaborated with the Federal Educational Authority in Mexico City to create a total of 80 video capsules covering subjects like Spanish, math, and socio-emotional skills. She shared, "The goal is to ensure that students can access educational content with or without internet connectivity. And these capsules are not only intended for the pandemic school but also for the renewed school that embraces a hybrid approach." [*Lo que se busca es que las y los estudiantes puedan acceder a los contenidos educativos con o sin conectividad y aparte que no solamente sirvan para una escuela pandémica, sino también para la escuela renovada que nos invita al enfoque híbrido.*]

Despite the positive instances of collaboration mentioned, the overwhelming majority of CSOs shared examples of negative experiences with past government projects or discussed laws and initiatives they were involved in that eventually failed or were discontinued. An illustrative case is AMEPDIVI, which partnered with the SEP to develop adapted books for students with visual impairments. They dedicated six months to the project, but the authority rejected the proposed adaptations and, in the end, the accessible books were never printed.

Another example involves CATIC, who collaborated with the government on a free-access online platform that provided a valuable resource for teachers. This platform allowed teachers to complete a brief and user-friendly survey, which would then generate personalized recommendations and a comprehensive list of equipment and technology to assist their students. It included explanatory videos and relevant reference materials. Unfortunately, with the change of government in 2018, the webpage was simply taken down, leaving their collaborative efforts in vain. Marcela recounted this experience with a deep sense of sadness and disappointment. "We put in a tremendous amount of work, but when the government changed, they took the webpage down. […] We still have the materials, but since it was a project paid for by the government, we cannot distribute it. We worked for them, and it belongs to them, even though they don't use anymore. [*Hicimos un trabajo enorme y a partir de cuando pasó el gobierno la quitaron. […] Tenemos el material, pero como fue un trabajo pagado por el gobierno, nosotros no podemos difundirlo, como que trabajamos para ellos y es de ellos, aunque ellos ya ahorita no lo usan*.]

Similar to CATIC, numerous CSOs shared anecdotes of terminated projects that were directly linked to the current AMLO administration. During interviews, the majority of study participants expressed significant criticism towards this administration, highlighting its negative impact on disability rights and civil society as a whole. Consistent with the literature review, interviews revealed that the AMLO administration has actively worked to undermine CSOs by terminating collaborative projects, closing supportive institutions, and enacting laws that impede the financial sustainability of the third sector. Some CSOs even regarded their ability to survive both the pandemic and the AMLO administration as their greatest achievement. To protect the participants, specific quotes regarding these criticisms will not be provided.

Overall, most representatives from CSOs expressed a shared sentiment of sadness and frustration when talking about collaborations with the Mexican government, regardless of the party or administration in power. Many felt that their past efforts to collaborate were in vain. Marcedes from IPPLIAP highlighted that working with the government felt like going against the current. She explained that years ago IPPLIAP made sincere efforts to engage with the SEP, but eventually decided to stop as they saw no value in wasting their time and resources.

> *Mercedes:* The experience wears you out because there are no changes, and they simply say, 'Oh, how nice', without actually implementing any changes. I remember when the SEP invited CSOs to discuss SPED. We all shared our work and experiences, but after numerous trips to the center of Mexico City, you know how it is. The SEP is doing this, these are their statistics, and they were not open to any changes, needs, or anything at all. You think, 'Ugh, I wasted my time, weeks coming here every morning, and they did absolutely nothing, nothing at all.' Why do they even invite us? Just to say that they did it, that they had conversations with the CSOs, that they are aware of the needs.
> *La experiencia te agota porque no hay cambios y te dicen 'Ay, qué bonito' y no hacen ningún cambio. Me acuerdo nos invitó la SEP a las asociaciones de la sociedad civil para dialogar sobre la educación especial y todos exponíamos lo que hacemos y tal y al final después de mil veces que fuimos hasta el centro, ya sabes. La SEP está haciendo esto, estas son sus estadísticas, no se abrieron a ningún cambio, ninguna necesidad, ni nada, nada. Dices, 'híjole, perdí tiempo, cuantas semanas en venir acá toda la mañana para que no haga nada, nada de nada'. ¿Para qué nos llaman? Para decir que lo hicieron, que ya hablaron con las organizaciones, que ya conocen las necesidades.*

Marifer, a representative of both IDEA and PHINE and a parent of a PwD, expressed a similar sentiment. While acknowledging some accomplishments made by other parents of PwD within the legislative sphere, she emphasized the lack of concrete changes. As a result, she personally questions the purpose of engaging in such work and instead finds more value in working directly with individuals and families, effecting change from the grassroots level. She said, "This is my personal opinion, but I won't waste my time on such actions. Surely, important precedents are being set, I have no doubt about that. Everything that is done holds value, and you leave behind seeds, undoubtedly. However, personally, I prefer to focus on the here and now."

[*Esto si es bien personal, pero no voy a perder el tiempo ahí, seguramente se están dejando antecedentes importantes, no lo dudo, todo lo que se hace tiene un valor, y vas dejando semillas, eso sin duda, pero yo personalmente soy del aquí, y el ahora.*]

Ultimately, Marifer's perspective on driving change from bottom up was echoed by Marcela from CATIC and Raquel from CEAA, among others. They all shared the belief that relying on their own resources and the collective efforts of regular people and CSOs is the key to making a real difference. They emphasized that while the government may not hold as much significance, focusing on initiating change at the family and school levels is paramount.

> **Raquel:** We have functioned without government, with government, and despite the government. In other words, the outcome is there, but the real challenge lies in working with teachers who exhibit significant differences among themselves and working with parents who also exhibit diverse backgrounds. Those are the major challenges. *Hemos funcionado sin gobierno, con gobierno y a pesar del gobierno, o sea, el resultado está, pero el trabajar con los maestros que tienen mucha diferencia en ellos y el trabajar con los padres que tienen toda la diferencia en ellos, esos son los desafíos mayores.*

The opposition of the federal government and the discussions surrounding it shed light on the underlying reasons for the relatively weak disability activism in Mexico. While there are instances where CSOs engage in activities that can be considered as forms of activism, such as advocating for laws, defending disability rights, and promoting various initiatives, they often hesitate to participate in more overt forms of activism due to the challenges previously discussed.

Parental activism also plays an important role, as evidenced by numerous examples provided during interviews. Some study participants themselves exemplify parent activists who manage their own CSOs and strive to effect change on multiple levels. Additionally, parents who are not affiliated with CSOs may engage in organized activism through existing networks of PwD and in other cases, they may demonstrate activism in their everyday actions, such as advocating for their child in schools, medical facilities, and other relevant spaces.

Lastly, it is important to touch upon the subject of self-advocacy and activism within the disability community. During the interviews, all study participants expressed a shared perspective that disability activism in Mexico is currently weak. The primary factor attributed to this weakness is the lack of organization within the disability community itself. Rather than functioning as a unified collective, there are numerous disability groups with varying opinions, which makes it challenging to establish common ground and concerted action. These differences are not only present between groups representing different disabilities but also within those groups. As an illustration, Haydee and Laura from Inclusor highlighted the abundance of differences and conflicts within the Deaf community, posing obstacles to organized activism efforts. Haydee, a co-founder of the CSO and a Deaf person herself shared her perspective.

> *Haydee:* Sometimes there are differences among individuals within the Deaf community, and this causes the community to become fragmented and weakens our empowerment. As a CSO, we strive to promote the dissolution of these differences within the Deaf community, in order to have a stronger activism and empower ourselves as a community. There is a lack of serious activism and willingness to engage in dialogue and unite as a community to defend our rights.
> *A veces hay diferencias entre unos y otros, eso hace que se vaya separando la comunidad sorda y que el empoderamiento se debilite. A nosotros como organización, dentro de la comunidad sorda, nos gusta promover que esas diferencias que tenemos se diluyan para tener un activismo más sólido y empoderarnos más como comunidad. Falta activismo serio y voluntad para que si tenemos las diferencias -- dialogar y hacernos más fuertes como comunidad para defender nuestros derechos.*

Juventino, another participant, also offered valuable insights into the current state of activism. As an indigenous person with a disability, he himself is one of the key disability activists in Mexico. He particularly stands out due to his focus on the often invisible population of indigenous PwD. This intersectionality of his activism brings attention to a marginalized group that is often overlooked even within many disability-focused CSOs.

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Juventino shared that in his 20 years of activism he has observed multiple highs and lows

of disability movement; "At times, we make a lot of noise, but then we suddenly disappear from

the public spotlight. We are not always present." [*De pronto hacemos mucho ruido, pero de

pronto desaparecemos del foco público, no estamos*.]. He then explained that in his opinion ego

and pride pose significant obstacles to disability activism in Mexico. Echoing Haydee's

perspective, he emphasized the importance of transcending individualism and the inclination to

promote personal ideas. He drew a parallel to indigenous communities and their communal

thinking, underscoring the relevance of embracing such a mindset within disability activism.

