

# the report



**Aula Desigual** is a training experience led by a specialised pedagogical office based on four pillars: strategy, inclusive training, success stories and innovation.

**Antonio Márquez** is a teacher of the Junta de Andalucía, expert and trainer in Inclusive Pedagogy. He is the coordinator of the Aula Desigual project and advisor in the REA Andalucía Project on open educational resources with UDL. He has a blog "Si es por el maestro, nunca aprendo" ("If it is for the teacher, I never learn") on student inclusion.

**José Blas García-Pérez** is a teacher at IES in Murcia, has been associate professor at the University of Murcia, director of the EdHospi magazine on Hospital Pedagogy and Educational Technician, advisor and trainer in CC.AA. on Inclusive Education. Coordinator of online training in Aula Desigual. Co-author of "Educar para ser" Editorial SM; "Miradas que educan. Diálogos sobre educación y justicia social" Editorial Zambra, "Inclusión: acciones en primera persona" Editorial Graó.



# Aula Desigual

## Transforming Education Today to Achieve Inclusion

by Ana Moreno

### INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIO MÁRQUEZ AND JOSÉ BLAS GARCÍA

**W**hat is “Aula Desigual”, and what are its challenges? How would you summarise your message?

**Antonio Márquez:** [Aula Desigual](#) is a pedagogical counselling and training project for teachers, institutions, educational centres, etc., who want to receive any information and training in the field of inclusive education. Although we deal with aspects of different methodology types and school organisations, we always provide a “touch” to transform them towards an inclusive school model where everyone takes part in it.

**José Blas García:** We want and believe that the message of inclusive schooling reaches the majority of teachers. We take advantage not only of our voice to do this but also of our shared work, our published

experiences, our little research, and providing teachers with the material they could use, giving them that vision from a teacher’s point of view, i.e. somebody really knowing the problem and the difficulties they have, being aware of the difficulties that everything related to inclusion has.

#### How did you each embark on the project, how did it come about?

**AM:** It was an initiative that started from the experience that we began to have in the field of training. Personally, I was working as a teacher of inclusive pedagogy when I became known through the blog: I started to get requests for information, and there came a time when I saw the need for training teachers due to their concerns, curiosities and the reality they had in their classrooms: it was

growing and growing, so we decided to create the Aula Desigual project and do it more seriously, with more dedication, which in my case is 100%.

**JBG:** Antonio is the project leader. When discussing these issues, we realised the inclusive school model was presented to teachers who had just graduated from university or were in teacher training to access the civil service. We were preparing to access something that would be assessed by other people who did not understand education in the way we did. The solution was to disseminate it to all teachers interested in inclusive schooling in other places. And that’s when we started: we realised that there was some lack of formation, and we mainly wanted to commit ourselves to the transformation of those schools towards a closer model

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to our being teachers and our way of thinking about the world and life. And this is a little of why we are here.

### **What do you see as the project's most remarkable success?**

**AM:** Personally, one of the project's greatest successes was when a group of teachers realised the necessary school changes. They then asked us how to do it and bring it to "my classroom". In the beginning, they were small groups of teachers, mostly related to diversity attention profiles. Our most outstanding achievement is that in our training profile, almost 60% or 70% of teachers are not specialists in attention to diversity. It was one of our great objectives; if we really want a school to be inclusive, the diversity teachers are not the only ones responsible for this, but all of them are. I want to think that this is happening because of the push from Aula Desigual plus other colleagues who are also activists for inclusion.

**JBG:** Indeed, one of the greatest successes of Aula Desigual -and for the two of us, as individuals- was taking advantage of the image we had offered in networks and also in the information and communication circuits to build this training company. The important thing is that it has made visible everything that inclusive education entails. We like to call ourselves activists for inclusion, with no going back but a push forward that can undoubtedly be improved. We are willing to continue learning and sharing with other people we are joining synergies with to create organisational, cultural, pedagogical, and humanist models, which are very different from those permeating the school up to now.

We refer to inclusive cultures in the sense that a world expert on inclusion

and equity, Mel Ainscow, does. That inclusive culture is what must be present and what the education system, the university and all those involved in what we can call the school with capital letters, must have as an essential element. An inclusive culture that leads us to understand the school's transformation into a better place, a better place to learn and a better place to live together.

