

# THE ROLE OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER IN BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL

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## Abstract

Ensuring that all students have access to quality education is also recognizing the intrinsic value of diversity and respect for the dignity of the human person [1]. In this sense, concerning the inclusion of students with special educational needs, this is a process often seen as the exclusive responsibility of the Special Education teacher.

Assuming the importance of the Special Education Teacher (SE) role in the construction of a school that wants to be inclusive, this article aims to assess:

- 1 how the SE teacher works in schools;
- 2 how the work related to Special Education is organized and
- 3 what is the opinion of teachers about legislation related to Special Education.

The methodology adopted in this study took a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews as the data collection technique. The study was carried out in seven school groups, involving ten teachers (n = 10) specialized in Special Education.

Main results point to the fact that SE teachers identify several constraints to the promotion of a school that intends to be more inclusive, namely, lack of resources, ineligibility to support students with problems such as hyperactivity disorder and attention deficit and lack of connection between SE teachers and regular schoolteachers. In general, a Special Education teacher often has a supportive role only to the student, lacking articulation with regular education teachers so that they develop inclusive practices for all students, given global success.

Keywords: Inclusion, Special Education Teacher, diversity, special educational needs.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The present study was developed in the academic year 2016/2017, that is, before the current Decree-Law 54/2018 of July 6th (which establishes the legal regime for inclusive education) and which has as its central guiding principle a need for each School to recognize an added value of the diversity of its students, finding ways to deal with this difference, adapting the teaching processes to individual characteristics and conditions of each student, mobilizing means that provide for everyone to learn and participate in the life of the educational community. This implies a strong commitment to schools and their professionals' autonomy, namely through reinforcement of the intervention of special education teachers, as an active part of the educational teams in the definition of strategies and monitoring of curricular diversification.

The Decree-Law (DL n<sup>o</sup>) 3/2008 of January 7th, was based on the premise, amongst other, of responding to the diversity of characteristics and needs of all students, which implies the inclusion of children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) within the framework of a quality policy geared towards the educational success of all students.

The concept of SEN encompasses, according to Correia's perspective, "children and adolescents with atypical learning skills, that is, who do not follow a standard curriculum, requiring curricular adaptations, more or less generalized, according to the framework in which the problem [physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional or learning difficulties] of the child or adolescent is inserted "[2]. In this sense, for the same author, "children and adolescents with SEN have the right to a public, adequate and free education program, in the most appropriate learning environment, which answers to their educational needs and their pace and styles of learning. Thus, the School must be prepared to provide an effective response to the problem of students with SEN, according to their characteristics "(2008, p. 45), promoting their inclusion.

In this regard, the significant change introduced by DL no. 3/2008 in education is all students with SEN should have a place in a mainstream school, without segregating the highest degree of their limitation, thus making it understand School is truly for everyone and to everyone. Concept School is created, with a plurality of cases to be dealt with individually, which poses challenges to all educational agents, particularly to teachers and schools' leadership. Knowing the attitude towards change is, very often, of fear, the inclusion of students with SEN in schools has been carried out in a variable, irregular way, according to the people who receive them [3].

Since last decade of the 20th century, we have witnessed a series of international meetings, because of the concern of world organizations with the existence of an Education to All: World Declaration on Education for All [4], Salamanca Declaration [5], World Education Forum - Dakar Commitment [6] and the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities [7]. In all these meetings, the emphasis on the access of all children to mainstream schools, to whom they must offer appropriate educational methods, centred on their specificity, and needs, is common and the idea that the School must follow an all-inclusive orientation. Inclusion is seen as a primary mean of combating a society that discriminates against difference. The documents call on all Governments to implement the measures that make these matrixes concrete, create inclusive education systems, and adopt inclusive education in the form of law or policy [5].

The concept of inclusion is polysomic and does not gather consensus between authors, however, similar to the thinking [8] more than finding consensus on the conceptualization of the term inclusion, it is important to understand how inclusion is promoted and, in this study, the inclusion of children with SEN. Therefore, we understand that inclusion arises from a consensus that children with SEN should enjoy the same educational rights as children without SEN who include the same systems as all children, so the response should be global. The inclusive School's challenge is creating a child-centred pedagogy, from which all goals and objectives start, according to their profile and their specificities. Only then will it be possible to design a non-discriminatory culture and an inclusive society.