> ***Juventino:*** As an indigenous person with a disability from Tlahuitoltepec, I can tell you
> that something that would yield significant results is to shift our thinking to another logic,
> to think from a communal perspective, to think collectively. Leaders should only
> accompany, not be the ones who speak on behalf of others. Nowadays, in social
> movements, there are always leaders who impose their will, leaders who are only there to
> attain public positions. That is the issue in my country.
> *Te puedo decir como indígena con discapacidad de Tlahuitoltepec, algo que daría mucho*
> *resultado es pensar desde otra lógica, pensar desde lo comunitario, pensar desde lo*
> *colectivo. Los líderes solo acompañan, no son los que van hablando. Y hoy en día en los*
> *movimientos siempre son líderes que imponen, líderes que solamente están ahí para*
> *poder llegar a un cargo público, ese es el asunto en mi país.*

He also explained this dynamic by highlighting the pervasive discrimination faced by

PwD. According to Juventino, when some of them rise as leaders and experience being

acknowledged by non-disabled individuals, there is a tendency to willingly accept a form of self-

oppression. This can be further compounded by financial incentives, particularly if they are

offered well-paying positions within the government. In such cases, the desire for financial

stability can sometimes overshadow their ideals and principles.

In conclusion, this chapter has illuminated the multifaceted efforts of CSOs in preparing

ground for IE. By actively contributing to the transformation of attitudes, bridging the

knowledge gap, fostering partnerships with support teachers, families, and policymakers, and

navigating the intricate landscape of activism, CSOs demonstrate a true commitment to

inclusion. These efforts not only unite diverse stakeholders but also illuminate the

interconnectedness of their roles in nurturing an IE landscape.

# CHAPTER 7: CSOS TAKING ACTION – DIRECT ENGAGEMENT WITH THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

This chapter will continue the exploration of CSOs' actions, with a specific focus on the advancement of IE directly within schools and other educational institutions. It will provide a detailed examination of the step-by-step process CSOs follow when including a student with a disability in mainstreaming. This process encompasses several phases, beginning with assessing a student's readiness for inclusion and then preparing them by imparting essential skills and tools to navigate mainstream settings. Then CSOs assist families in finding suitable schools and facilitating admission. Once a student is enrolled, CSOs continue their involvement by supporting the school in teacher training, designing accommodations, and addressing other concerns. Subsequently, CSOs engage in ongoing monitoring, tutoring to students, observations and feedback exchanges with teachers. Some of them extend their efforts towards more comprehensive transformations within schools where CSOs establish dedicated teams of professionals empowering them to implement IE policies and practices.

Subsequently, the chapter will shift to a separate discussion on Deaf education within the framework of IE. This is due to the fact that the distinct characteristics of Deaf students as a separate cultural and linguistic group require a slightly different approach. The chapter will also discuss CSOs that operate special schools and CAMs, explaining their distinctive strategies and the scope of their activities.

Lastly, the final section of the chapter will provide a brief overview of CSOs' collaborations with universities that encompass efforts to facilitate higher education opportunities and college experiences for PwD and other types of partnerships aimed at otherwise fostering IE.

**Inclusion of students with disabilities in regular schools**

Approximately two-thirds of the CSOs I interviewed actively participate in the endeavor to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream schools. While some CSOs have comprehensive IE programs, others only cover specific aspects of the process. A handful of CSOs prefer to cultivate stronger partnerships with individual schools, aiming to facilitate profound transformations within them. Conversely, other CSOs opt to engage with all schools where their beneficiaries are present or need to be included.

Although IE programs vary across different CSOs, a comprehensive analysis of the interviews allowed me to identify key overarching steps involved in the process. These steps include pre-inclusion, student preparation, school search, admission process, monitoring and evaluation, and all-school transformation. It is important to note that while some CSOs may focus solely on school search and assistance during the admission process, others may address all of these steps, albeit with varying methodologies. In this section, I will delve deeper into these distinctions and explore the diverse approaches employed by each CSO.

*Pre-inclusion student preparation*

Prior to the integration of their beneficiaries into mainstream schools, CSO representatives emphasize the importance of supporting children and young individuals in developing the necessary skills to thrive in a regular educational environment alongside their non-disabled peers. Some individuals acquire these skills as part of the therapies they are already receiving within the CSO, while others participate in specific programs designed to prepare them for inclusion. Additionally, in the case of CSOs operating SPED schools, it appears that two distinct approaches are prevalent. Those CSOs that exclusively provide education up to a specific level, such as primary or secondary school, support their students in transitioning to mainstream

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schools as a natural progression of their education. In turn, some other CSOs that offer all levels

of education, constantly evaluate their students to determine who is ready for mainstreaming.

Abriendo Posibilidades is an example of a CSO that operates a specific program called

the school simulator, specifically designed to facilitate the inclusion of pre-schoolers (2 - 6 years

old) into primary school. This program operates as a therapeutic environment, distinct from

formal education, providing specialized support and adhering to a schedule similar to a preschool

setting. When the child reaches the age of six or when both the family and the child feel

prepared, they smoothly transition from the school simulator to a regular school.

Regardless of the beneficiary's previous engagement with Abriendo Posibilidades,

whether it be through the school simulator, therapy sessions, or other forms of interaction, the

CSO conducts a comprehensive evaluation and develops an updated profile for each child. This

assessment aims to determine their readiness for inclusion. Following the evaluation, the CSO

meets with the family to discuss this profile, the advantages of mainstreaming, and the potential

challenges they might encounter. This process ensures that families are well-prepared and

informed about what to expect as they embark on the inclusion journey.

Other CSOs also mentioned conducting evaluations prior to including students. APAC

and Nuevo Amanecer, the two CSOs I interviewed that work with children with cerebral palsy

and operate their own CAMs, follow quite a robust evaluation approach. Both CSOs involve a

multidisciplinary team of specialists, including therapists from various disciplines, rehabilitation

experts, psychologists, neurologists, and other healthcare professionals, as well as teachers and

educational experts. That said, each CSO described their specific focus during these evaluations

in slightly different terms. For example, Nuevo Amanecer places the highest priority on the

health aspect, ensuring that there are no health-related circumstances that would hinder inclusion,

such as an upcoming surgery that would require bed rest and months of recovery. Subsequently, they take into account family dynamics, followed by considering the cognitive and social abilities of the individual for potential inclusion. Noelia explained: "Cognitive abilities alone do not have a significant impact, as we have seen children with significant cognitive challenges successfully attending regular schools, thanks to strong support systems from their families and social environments." [*Realmente la cuestión cognitiva social no influye tanto, porque tenemos chicos con muchos retos cognitivos que aun así se han ido a una escuela regular porque sabemos que tiene todo un sustento, sobre todo lo que es la familia y toda la parte social*.]

In turn, APAC discussed their approach called 'Valora' – a comprehensive assessment of adaptive skills covering 10 areas such as mathematics, motor skills, language, psychology, etc. This evaluation helps determine a child's readiness for regular school and identifies necessary support. APAC adopts a proactive approach by starting one year in advance to prepare students for inclusion in a regular school. They assess and identify students who will be included in the following school year at the beginning of the current year. This allows them to work with families and receiving schools throughout the year, ensuring a smooth and effective inclusion process and minimizing situations where students return to CAM after only a few months.

After the evaluation, APAC initiates the process of working with the student to enhance the necessary skills for successful inclusion. As an illustration, they shared that for preschoolers, this may involve promoting independence from the mother or primary caregiver and determining if additional support is required in the classroom.

While most CSOs do not have a year-long IE process like APAC, many do focus on preparing their students by equipping them with the necessary skills and tools. For example, Mariana from IPACIDEVI explained that their IE process begins at the secondary school level,

allowing students time to develop essential skills like Braille, orientation, and mobility before integration into mainstream education. The CSO recognizes that inadequate preparation may lead to significant struggles during IE. Therefore, they currently focus on intensifying skill development for primary school children to ensure they are fully prepared for a successful transition to regular schools.

### *School search*

When it comes to selecting a school for inclusion, CSOs adopt different approaches. Many CSOs have compiled databases of inclusive schools or schools that accept students with disabilities. These databases are typically built using feedback from parents over the years, as well as the CSOs' own experiences working with schools during teacher training and other collaborative initiatives. However, each CSO utilizes and relies on these databases differently. While such CSOs as Nuevo Amanecer view them as valuable resources that have proven helpful in guiding and supporting new parents through the inclusion process, others exhibit caution when employing such databases for new school searches. For instance, Ilumina and AMAD expressed concerns about potentially overwhelming schools. They noted that it may not always be feasible to approach the same schools repeatedly and request the inclusion of new students with disabilities as these schools may already have a significant number of such students.