### **Although inclusion has long been on the agenda of our education system, and the reality is that there is still a long way to go:**

#### **- What do you see as an inclusive school?**

**AM:** An inclusive school is the one that, for the first time, begins to understand that talking about inclusion is not about disability or students with learning difficulties or high abilities, but about all students who are part of the centre, including the sphere that surrounds it. In other words, the inclusive model is based on a system of values that aims to ensure that everyone is accepted equally, that it is a system that welcomes rather than accepts and, of course, that understands that diversity is a source of learning. Let's think that if we were all exactly the same, we would have little room for learning. The inherent diversity in any human group should be understood as a process of wealth for everyone. But, right now, it is seen as people who could become a nuisance

at a given moment or who could hinder some others presumably doing better or that could do better. Nothing could be further from the truth because this wealth that diversity brings us as a human group to learn together, to build networks of equals in learning, can only be built based on diversity: there is no other way. For me, this is an inclusive school.

**JBG:** Actually, we misunderstand it when we talk about educational quality. Quality education is equality; it is equity and inclusion; therefore, it is social justice. We cannot think of a school that offers quality, but injustices taking place, or where the rights of some students are undervalued concerning others or where they are treated differently. Social justice, educational quality, and inclusion are absolutely indissoluble trinomial that defines inclusive schools.

#### **-What are the benefits for the education community and society?**

**JBG:** Actually, the educational community and society are the same thing. A school, an educational community, is a subsystem of any social system. Therefore, anything improving school humanises it, democratises it, produces justice, and will also benefit society in general. It will result in a more democratic, fairer and, above all, more humanitarian society, much more thinking of people as human beings and not as pupils/clients. One thing and the other are so closely linked that we cannot assume that there will be an inclusive society if we do not have an inclusive school. If

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at school we cannot get pupils to work, participate and collaborate together and be friends, let's not assume that in society, in the street, they will do so.

**AM:** A school model that hides difficulties, that does not cater for any type kind of diversity, learning difficulties or high abilities, creates people who, when adults, will replicate this model in the society they live in. Everyone must work together because this is how to ensure that this diversity is respected, accepted, and embraced when schooling ends. A school model that does not work on this inclusive factor will later lead to segregation in adult life.

**JBG:** I find the distinction between acceptance and welcome in inclusive schooling very valuable.

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"Accepting" implies making establishing a difference. However, when we are "welcoming", it is because the doors are open, and anyone can be part of my circle. And that is the difference between what we understand as inclusive school or integrating the school. Integrating starts from the fact of considering the other as disintegrated. The school is inclusive because it is open to everyone staying in it. These small nuances shape what we can understand of the cultural ideology we have, not only teachers but also society in general. What is at stake

is to have a better society in a few years' time.

### - What are the main challenges for a teacher who wants to be inclusive?

**AM:** The main challenge for a teacher willing to be inclusive right now is knowing how to correctly identify the barriers to participation. We tend to use the concept of learner needs instead of barriers to learning. It is very difficult to change this: this is normal because it is a process that has been in place for many years. We have to unlearn to put





the focus of the problem on the student and place it where it is really happening: in the context and in those barriers that we as teachers put in our classroom without being, in most cases, aware that we are creating a barrier for a student to participate and learn at school. It will then be necessary to know how to commit to resources, to the required alternatives to minimise those barriers.

**JBG:** There are no recipes; there is no ABC for doing this. The first thing to be clear about is the intention to make it happen. Then, there are methodologies, educational frameworks, organisations, cultural ways of doing it. Still, above all, a teacher must position him or herself as such because otherwise, it will remain theoretical; it will neither be lived nor done.

- **What are the main challenges for a school that wants to take a step forward in inclusion?**

**JBG:** The challenge for a school lies in rethinking its organisational and cultural model and facilitating a change in its methodological and didactic model. This is only possible if the management teams, educational leaders and teachers agree on a few objectives because educational change towards an inclusive model is very difficult. The challenge is for the school to commit to changes in the three or four faces that can make up the inclusive model.

**AM:** I would add that the main challenge is to understand or make explicit the objective you are aiming for in the pursuit of the objective proposed in the

search for this inclusive school. Because we often have the wrong objectives, we can take 100 right steps on the wrong path and get nowhere. The most important thing is to have a well-defined objective; that is to say- in other words, the first thing is to think about why and what we want to be an inclusive school for. When this is clear, we will find a way to do it.