In the theoretical perspective of Ainscow and Miles [9] the concept of inclusion incorporates four dimensions that seek to provide educational responses to all students, regardless of their characteristics, namely that inclusion: i) is a process; ii) is interested in identifying and removing barriers; iii) seeks to ensure the presence, participation, and success of all and iv) emphasizes, in particular, the education of students at risk of marginalization, exclusion or low income.

Special Education teacher (SE) currently has many responsibilities regarding students' inclusion with SEN. However, Correia [10] reinforces that the functions of the SE teacher who wants to be integrated into a multidisciplinary team, must go through: adjust the student's standard curriculum in order to facilitate his learning; propose help and services for the student to achieve success inside and outside the classroom; alter the assessments in the sense that the student can show what he has learned; be aware of other aspects of individualized education that can respond to the needs of the student. The SE teacher must, therefore, be a promoting agent regarding the inclusion of students with SEN.

In terms of working with other teachers, the SE teacher should work cooperatively with the regular teacher; carry out consultancy work to teachers, parents, and other education professionals; make plans together with ER teachers; work directly with students with SEN in the classroom, support room or partial support room, according to the indications in the student's study plan [10]. In addition, the SE teacher's essential role in guiding the diversity support model must meet students with SEN, due to their knowledge about the students and specific techniques to implement inclusive practices.

In short, creating inclusive schools is considered desirable for equality and human rights, and has benefits not only educational but also social and economic [12].

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The methodology adopted in this study favoured a qualitative approach, whose ambition is to understand how the SE teacher can act, so the School where he works becomes effectively inclusive, in particular, for students with SEN, assuming themselves as the research problem translates into the following question: "What is the role of the SE teacher in the construction of an all-inclusive school?"

In order to respond to the research problem, the following objectives were defined:

- 1 how the SE teacher works in schools,

- 2 how SE-related work is organized,
- 3 what is the opinion of professionals about the current legislation related to SE.

In this sense, this article confers a descriptive analysis, which highlights the most relevant aspects of the inclusive practices of SE teachers participating in the study.

Therefore, the study involved ten SE teachers who answered a semi-structured interview to assess the interviewees' perceptions of their role as an SE teacher. It was taken account that scientific research is geared the analysis of concrete cases, in their particularities of time and space, starting from manifestations and activities of people in their contexts, realizing there is transience conditioned by personal and professional experience of participants, taken until the moment of the interview elaboration [13].

The criteria underlying the selection of teachers participating in the study were:

- 1 being specialized SE teachers who were in that school year (data collection moment) working with students with SEN;
- 2 geographic proximity issues between the schools involved in the study and the researcher's place/school.

Thus, a convenience criterion interfered in the selection of the sample by selecting cases with easy access. According to Flick [13], an a priori determination sample structure was made, according to the logic of statistical sampling, which groups the material according to a specific criterion; in this case, an abstract criterion of the interviewees being teachers of SE currently in teaching duties, defined before their collection and analysis.

*Table 1. Respondents characterization.*

<i>Interviewees</i>	<i>Service time</i>	<i>Service time in SE</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Specialized Training</i>	<i>Number of students supported</i>
E1	19	2	Visual and Technological Education	Specialized in SE	3
E2	16	6	Portuguese / French	Master in SE	6
E3	20	11	Portuguese / French	Specialized in SE	10
E4	14	2	1st cycle Basic Education	Master in SE	7
E5	11	3	Portuguese / English	Specialized in SE	9
E6	12	4	Geography	Master in International Relations	14
E7	15	5	Childhood Education	Specialized in SE	6
E8	16	7	Portuguese / French	Master in SE	6
E9	16	8	Portuguese / French	Specialized in SE	20
E10	20	6	Portuguese / French	Specialized in SE	13

After the data collection, it was necessary to proceed to its analysis and interpretation, and the preferred data treatment technique was content analysis

### 3 RESULTS

In this section will discuss the results obtained by analysing the relationship between data collected and objectives that motivated this investigation or by comparing it with results of investigations by other authors, considering the guiding issues of this study: inclusive practices in schools.

Returning to the question, which motivated this investigation - "What is the SE teacher's role in the construction of an inclusive school?" - and circumscribing it to the interviewed teachers, the data collected indicate that, in general, inclusion is challenging to be operationalised when there are too many students with SEN to support. In the perspective of inclusion advocated by Ainscow and Booth [8], inclusive education requires teachers and schools to develop effective pedagogical practices that guarantee all students' success is considering their idiosyncrasies, thus allowing participation of all children in learning.