Another frequently mentioned concern during interviews was the significant variation in experiences among students. What may have been effective for one family may not necessarily work for another. Karina from Atzan succinctly summarized this issue.

> *Karina:* We can have excellent experiences with one student in one school and not as good in another, because the teachers are different, the children are different, the challenges are different, and even though the school may have a methodology, it will vary for each child. So, we do make suggestions, we tell parents that a certain methodology will be beneficial, that this school is very big, etc.

*En una escuela nos puede ir excelentemente bien en términos de experiencia con un caso y con otro no, porque era diferente maestra, porque era diferente niño, porque eran diferentes retos y porque la misma escuela ofrece una metodología, pero en cada niño va a ser distinto, entonces sí hacemos sugerencias, les decimos yo sugiero que una metodología de este tipo le va a favorecer, esta escuela está muy grande, etc.*

Marifer, who is both a mother of a PwD and the CEO of IDEA, shared a similar perspective on these databases. While she acknowledged their usefulness as a starting point, she emphasized their lack of reliability. She pointed out that these databases are created based on subjective experiences of other families and there is no institution or mechanism that could objectively certify schools as inclusive. As a result, when a certain family has a positive experience with a school, they label it as inclusive, but it does not mean that it truly meets key criteria for inclusion.

During the interviews, representatives from other CSOs echoed a similar sentiment, acknowledging the subjective and unreliable nature of these databases while emphasizing their use as a source of guidance. Many highlighted the issue of school proximity, particularly in densely populated cities like Mexico City and Monterrey, where many schools listed in the database may be too far from where the family lives. For example, Claudia from Ilumina shared that their beneficiaries can come from Texcoco, from Ecatepec, from Tultitlán, places that are far apart. As a result, CSOs commonly advise and encourage families to conduct their own research and explore schools within their neighborhoods because lengthy commutes can be draining.

Some CSOs shared that previously they used to take on the responsibility of conducting the search and presenting families with options. However, over time, they recognized that this approach had its shortcomings. Parents tended to become overly dependent on the CSO and expecting them to handle everything, including advocating for their children and themselves. This realization prompted a shift in approach for many CSOs who now emphasize the

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empowerment of families. They encourage families to take the initiative, knocking on doors and

exploring options independently. Noelia from Nuevo Amanecer summarized this approach in the

following manner, "We strive for families to independently search for schools, taking into

account their schedules, their place of residence, and whether they have siblings in the same

school. We place great emphasis on families becoming self-advocates, seeking out the necessary

resources, while we serve as the support or foundation they need." [*Tratamos de que ellos solitos*

*busquen la escuela considerando sus tiempos, considerando donde viven, considerando si tienen*

*hermanitos en la misma escuela. Buscamos mucho el que las familias sean autogestoras, que*

*ellos busquen esos recursos y ya nosotros ser ese apoyo o ese sustento que ellos necesitan.*]

While asking families to search for schools, many CSOs still provide a lot of support

advising them on how to approach the search. Apart from asking parents to find schools that are

closer to their home and where they have other children, as mentioned by Noelia, they also tell

them what to pay attention to once they make the first contact and visit the school. For example,

Claudia from Ilumina shared that they tell mothers to visit various schools and pay attention to

both the physical accessibility and attitudes, i.e., how the school staff responds to them when

they tell them they have a child with a visual impairment. They also advise them on the language

to use talking about their child and their right to education.

> *Claudia:* We advise them to subtly advocate for their child's rights, rather than explicitly
> saying, 'It's my right.' Instead, we encourage them to say 'I know my child is of age to
> be included, and I believe he has the right to education just like any other child.
> Therefore, I am searching for schools.' By using this language of rights, it helps schools
> understand that parents are aware of their child's rights and have support behind them.
> That's the guidance we provide to them.
> Les decimos que sutilmente vayan con la bandera del derecho de su hijo, que no les digan
> 'es que es mi derecho', pero que les digan, 'yo sé que mi hijo ya está en edad de incluirse,
> sé que él como los demás tiene derecho a su educación, entonces estoy buscando
> escuelas', como que por ahí meterles, que mencionen esa palabra de derechos, para que
> las escuelas vean que ellos saben, que están respaldados, por ahí los vamos aconsejando.

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In some instances, CSOs also offer support by accompanying parents during their initial contact with schools. For instance, AMAD not only encourages parents to independently search for schools but also utilizes their database and assists in approaching schools with whom they already have an established collaboration. Marifer, the CEO, explained that they often accompany families during their initial school visits, essentially acting as a support team. This collaborative approach is beneficial as it helps open doors for families. Schools notice that these parents are entering not just as individuals, but "with an army behind them".

### *Admission process & introductions*

Once families have made their decision about a school and the school has accepted their child, the next stage begins, which involves collaborative preparation of the student and the school. This is the phase where CSOs often become heavily involved, although their approaches may vary significantly, similar to previous stages.

As an initial step, certain CSOs highlighted the importance of scheduling an introductory meeting with the school, usually involving the school principal. The purpose of this meeting is to formally introduce the CSO, explain how they can support the IE process, establish a working relationship, and begin the process of organizing the inclusion of a specific student. Some CSOs meet directly with the school, while others also invite the family; together they reach agreements and discuss the responsibilities of each party. This approach aims to foster key collaborations and emphasize the shared responsibility among the school, the family, and the CSO.

Some CSOs also utilize this meeting as a chance to familiarize themselves with the school and gain insights into their experience with disabilities in order to provide better support. For instance, Yosedil mentioned that during this initial meeting, they inquire about the types of students with neurodiversity the school has worked with, how they have implemented curriculum

adaptations, and who has overseen the process. But in a broader sense, CSOs leverage this opportunity to demonstrate to schools that they are there to assist and act as their allies.

The next step, in some cases, involves bringing the student to the school to facilitate their orientation and introduce them to teachers, school staff, and, in some cases, other students. For instance, Ilumina often arranges these sessions during summer vacations, prior to the start of classes. The primary objective is to address common concerns, such as the fear that a visually impaired child may be prone to accidents and thus requires constant accompaniment and protection. Ilumina challenges this stereotype by bringing the student to the school and empowering them to independently navigate the school environment. To achieve this, they devise specific routes leading from the entrance to classrooms, restrooms, and other essential areas. Ilumina provides the students with spatial references, allowing them to construct mental maps and navigate the school with confidence. Mastering such navigation not only fosters student autonomy and independence but also prevents potential accidents.

Another CSO representative, Noelia, also emphasized the shared concerns and anxieties that both schools and students experience when it comes to inclusion. To address these worries, Nuevo Amanecer takes a slightly different approach than Ilumina. Instead of bringing the student to the school before classes start, they prefer to bring them during the school year. This allows the student to enter some classes, meet their future teacher, and interact with their future classmates. Noelia explained that this practice has proven beneficial in alleviating anxiety for both the child and their classmates. It also gives the CSO the opportunity to observe and identify any specific areas that may require additional attention or support for the child. For example, they may notice that essential pictograms are missing or observe that the student faces challenges utilizing their alternative form of communication in the classroom, possibly due to shyness or

other factors. They also assess their emotional state during those visits, noting interactions during recess and whether the child exhibited signs of distress. All these observations help Nuevo Amanecer structure their individual sessions with the student to address their specific challenges.

Noelia further emphasized that when the students finally enter the school, they already have familiar faces. On their first day, other students and school staff recognize and greet them, which greatly reduces their stress levels, benefiting both the students and the schools.

Introducing the student to their future classmates before the inclusion process was mentioned by other CSOs as well. Different approaches were shared, such as incorporating it into awareness-raising sessions mentioned earlier or organizing separate activities. For instance, Ilumina asks their students how they would like to be introduced. Recently, one of their students chose to do it by email, so "he introduced himself in an email and said, 'Hi, I'm Juan, I like this and I'm passionate about languages. I have a cat named this, and I have a visual impairment. If we ever meet in the school yard, please tell me your name and who you are.'" [*se presentó en un correo y les dijo 'hola, yo soy fulanito, me gusta tal cosa, me encantan los idiomas, tengo un gato que se llama tal y tengo discapacidad visual, te pido que si en algún momento nos encontramos en el patio me digas tu nombre, quién eres y ya*.]

Another CSO, CATIC, adopts the practice of creating a video featuring the student, in which they introduce themselves and the CSO shares it with all the students in the school. This approach not only allows students to become familiar with the new student but also creates a platform for them to ask questions and resolve any doubts before meeting the student in person.