**JBG:** I would love to see schools with a sign pleased to say “we are bilingual schools” or “we are technological schools”, but also proud in stating “we are inclusive schools”. This definition of an inclusive centre and the knowledge that you are an inclusive centre would give tremendous power to all teachers to work along these lines. Some centres understand inclusion as a drop in quality. Suppose when we talk about educational quality, we only measure it by PISA tests or those who pass the EBAU. In that case, what we understand by educational quality is only the evaluation of these specific achievements and not others. Quality in education with a capital ‘A’ means that everyone is taken care of, that no one is left behind, and that there are no educational or human injustices with any student.

- **What are the main difficulties?**

**AM:** The ones I perceive are related to what we call fear of the new, the unknown, staying in the comfort zone, but because I don't want to do anything, but because what I see is very different for me, and I don't quite understand it. When we refuse its need, the resistance to change

and the culture we have had for so long is one of the main obstacles; changing the mentality is very complex; however, it is essential. Raising awareness and sensitisation is very important for minds to open up. Once they are, they can accept and welcome any proposal for change. For me, this is the most difficult point.

**JBG:** Actually, there is no support to bring about this change and commit to the model Antonio has mentioned. Even at times like now, when a new law committed to inclusion has been enacted, it is just make-up, a prologue and a little

more. Politicians do not dare to support these models, which are much more appropriate for building a better society.

- **What are the main needs?**

**JBG:** The main need we have is for a real

**We have to unlearn to put the focus of the problem on the student and place it barriers that we as teachers put in our classroom**



## I would love to see schools with a sign on the door that they are proud to say: “we are inclusive schools”

commitment on all fronts that make up the educational community and, by extension, the social system to human rights and justice for all individuals on earth.

**AM:** The first and most essential are training educational needs rather than before regulatory changes. The regulations saying that a school is inclusive and has to commit to the SAD,

for example, does not ensure that it will be carried out. It would be much better to generate a national plan for implementing the inclusive system in classrooms with planned training, with a clear objective and set steps. The teachers tell us what is happening to students with special needs in the

schools: the problems they encounter in the classroom, that they do not know how to place the barriers properly, how to work with all students simultaneously, etc. In other words, it is not that they do not want to do it in many cases, but that we have a traditional school model that is still very deeply rooted. We need a process that suggests that validated changes by other educational systems and configured as successful, but done in a thoughtful, reflective, planned, formative





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way and has a real impact in the classroom.

**JBG:** Schools and teachers who have these needs say, "I want to be an inclusive school, I want to be an inclusive teacher, but give me the tools, resources and possibilities that will allow me to be the teacher I would like to be or the school I want to be". But who is responsible for initial teacher education? The university. Faculties of education do not select to prepare the best teachers who will teach the best students. The tools, the resources, the endowments, the teaching staff, etc., everything has to go together and in harmony for this to be possible.

### - Could you tell us a successful story?

**AM:** From Aula Desigual, we ask ourselves, which school is really inclusive? But the answer is not easy because how does one measure inclusion? We have successful experiences, but rather than giving the example of a specific centre, it should be pointed out that every successful story has always had a team

of managers exercising their leadership in the centre, so transformation can occur. I like to think what M<sup>a</sup> Eugenia Pérez says, "the success of inclusion should be measured in the students' happiness". If we had a happiness meter, we would know which schools are inclusive and not.

**JBG:** Even when talking about success, this concept is misunderstood, and it is, therefore, a problem to label it as such. Some research claims that the SAD is unsuccessful because there is no improvement in results. We ask ourselves, where is this measure of educational success, where is this measure of successful experiences in inclusion? It is so difficult that I will stick with M<sup>a</sup> Eugenia's reflection: "in the happiness of the families, of the children". Allow me to tell you a personal anecdote: a girl with a negative success record, specifically in maths, at the end of the term, at the end of the evaluation and with her marks in hand, came to see me on the last day and said: "Teacher, can I give you a hug? Well, I'm not going to give it to you because we're doing

this COVID thing, but I'd really like to". The girl had not only passed, but she had learned. When she spoke to me and looked me in the eye and said this, I understood that what she was saying was: "Teacher, now I understand mathematics, I know what I'm talking about". I saw that happiness to which M<sup>a</sup> Eugenia refers. That is a small personal experience of success, but success nonetheless: the child's success, of course.