Marcela shared that in the video presentation, the student uses their communication device to introduce themselves, demonstrating that they can communicate effectively. Following this introduction, CATIC offers additional information and gives advice to the students tailored

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to different age groups. They try to foster an open dialogue, urging students to ask questions to prevent any awkward situations upon the new student's arrival. For instance, if a student eats through a gastric tube, CATIC tries to explain how it works to address any fears and misconceptions and explain to students how they could share meals together.

Once the student is enrolled in the school, CSOs begin a more hands-on approach. In many cases, they conduct awareness sessions for the entire school community and then focus on specific aspects directly related to the student's education. Targeted teacher training is often a key component, with CSOs closely collaborating with the student's regular teacher, the USAER teacher, or the support teacher. To facilitate effective support, some CSOs find it beneficial to create a student profile for the school, while others develop individualized education plans.

A student profile can take various forms. Some CSOs primarily provide information about the student's skills, abilities, challenges, and needs, while others aim to make it more personal, highlighting the student's personality alongside other characteristics. CEAA places great emphasis on this process and has even developed a dedicated course on creating such profiles. There, they focus on uncovering student's psychological characteristics, emotional characteristics, family background, likes and dislikes, abilities and academic skills. Parents play an active role in the profile creation process by providing valuable information about their child's likes, fears, triggers, what makes them happy or upset, and daily routines. Raquel emphasized that these comprehensive profiles greatly enhance teachers' understanding of their students, enabling them to see them as individuals, comprehend their learning styles, and effectively support their education.

Raquel also pointed out the importance of designing such a profile, specifically that it should be concise, easy to read, visually appealing (always using color printing), and include a

recent photograph of the student. Given the time constraints teachers face, it should be a quick and easy reference tool. CEAA usually advises parents to share the profile with as many teachers as possible, and they stress the need to update it regularly as student's preferences, skills, and characteristics evolve over time. Raquel also shared that during feedback sessions with teachers, 90% of them expressed how incredibly helpful they found the student profile, enabling them to truly see and understand their students for the first time.

When it comes to individual education plans, there are only a handful of CSOs that mentioned them. Capys was one of them and Isabel shared their comprehensive process for the development of such plans that often extend beyond the topic of education. Their approach revolves around placing the person at the center and establishing a support group to assist them. The composition of the support group is personalized, typically including six individuals such as family members and friends. The group's role is to provide guidance, support, and strategies tailored to the person's current stage of life, helping them achieve their goals. As the CSO works with individuals with intellectual disabilities, the selection of the support group can be done through methods like photos or verbal communication with a facilitator for those who have good verbal skills. Different facilitators coordinate and oversee the various projects within the plan, monitoring progress and evaluating at different stages. The CSO assists in defining long-term and short-term goals, as well as determining the tools needed to accomplish them. For example, if it is a primary school student whose goal is to make friends or play soccer, Capys identifies suitable resources and devises strategies to progress towards these goals.

Some CSOs also emphasized their close collaboration with parents upon enrolling their child in a school. For instance, at Nuevo Amanecer, parents start working with a psychologist and participate in workshops that focus on disability rights and behavior management. These

workshops also serve as an opportunity for parents to connect with others who have already gone through the process of including their children in regular schools, allowing for the exchange of experiences, mutual support, and reassurance.

APAC also takes a proactive approach by training families when their children enter schools. They provide families with the necessary tools and knowledge to become advocates for their child and effectively guide schools in providing the best possible support. APAC prioritizes family training over teacher training and the rationale behind this focus is rooted in sustainability. Unlike teachers who might change assignments each year, caregivers are the ones that support the student throughout their educational journey. By equipping families with comprehensive information and resources, they ensure that they can actively support their child's IE. For example, APAC educates parents about accessible materials, assistive devices, and other adaptations their child requires so that caregivers can effectively communicate with their child's teachers and directly explain to them what their child requires. This proactive approach ensures continuity even when teachers transition between schools, preventing disruptions to IE efforts.

### *Follow-up*

The next phase of IE involves monitoring the progress of students who have been included in mainstream schools and taking action to provide them with further educational support. Typically, CSOs visit schools to gather feedback and collaborate with teachers in refining their instructional approaches. Alternatively, CSOs directly engage with students, seeking their input and offering tutoring services within the CSO to strengthen any specific skills or knowledge they require.

One example is IPACIDEVI where students attend classes in regular schools in the morning and then come to the CSO in the afternoon to address any uncertainties or challenges

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they encounter. This guidance encompasses various aspects, such as providing explanations for math equations that cater to blind students. Mariana explained that there are specific tasks that teachers often request that overlook the unique learning style and needs of blind students. IPACIDEVI considers such ongoing support and connection with students to be crucial in preventing any chance of them falling behind. This approach has yielded good results for them.

Another CSO, APAC, follows a similar approach but they tend to provide pedagogical support to their students in regular schools for a period of one year. After that first year, APAC still maintains regular contact with the students through therapy sessions and is always aware of their educational needs and whether they need additional accommodations.

Observations is another way CSOs follow up on the IE process. When CSOs visit their students in their respective schools, they observe the students in various settings, including classrooms and breaks, while taking note of any support they may require. For instance, CATIC conducts observations twice a year, with one of their therapists spending an entire day at the school to assess the functioning of assistive devices and address any issues that may arise.

Some CSOs, including Ilumina and Nuevo Amanecer, employ rather advanced observation methods that incorporate elements from the Index for Inclusion developed by Booth and Ainscow discussed in Chapter 2. Claudia explained that they have adapted their assessment tool, taking inspiration from the Index but not strictly following it, to conduct a holistic evaluation of students' learning, participation, socialization, and independence. They observe how students engage in various activities, overcome challenges, interact during playtime, and handle tasks such as buying food in the cafeteria. Based on these observations, they provide feedback to teachers, offering suggestions for necessary adjustments. Claudia emphasized the importance of communicating such recommendations in a tactful manner to avoid any tensions.

***Claudia:*** With great tact, we suggest to the teacher, 'Look, I think Juanito may have missed a bit of the topic, so how about using a different material next time? We can ask his parents to adapt it so that you have it here on time. Also, we noticed that the light is bothering him in that spot. What do you think about moving him here, where there is no direct light to hurt his eyes?' Or 'Miss, I recommend that you don't give him the book in his hand. Maybe he could have a designated space where he can get up, take the book, and bring it to his seat like the rest of the students.'

*Con toda la sutileza vamos diciéndole, 'mire maestra, es que yo veo que a la mejor se perdió un poquito Juanito en el tema, entonces que le parece si para la otra usamos otro material, le podemos pedir a los papás para que lo adapten, para que usted ya lo tenga aquí en tiempo, o mire, observamos que en ese lugar le está lastimando la luz, ¿qué le parece si lo movemos acá para que no tenga esta entrada de luz directa y no le lastime los ojos?, o mira miss, yo te recomiendo que no le des su libro en la mano, sino, a lo mejor que él tenga un espacio para que él pueda levantarse a tomarlo y llevarlo a su lugar como el resto de los estudiantes.*

Furthermore, Claudia highlighted that they actively listen to their students' teachers and address their concerns, thereby providing additional support to the school. For instance, when the curriculum includes basic math operations, Ilumina ensures that the student is taught how to use the arithmetic box effectively. Similarly, when punctuation is introduced, Ilumina incorporates Braille punctuation as a parallel learning process. The Ilumina teacher who conducts the observation also takes note of the skills that the student needs to reinforce and shares the information with rehabilitation specialists to guide them on the areas to focus on.

Ultimately, Ilumina documents their observation results in minutes and shares them with the school principal and parents, fostering transparency and encouraging better collaboration among all stakeholders.

Nuevo Amanecer operates in a similar manner, conducting observations, utilizing the Index for Inclusion, and providing support and guidance. Noelia mentioned that they maintain direct communication with teachers through platforms like WhatsApp, allowing teachers to seek immediate assistance and guidance, even for students who do not have cerebral palsy.

Additionally, when it comes to implementing specific adaptations, the CSO takes either a hands-on approach or advises the school on how to make them. For example, the CSO typically creates communication boards, as part of AAC, and tailors them based on requests from teachers, such as adding tables or geometric shapes to these boards, etc. They can also make adjustments to chairs and benches, adding stops or belts to prevent students from falling, or modifying their size to ensure the right angle and support when seated. In some cases, schools choose to undertake these adaptations themselves, only seeking guidance from Nuevo Amanecer.

As part of their support to schools, some CSOs also provide the opportunity for schools to borrow specific materials schools may need for teaching. For instance, Mariana from IPACIDEVI mentioned that their organization always assists schools by providing adapted materials for their students. They have access to a Braille printer and are able to prepare and print books, exams, and other requested materials for teachers and students.

The follow-up process also includes meetings with the school. For instance, COTII holds regular bi-monthly meetings to address any doubts or concerns raised by the teachers and provide them with guidance and advice. These meetings typically involve the presence of parents, the school principal, psychologist, regular teacher, and occasionally a support teacher. When a student is enrolled, COTII meets with the teachers to discuss short-term goals for the student, provide recommendations on necessary adjustments to facilitate their inclusion, and offer teacher training. However, Rosy mentioned that most of the time, people who take part in the training are support teachers or mothers, as regular teachers are not interested. "It is quite evident that during the meetings, the classroom teacher comes in and I ask her about the child's progress, about what she sees as their needs, and she doesn't know. She doesn't delve into any details, and it's very sad, very frustrating." [*Es bien evidente que en las reuniones entra la*

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*maestra del grupo y yo le pregunto cuáles han sido los avances del niño, cuáles ves que sean sus*

*necesidades y no lo conoce. Cualquier cosa, no profundiza, y es muy triste, es muy frustrante.]*

Likewise, IDEA conducts regular meetings that encompass various stakeholders such as

the inclusion department, regular teachers, support teachers, therapists, and families; "that is

where we determine what is being done, how we are progressing, and what new goals or changes

need to be made in the work being done, taking into account the family aspect, the therapeutic

aspect, and the school aspect, not just one." [*ahí es donde vamos a determinar qué se está*

*hacienda, cómo estamos avanzando y qué nuevos objetivos, o qué cambios tenemos que hacer en*

*lo que se está trabajando, tomando en cuenta la parte familiar, la parte terapéutica y la parte de*

*la escuela; no, una única.*]

Marifer emphasized the significance of involving families, noting that many schools are

hesitant to do so. She explained that schools often perceive parents as problematic due to their

high demands and excessive intrusiveness. So, IDEA strives to challenge this perspective and

bring together all stakeholders, fostering collaborative efforts.

AMAD also places strong emphasis on collaborative work that actively involves families.

Together with the family, the CSO creates a three-month plan for each student and shares it with

the school. Then they monitor the progress made both at school and at home. As part of this

collaboration, families are sometimes asked to reinforce specific skills at home, enabling

students to make continuous progress in school. Marifer, the CEO, explained: "So that's like

aligning everyone in the objectives. Because you can't expect the school to teach them how to

read if you're not teaching them how to sit at home. That really reassures the teachers."

[*Entonces eso es como unir en los objetivos a todos. Porque no le puedes pedir a la escuela que*

*lea, si en tu casa no le estás enseñando a que se siente. Eso tranquiliza mucho a los maestros.*]

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AMAD also provides ongoing guidance to the school regarding adaptations, while emphasizing that students with disabilities should not be placed on a separate program but rather receive adaptations within the regular curriculum. Marifer shared that schools often request the creation of specialized programs for specific students with disabilities, but AMAD declines, instead opting to adapt the existing program. With some teachers, the CSO successfully develops inclusive study programs from scratch, which is ideal. However, more commonly, AMAD addresses issues in existing programs, helping teachers to create day-to-day adaptations. For example, if a teacher prepares a vocal-only presentation for a group with a Deaf student, the CSO helps them adapt the format to ensure accessibility for all.

### *Transforming schools through inclusion department*

A couple of CSOs emphasized the significance of establishing inclusion departments as part of their endeavors to promote IE. They believe that this approach facilitates lasting change within schools, going beyond providing temporary support for individual students. By creating a dedicated team within their institutions, schools are equipped with individuals who possess a comprehensive understanding of the inclusion process and are capable of effectively accommodating any new student with a disability. Only two CSOs, namely AMAD and IDEA, specifically mentioned such programs, and I will briefly discuss them in this subsection.

AMAD utilizes the Index for Inclusion as a fundamental framework for developing inclusion departments. Their focus is on providing guidance to schools across three key dimensions outlined in the Index: fostering an inclusive culture, establishing inclusive policies, and implementing inclusive practices. To facilitate this process, they begin by conducting a SWOT analysis to assess the specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of each

school. Subsequently, they engage in discussions with the school to explore potential changes

and adaptations that can promote a more inclusive environment within the institution.

> *Marifer:* We sit down with the principals to align our discourse, ensuring they have an inclusive language and understand the objectives. Then we move on to creating written policies and drafting what needs to be done. We dive into the processes and create flowcharts. For example, if a family comes in and tells you they have a child with a specific condition, what should you do? We review all their processes, starting from admission, making sure they are inclusive. Even the receptionist who answers the first call needs to know what to say when someone asks, 'My child has autism, will you accept them?' […] We help them so they can later implement their inclusive policies and practices.
> *Te sientas con los directores para unificar el discurso, que tengan un lenguaje inclusivo y entiendan cuáles son los objetivos. Y después nos vamos ya al papel, a la política, a redactar lo que se tiene que hacer. Nos vamos desde los procesos y a hacer diagramas de flujo para ver 'viene esta familia ¿y qué tienes que hacer si llega esta familia y te dice que tiene este chico? Desde la admisión revisamos todos sus procesos para que sean inclusivos. Desde la persona de recepción que atiende la primera llamada y que le dicen 'oye, mi hijo tiene autismo, ¿me lo aceptas?', tiene que saber qué tiene que decir. […] Les ayudamos para que después ellos implementen políticas y prácticas inclusivas.*

Marifer further explained that while some schools may already have inclusion

departments in place, the transformative shift occurs when these departments adopt a genuinely

inclusive perspective. She emphasized that CSOs should provide training and support to schools,

empowering them to take charge of these processes independently. The intention is for the CSO

to gradually step back, allowing schools to manage and sustain IE practices on their own.

The CEO of IDEA, also named Marifer, pointed out that such transformations may be

difficult and may take a long time. Therefore, it is important for CSOs to establish trust and a

good relationship with the school first, usually through including students and organizing

workshops and other activities. Once this foundation of trust and collaboration is established,

IDEA then embarks on the journey of transforming the school.

As a starting point, IDEA also conducts an evaluation by doing observations and interviewing all school personnel. In this comprehensive process, they not only make use of the Index but also employ additional instruments developed in Mexico. Similar to other CSOs, IDEA recognizes the importance of incorporating a diverse range of assessment tools rather than relying solely on the Index because it does not capture the nuances of Mexico's realities.

Following the evaluation, IDEA sets objectives for their inclusion efforts. These objectives encompass training goals and establishing an inclusion department. They form a team to help them disseminate information to teachers, administrative staff, and students. The team collaborates consistently with IDEA to plan and implement actions such as training sessions and classroom support, including adjustments and strategies to enhance IE.

**Inclusive education for Deaf and hard of hearing students**

In this subsection, I will address Deaf IE as a separate topic due to the unique process involved in integrating Deaf students into regular schools compared to other disabilities. Deaf education stands out because Deaf students, beyond their disability, represent a linguistic and cultural community. So, IE needs to address their language needs (such as sign language classes, interpreters, and specific assistance in acquiring Spanish reading and writing, or speaking for some students) and their distinct cosmology (the need to learn about both Deaf culture and history while gaining understanding of the hearing world). As a result of these unique factors, the conventional steps and models used by CSOs may not be directly applicable to Deaf IE. The interviews yielded limited data on the topic. However, three out of four CSOs specializing in this population discussed programs that included Deaf students in regular schools. Two of these projects achieved success but were discontinued due to changes in the government. And one

project did not achieve the desired level of success, leading the CSO to terminate its partnership with the school altogether. I will provide a brief overview of these three experiences.

Educación Incluyente, a CSO for and by Deaf individuals in Guadalajara, was once almost entirely devoted to the creation and execution of bilingual and bicultural education programs in schools. Drawing inspiration from existing research and taking cues from the model followed by Gallaudet University in the US, they worked diligently to establish these programs in Secondary School No. 20 and High School No. 7. As a result of their efforts, six consecutive generations of Deaf students successfully graduated from these institutions before 2019.

Abisaí, the representative of Educación Incluyente, highlighted an important aspect of their approach. He shared that before enrolling in any academic grade, it was mandatory for students to attend a one-year preparatory course. This course encompassed all the subjects they would study once they enrolled, along with comprehensive training in sign language. This was particularly important for Deaf students who may not have been previously exposed to sign language. In addition to the academic curriculum, the preparatory course included specific subjects like Deaf Identity, where students learned about the rich history, culture, and unique perspectives of the Deaf community. The teaching staff consisted of both hearing and Deaf teachers. Abisaí added that the course facilitated the return to school of many students who had discontinued their education years ago.

An added advantage of the preparatory course was that it took place within the same school the students were planning to attend. This allowed them to familiarize themselves with the school environment, actively participate in cultural and sports activities alongside hearing students, and establish connections with teachers and administrative staff. As a result, the

students gained a significant amount of confidence during this period, setting a strong foundation for their academic journey.

Furthermore, the inclusive nature of the program sparked interest among hearing students as well, leading them to join sign language classes and fostering greater understanding and collaboration between Deaf and hearing students.

> *Abisai:* That was really interesting. There were many hearing students interested in learning sign language, so we had an academic and cultural exchange where hearing students from the school would come to the preparatory group and start learning sign language. At the same time, Deaf students would also learn how to interact with hearing students because that was something many of them were completely unfamiliar with. *Eso era bien interesante, había muchos jóvenes oyentes interesados en aprender lengua de señas, entonces hacíamos como un intercambio académico y cultural en donde chicos oyentes de la escuela venían al grupo de propedéutico, empezaban a aprender lengua de señas, pero los chicos sordos también empezaban a aprender a cómo relacionarse con chicos oyentes porque eso es algo que muchos de ellos totalmente desconocían.*

Once Deaf students fully enrolled, the school program would foster an inclusive learning environment where Deaf and hearing students studied together in all classes. Additionally, they actively participated in inclusive camps and cultural projects that encompassed various forms of artistic expression such as theater, dance, design, drawing, and song signing. Deaf students who needed additional support also received tutoring sessions.

Collaboration between Educación Incluyente and the schools played a significant role in the project. The CSO provided sign language interpreters and had a designated classroom within each school. They also organized workshops to raise awareness and otherwise supported the IE program, by advising teachers and more. Abisai recalled, "We functioned as a unified team […] and always worked hand in hand. We participated in council meetings of different areas and departments of the school." [*éramos un solo equipo […] y hacíamos siempre una mancuerna. Trabajamos en las reuniones de consejo de las distintas áreas y departamentos de la escuela*]

Unfortunately, between 2019 and 2022, there was a change in the government and subsequent change in personnel managing the schools, resulting in the termination of collaboration with the CSO. Educación Incluyente had to relinquish control of the programs and withdraw. Since then, numerous parents have expressed their concerns about the deteriorating state of education in those schools. Complementary workshops, tutoring sessions, an extensive preparatory course, and engaging activities such as camps or trips are now absent.

Ofelia from Ándale para Oír shared another example of a remarkable school. Although it was not a project directly implemented by the CSO, they are currently striving to support children who no longer have the opportunity to study in this school. According to Ofelia, the Institute San Javier stood out as the only school that truly embraced inclusion for Deaf students in Queretaro. Deaf students had the opportunity to study alongside their hearing peers and always had access to a sign language interpreter. She recalled, "When I saw that project, I said, 'Finally, the light at the end of the tunnel.' It was well executed; the [Deaf] children attended all classes with their peers, participated in ceremonies, and the hearing students had their sign language class while the deaf students studied Spanish." [*Yo cuando vi ese proyecto dije, por fin la luz al final del túnel. Estaba muy bien llevado, los niños tomaban todas las clases con todos los compañeros, hacían honores, y los oyentes tenían su clase de lengua de señas, y mientras ellos [sordos] tomaban español.*]

Regrettably, the school principal who took over the previous year failed to recognize the value of the program due to its high cost and the relatively low fees paid by Deaf students. As a result, he chose to hire individuals who charged lower fees but lacked the necessary expertise, such as interpreters who do not really know sign language; and the project fell apart. Ofelia concluded, "The Deaf children now spend all their time drawing, they don't carry a notebook,

it's terrible, and they pay the same as all the other children." [*Los niños sordos ahora dibujan todo el tiempo, no llevan un cuaderno, es horrible y pagan lo mismo que todos los niños.*]

During the interview that took place in August, Ofelia revealed that Ándale para Oír was going to open a program specifically for the children from this school. This initiative was going to enable them to begin the new academic year receiving primary education within the CSO, albeit in an isolated environment. Meanwhile, Ándale para Oír was going to persist in their efforts to empower parents and actively seek a school that can reintroduce a similar inclusive program once again.

Finally, the third example concerns IPPLIAP that operates its own special school for the Deaf but does not offer education after primary school level. The CSO partnered with another school, offering secondary education, in an attempt to create an inclusive program for their students who finish primary school at IPPLIAP and have nowhere else to go to continue their education.

Mercedes, the CEO, elaborated on the school's approach, explaining that Deaf students participated in less academically demanding classes like computer science, PE, theater, and arts alongside their hearing peers. However, for subjects with a strong academic focus, they had separate classes facilitated by an interpreter and the subject teacher, with pedagogical support from IPPLIAP educators. In these cases, IPPLIAP teachers collaborated with regular teachers, suggesting strategies like creating summaries, concept maps, or mind maps. Or instead of written assignments, they would suggest students creating videos with voice-overs to showcase learning. Unfortunately, despite these methods, achieving inclusion remained a challenge. Even during recess, Deaf and hearing students often remained separate from each other.

Ultimately, the partnership came to an end, coinciding with the onset of the pandemic. Mercedes revealed that they encountered various challenges during the collaboration. The fees imposed on students were deemed excessive, some teachers were unwilling to make necessary adaptations to their teaching methods to accommodate Deaf students, and hearing students did not actively engage in learning sign language. Consequently, Deaf students faced significant difficulties in adapting to the learning environment as a whole.

**Special schools and CAMs**

In examining the impact of CSOs on IE, it is essential to mention CSOs that run their own special schools or CAMs. Among the CSOs interviewed for this study, five have their own schools, and they are either certified by the SEP or INEA (National Institute for Adult Education). The key distinction is that the CSOs certified by INEA have greater flexibility and are not bound by the same age-grade level standards. APAC and Nuevo Amanecer are two CSOs that operate CAMs and cater to children with cerebral palsy. In turn, Educación Especial Más, IPACIDEVI, and IPPLIAP run special schools for students with various disabilities.

Nuevo Amanecer's CAM is home to approximately 100 students who attend classes from 8:30 am to 2:00 pm. The CAM provides a range of specialized groups that cater to different age groups and individual needs. These groups include nursery, preschool, primary school, as well as groups focused on acquiring learning skills and functional skills; the latter for children facing more significant cognitive, physical, and health-related challenges. On the other hand, APAC operates a CAM that provides education from preschool to secondary school. And beyond CAM, APAC provides additional support for high school and university education through various programs and partnerships. Unlike CAMs operated by the government, these two CAMs

specialize in catering to students with cerebral palsy only. During my personal visit to APAC in Mexico City, I was impressed by their resources and highly accessible facilities.

IPPLIAP currently educates 120 Deaf students, offering schooling from preschool to primary school. For the older population, they provide specialized workshops and extracurricular support. Initially founded as a therapy center, IPPLIAP identified the importance of formal education for their beneficiaries and transformed into a school. After the interview, I also had the opportunity to visit their premises and meet some teachers and students; IPPLIAP has created a truly vibrant community comprising both hearing and Deaf individuals. Their educational approach follows the bilingual bicultural model, drawing significant inspiration from experiences in other countries, particularly Gallaudet University in the US. Recognized by the SEP since 1998, IPPLIAP ensures that their students receive school certificates equivalent to those granted by any other formal educational institution. Mercedes further added, "We are the educational center with the largest number of Deaf children in the country, and the only one with official recognition from the SEP apart from public institutions. So, I believe that is a great achievement." [*Somos el centro educativo con más niños sordos en el país, el único con reconocimiento oficial de la SEP aparte de lo público. Entonces eso creo que es un gran logro.*]

IPACIDEVI serves students with visual impairments, some of whom may have additional disabilities such as autism or intellectual disability. They provide education from the early intervention stage to high school. However, in their ongoing efforts to promote IE, they are now transitioning to sending all students to regular schools after completing primary school.

In addition to their core curriculum, the CSO offers a wide range of supplementary subjects to equip their students with essential skills. These include teaching Braille, adapted computer skills, music, orientation and mobility, and the effective use of cane. By providing

these tools, IPACIDEVI aims to empower their beneficiaries to thrive in life. The CSO also takes pride in the achievements of their former students, with 15 of them having successfully graduated from university. Mariana concluded, "We are recognized at a national level for the work we have done in the field of education for the blind. We have established important alliances and collaborated with leading organizations on a global scale. For instance, we have worked closely with ONCE, which is considered one of the best organizations for the blind in the world." [*Somos reconocidos a nivel nacional por el trabajo que hemos hecho en cuestión de educación para ciegos. Se han hecho alianzas importantes o hemos trabajado con organismos líderes a nivel mundial, por ejemplo, la ONCE que son como los mejores que hay para ciegos en el mundo*.]

Finally, Educación Especial Más was founded in 2010 with the idea to provide integral support to children with disabilities encompassing education, therapy, arts and sports. They are certified by INEA, which grants them the flexibility to customize their programs according to each child's individual needs and pace. Mariangie emphasized that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for the children they serve. Their main goal is to ensure that each child reaches their maximum potential, rather than simply issuing a school certificate. The realization of potential varies for each child, ranging from achieving basic communication and self-care skills to progressing through high school, entering the job market, or transitioning to mainstreaming. Regular evaluations, goal-setting, and monthly or quarterly reports are conducted to track progress. The children also maintain a daily journal where their objectives, accomplishments, and areas for reinforcement at home are documented. The active involvement of the family is highly encouraged, as they are expected to provide feedback based on the journal entries.

These five schools exemplify SPED settings that effectively benefit children with disabilities by supporting their education and facilitating their personal growth as much as possible. In addition to providing education in separate settings, they all actively promote IE through diverse approaches such as directly integrating their students into mainstream schools, providing national-level teacher training, and more.

**Partnering with universities**

CSOs also frequently establish collaborations with universities, albeit in diverse capacities. These partnerships encompass various aspects, such as facilitating higher education of students with disabilities, developing IE programs within universities, raising awareness, and involving university students in the activities undertaken by CSOs. Additionally, certain CSOs, including CATIC, CAPYS, AMAD, among others, actively participate in research endeavors.

APAC, as a CSO dedicated to providing education to children and youth with cerebral palsy, offers comprehensive educational support that spans all levels, including higher education. In cases where APAC users express a desire to pursue a university degree, the organization has established agreements with select universities and facilitates the acquisition of scholarships; it typically involves online bachelor's degree programs. APAC students are given the opportunity to study their university courses directly at APAC premises, where they receive assistance from an APAC teacher. This teacher creates adaptations tailored to their specific needs and provides guidance to ensure their successful progress throughout their courses because universities do not have dedicated staff that can make such adaptations.

IPPLIAP also actively collaborates with universities to create educational opportunities for Deaf students. According to Mercedes, there are several universities that demonstrate a greater level of IE in accepting Deaf students. Some of these universities include Santa Catarina

in Querétaro, Santa Rosa Jauregui, UTECA in Mexico City, UDI, Universidad del Valle in Hidalgo, and Ibero. By collaborating with these institutions, IPPLIAP strives to ensure that Deaf students have access to higher education and can pursue their academic aspirations.

> *Mercedes:* We work closely with Ibero because they offer technical programs and provide scholarships to students. They have a very affordable fee structure. We collaborated with them until they finally opened one of the technical programs for Deaf students. We now have four Deaf alumni who are in their second year of studies there. *Trabajamos mucho con la Ibero porque tienen unas carreras técnicas que además becan a los estudiantes, pagan una cuota muy accesible. Hicimos un trabajo con ellos hasta que por fin abrieron para sordos una de las carreras técnicas y ya tenemos ahí a cuatro exalumnos sordos que están en el segundo año.*

Juventino, the founder of Punto Seis, also initiated an impactful program called *Letras Habladas* [Spoken Letters] in collaboration with his colleagues with visual impairments that has been implemented at the Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México (UACM). *Letras Habladas* aims to make academic materials and books accessible for individuals with visual impairments. Additionally, it offers courses, raises awareness, provides tutoring, and hosts various activities to promote IE for people with visual impairments at the university. The program began as a partnership between Punto Seis and the UACM in 2006, leading to the employment of four individuals with visual impairments from Punto Seis (the CSO runs on a voluntary basis). In 2014, the *Letras Habladas* program was entirely handed over to the university and is currently managed and operated by the UACM.

CAPYS, a CSO dedicated to working with individuals with intellectual disabilities, also has implemented an innovative program called *Construyendo Puentes* [Building Bridges]. This program aims to facilitate the inclusion of their users in higher education institutions. Although they do not pursue formal degrees, people with intellectual disabilities are granted the

opportunity to attend classes that interest them and engage in various activities, providing them

with a firsthand experience of college life.

> *Isabel:* The main goal is to allow individuals with disabilities experience being a university student, allow them to develop skills that will be valuable for their independent life and future careers. For example, if someone is passionate about architecture, we try to find a class where they can acquire general knowledge that is not overly complex, and we work closely with the professors. Prior to their enrollment, we conduct sensitization and training sessions with all the professors, and there is strong involvement with the community. We actively participate in various activities organized by institutions like TEC, UIC, or UNAM. We are highly visible and engage in sports and arts activities.
> *Lo que se promueve es que la persona viva la experiencia de ser universitario, que desarrolle competencias que le vayan a servir para esa vida independiente, ese futuro laboral. Entonces lo que se hace es que la persona entra a clases, por ejemplo, si pienso en alguien que le gusta mucho la arquitectura, intentamos que entre en una clase donde adquiera conocimientos generales que no les sean muy complicados y donde se pueda hacer los ajustes, y trabajamos de la mano con los profesores. Aquí también hay una sensibilización y una capacitación previa con todos los profesores y una implicación muy grande con la comunidad, participamos también en todas las actividades, que desarrolle el TEC o la UIC o la UNAM, estamos ahí muy presentes, muy visibles y también participamos en las actividades deportivas o de artes.*

Isabel further elaborated that although their users do not earn a degree, the courses they

take are structured similarly to a diploma program. These programs typically span six semesters

and often lead to employment opportunities upon completion. Providing learning and practical

experience to facilitate employment for people with intellectual disabilities is a key component

of these programs. CAPYS operates these programs at Tec de Monterrey located in Mexico City,

at UIC, at UNAM, as well as at Anáhuac in Querétaro and Marista in Mérida.

Another notable example is Inclusor. While their focus is not on including Deaf students

in universities, they were invited by UNAM to develop a program that now offers Mexican Sign

Language on par with any other second foreign language. Laura and Haydee emphasized that

this is a significant milestone for the Deaf community in Mexico. Firstly, it signifies the formal

recognition of sign language as a language, comparable to English or French. Secondly, it

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provides a comprehensive program where hearing students can truly learn the language, including its grammar and structure, rather than merely learning the sign alphabet as often happens in other universities.

Laura further explained that the program lasts for two years, culminating in students receiving an official certificate from UNAM upon completion. The study of sign language is approached similarly to learning any other language, involving assessments and examinations. Successful fulfillment of the comprehensive curriculum across four semesters is a prerequisite for graduation.

During the final semester of their sign language course, hearing students are actively encouraged to engage in *convivencia* activities with the Deaf community, both within Inclusor and other settings. These activities provide them with valuable opportunities to practice sign language and further immerse themselves in the vibrant Deaf culture.

Other CSOs also highlighted their diverse collaborations with Mexican universities, which indirectly impact IE by influencing the wider academic community. Declic, for instance, has established agreements with multiple universities to offer their diploma programs to psychology and pedagogy students. These programs expose future professionals to the topic of diversity and prepare them to work with PwD. Similarly, Libre Acceso and several other CSOs have robust social service programs in various universities, allowing non-disabled students to actively participate in CSO's projects and gain awareness of the needs and capabilities of PwD. Lastly, COTII collaborates with universities to implement their unique program, COTII Soccer. Through this initiative, children with neurodiversity play soccer alongside other children, promoting the development of social, physical, emotional, and communication skills. COTII has

established agreements with several universities where students volunteer as personal coaches of COTII users.

Overall, the chapter demonstrated CSOs' commitment to directly advancing IE across educational realms, from integrating in mainstreaming to education provision in specialized settings to higher education, ultimately promoting equitable learning opportunities and participation for students with disabilities.

**CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

This study represents the first attempt to examine IE in Mexico through the lens of CSOs, including voices of PwD and parents of PwD. The importance of this research in the Mexican context cannot be overstated, as it adds valuable insights to the exploration of IE initiatives in countries of the Global South. In these regions, disability perspectives tend to differ from mainstream disability movements in the Global North, and the voices and experiences of PwD are frequently underrepresented or absent in research.

Overall, the findings show that CSOs hold a significant role in the advancement of IE by developing and coordinating projects across school, family, community, and internal organizational realms. CSOs are truly unique in their ability to bridge diverse perspectives and stakeholders, effectively translating this knowledge into actionable initiatives. This distinct capacity positions them to orchestrate the IE process, a role exemplified by numerous examples shared during interviews. CSOs make tangible changes in the lives of students with disabilities and their families, while simultaneously reshaping the culture on disability and inclusion.

To grasp the extent of the work and contributions of CSOs in promoting IE in Mexico, it was crucial to contextualize their role within the current landscape of IE. The interviews revealed both the existing barriers to inclusion and the factors that facilitate IE within schools. Contrary to academic discussions focusing on improving laws, budget allocations, and teacher training, this study highlighted a different perspective, where the human factor takes center stage and the fundamental challenge revolves around attitudinal barriers. These barriers stem from Mexico's prevailing cultural perspective on disability, deeply rooted in *asistencialismo*, which impedes progress. PwD are commonly perceived as helpless beings that cannot learn and contribute on par with their non-disabled peers. Discussions with CSOs revealed that a top-down approach to

IE would not yield results because schools would still perceive students with disabilities through this lens. Even with financial resources and knowledge about reasonable accommodations and UDL, true inclusion remains unattainable if educators do not believe that these students are capable of learning. Conversely, when schools transform their mindset, structural challenges become less relevant as principals and teachers, driven by conviction, invest their personal time and money and even break rules to promote IE.

As a result, making disability visible, raising awareness, and fostering opportunities for *convivencia* must be an integral part of any IE initiative, which explains why all CSOs in the study are actively involved in such activities, albeit to varying degrees. Among the different practices employed by CSOs in schools and public spaces, disability simulators stand out. These simulators enable individuals without disabilities to experience certain aspects of disability, prompting reflection and challenging misconceptions. The impact increases further when PwD get involved, showcasing their talents through interactive activities with their nondisabled peers.

Over time, many CSOs discovered that cultivating an inclusive culture within schools also requires the involvement of every member of the school community. This extends to students, teachers, parents of non-disabled students, principals, administrative and other school staff, from people opening doors and cleaning floors to those working in the cafeteria. When one of these stakeholders is missing, the process remains inconclusive.

The study further revealed that CSOs possess invaluable knowledge and expertise crucial for effective implementation of IE. This is particularly notable due to their ability to approach each facet of the educational process with critical thinking. For instance, under current law, visually impaired students must access materials in Braille to study. The reality is that schools lack access to such resources and lack the means to produce them, thus presenting a seemingly

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unsolvable problem. However, CSOs demonstrate resourcefulness by offering alternatives. They

can propose to supplement conventional Braille books with digital materials in accessible

formats and the adoption of simple yet effective practices, such as verbalizing visual information

and crafting homemade tactile materials to explain abstract concepts. Notably, these solutions are

not only cost effective but also easy to implement, showing schools that true IE is not contingent

on government support and finances. Instead, schools are encouraged to cultivate partnerships

between teachers and families to collaboratively implement the necessary accommodations.

In this context, the study underscored the pivotal role of parental involvement, emerging

as a significant finding. Numerous examples and anecdotes demonstrated that actively engaged

parents make a real difference in the IE success. Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic played

an unexpected role in this realization. As parents were forced to take a more hands-on role, being

their children's therapists, educators, psychologists, caregivers and more, CSOs observed the

hidden potential of their engagement. To advance IE, parents need to know their child's

strengths, weaknesses, and needs and be able to assist them in their development on a daily basis.

They also need to understand their child's communication and learning style, learn about diverse

teaching methods and accommodations, and know how to advocate for their child's needs,

articulating precise adaptations and required assistance to educators. Moreover, parents must

navigate emotional support for their child while taking care of their own well-being. Here, CSOs

emerge once again as a vital support system, equipping parents with necessary information and

accompanying them throughout the journey, while simultaneously empowering them to

confidently navigate these multiple responsibilities.

Despite the many challenges in the system, mindsets, and practices, and the seemingly

unattainable ideal of IE, many CSOs have developed comprehensive programs that specifically

facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular schools. While no single CSO's

approach may be flawless, when considered collectively, it is possible to identify best practices

to follow. In essence, IE concerns both equipping the student and the school with the necessary

tools, it is never the responsibility of just one party. Students acquire skills to navigate

mainstreaming, while schools are taught about accessibility, UDL, and adaptations. CSOs

overlook and get engaged in every step of the process, starting with student preparation and

school search and finishing with student observations and feedback exchange with their teachers.

The discussion of SPED within the context of IE also emerged as an important and

somewhat surprising finding. While literature highlights a clear dichotomy between IE and

SPED, this study revealed that they complement one another. Most importantly, PwD who

participated in the study were advocating for a return to special schools based on disability type –

institutions that had existed before IE reforms and were dismantled for being seen as

'segregatory'. CSOs underscored the role of SPED methodologies in facilitating the effective

implementation of IE and the potential coexistence of special schools within the broader

framework of IE as a temporary placement where students with disabilities can acquire specific

skills and identity before entering the world of mainstreaming. In summary, the study findings

challenged the notion of IE and SPED being in conflict and instead shed light on how they can

work together harmoniously to create an inclusive educational environment for all students.

In this regard, this study has illuminated the issue of blindly adhering to international

treaties, revealing its inherent unsustainability. The example of the Mexican government's

gradual dismantling of SPED as a profession, placement, and methodology demonstrates the

disconnect between international ideals and the actual needs of PwD. I argue that international

treaties are valuable as a foundational framework, but they must allow for greater flexibility,

prompting governments to tailor these guidelines to their local contexts. And it is crucial that these adaptations are guided by the affected population, in this case, PwD.

In addition, I want to emphasize that incorporating SPED into the IE framework, as discussed in this study, does not necessarily imply a permanent arrangement. Instead, it is a step towards improving the quality of education for PwD in contemporary Mexico. The sudden government shift to IE, involving the closure of SPED schools and the integration of PwD into mainstreaming without reforming the system of education itself, has exacerbated marginalization of students. Therefore, at this moment, IE requires integrating SPED methodologies and placements to better support PwD. However, over time, a potential paradigm shift may occur. This shift envisions mainstream schools absorbing the insights and practices from SPED, benefiting all students while also catering to the specific needs of PwD. Such a transformation of the regular school system could eventually make the separate SPED paradigm obsolete, leading to a more comprehensive and truly inclusive form of IE.

An overarching challenge that I observed within the realm of disability-focused IE is the struggle to adequately capture the voices of PwD. Through my conversations with CSOs and additional research of CSOs beyond the scope of this study, I realized that there are very few DPOs in Mexico and not all CSOs proactively involve PwD in their projects or seek their input, either during the design phases or throughout project implementation. It remains a prevailing reality that PwD are positioned as beneficiaries, and decisions are frequently made on their behalf. While prominent DPOs do exist in Mexico, including those that participated in this study such as Vida Independiente Mexico, Libre Acceso, Inclusor, AMADIVI, and Punto Seis – they represent a minority. And while many CSOs make a sincere effort to involve PwD and employ them as staff, such instances are not yet the norm. Therefore, a primary recommendation and

critique directed towards CSOs is to recognize PwD as the only true experts in disability topics, whose perspectives should guide the course of action in any disability CSO.

Overall, disability CSOs operating in Mexico navigate a challenging landscape characterized by a notable absence of government support and even attempts to dismantle the sector altogether. Despite these circumstances, CSOs demonstrate remarkable resilience and their contributions in the realm of IE are impressive and invaluable as they often serve as the only source of support for families. While the discourse around IE frequently centers on schools, teachers, and families, Chapters 4-7 reveal a complex interplay of personal and systemic barriers that impede IE. These challenges extend beyond the academic realm as parents and schools grapple with excessive regulatory constraints, limited resources, and a lack of support from authorities, further exacerbated by emotional strain, frustration, and exhaustion. This study demonstrates that the pursuit of IE cannot rely on schools and families alone. It requires external support from entities capable of overseeing, coordinating, and offering informational, emotional and other forms of assistance. In this context, CSOs step in and fulfill this vital role.

Interestingly, while the study underscores the significant role of CSOs in advancing IE, it also highlights a potential danger: excessive reliance on CSOs can hinder a true and lasting change. A few CSOs pointed out that sometimes successful inclusion of students becomes possible only with the help of CSO as they bring their expertise and organize the process. However, when these students have to change schools or the school accepts another student with a disability, the school has to start from scratch as they lack the knowledge to independently manage and replicate inclusive practices. A similar situation occurs with parents. Their overreliance on CSOs can lead to a lack of knowledge about their child's unique abilities and needs, impeding parents to provide comprehensive support and advocate on behalf of their child.

Notably, some CSOs proactively address this challenge by initiating extensive transformations within schools and empowering parents. By doing so, they aim to reduce the need for ongoing CSO involvement, working toward the creation of lasting and sustainable change within the education system and families.

It is important to acknowledge that the data I gathered extends beyond the scope of the analysis presented in this thesis, which opens up potential avenues for future research. For example, a deeper examination of barriers could be useful, especially the emotional ones. These barriers were not fully covered in this study, and delving into them could provide valuable insights into addressing these challenges more effectively. Another aspect to consider concerns a deeper study of IE in rural areas. This research primarily reflects experiences from urban contexts, with limited insights into rural settings. Participants pointed out that rural circumstances can be quite distinct, including factors like connectivity issues or unique school structures. Investigating specific approaches that work in rural settings and exploring potential differences, especially when it comes to indigenous communities, could yield valuable insights. In addition, understanding how CSOs could contribute to such contexts is an important consideration. Lastly, in-depth case studies of individual CSOs could be a valuable resource for identifying and promoting best practices.

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