According to most interviewees, students with SEN continue to be delegated to teachers of SE who serve them in a support room with other students with SEN, who present different problems with each other, perpetuating segregationist practices and not working collaboratively with teachers of RE, with

have such an extensive program that, at times, we could even think of doing a different activity for all students in the class; however, teachers do not have a morning or afternoon to spare for this. The teacher's dedication to the student with SEN who is in his class is compromised [by the extensive Program, it is understood]. (E4)

According to the interviewees, the RE teachers are not assuming their role in students' inclusion with SEN, so the SE teacher's intervention cannot support attending the student with SEN. However, it should be to make the RE teacher an element that builds inclusion, starting by alerting him to the need to see the student, considering his potential, and not only academic [10] [11]

The data collected in this study shows that RE and SE teachers exchange few ideas and that they mainly work individually, as can be seen in the interviewee's discourse (E6):

Teachers have many classes, many students, and many teaching hours. What is called a non-teaching component was used for teachers to talk about their students at school is now disappearing. There is neither time nor space to plan the intervention in students with SEN jointly. This does not promote inclusion.

According to Correia [2], it would be necessary for the school board to encourage teachers to work collaboratively, with a view of all students' inclusion, providing common time for teachers to gather, articulate, and plan the work to be developed with students. However, we believe that the "creation of this common working time" among teachers may not translate into teaching collaboration, as seen in the interviewee's speech (E10).

Our school has on Wednesday for two hours in the afternoon when SE teachers are available to coordinate with all CT teachers. If you ask me "Are there many teachers who come to you?" No, they are almost always the same, the most interested.

One of the aspects, according to the interviewees' perception, that seems to contribute to an inclusive school culture is when the Board has specific training in SEN, being a factor that positively influences the management of human resources (in terms of motivation, for example) and materials for SE.

Regarding the question of whether not legislation promotes inclusion, six of the interviewees consider that the legislation goes in the direction of promoting inclusion, but that it is not always experienced in practice, as mentioned by two of the interviewees:

It is people who make the inclusion and, as we have already seen, if people cannot do it, action must be taken to make the change (and here the Board's fundamental role in promoting the inclusive process is evident). (E1)

The legislation aims at inclusion, but in practice, it is challenging to implement this legislation. (E9)

RE teachers can also be a barrier for legislation to effectively implement inclusion:

The legislation points to it, but in practice, inclusion does not happen for all students. Those with the slightest disability are included, but those where it is most notorious are marginalised. RE teachers continue to feel that they should go to a special school, and the law does not say so. (E5)

Another limitation presented by legislation is related to the issue of human resources scarcity that prevents inclusion from being implemented, that is, there is a lack of people who support students from the Structured Teaching Unit for students with Autism spectrum (UEEA) and who can accompany them to the classroom.

The legislation aims at inclusion, but in reality, there is a lack of human resources since most students with autism only go to the classroom when supported. (E4)

DL nº 3/2008 does not include some SEN which, in the opinion of the interviewees, would make sense to have visibility and framing in the legislation:

One feels that the school has no other answer for students with learning difficulties than SE. The assessment is very quantitative, and according to the student, teaching is not differentiated. Dyslexia and hyperactivity also need a response. (E7)

Another main barrier to inclusion is, according to most respondents, the problems that are not covered by DL nº 3/2008 to benefit from SE support, leaving the students without the necessary support, the which, over time, ends up increasing its gap even more with other students, accentuating a limitation that could be lessened at first, which is in line with the recommendations of the National Education Council in 2014 [14]. In this regard, Colôa and Santos [15] note in DL no. 3/2008, the focus is on issues related to eligibility, proving there is a quantitative concern in the number of students eligible to benefit from SE measures to the detriment of the service quality they benefit from. So the absence of an SE response to these cases of students who are left destitute can be linked to this limitation in the number of students supported by measures of DL nº 3/2008.

Regarding the main constraints perceived by the ten SE teachers in their practice in favor of inclusion, data seems to be organized around three aspects:

- 1 The lack of articulation between SE teacher and RE teachers, as seen in the interviewees' speeches:

The lack of articulation of teachers of disciplines that do not provide us with the subject they will teach in time causes individualised support to be lost. The support should be given by the discipline's professor and not by the SE teacher. (E9)

The prejudice. The socio-economic environment, family's unwillingness, makes them resist inclusive measures and the work we intend to do. (...) The professors' lack of openness, especially those in the second and third cycles, is also an embarrassment. (...) We must look for the principal professor to help the student benefit and be included from SE measures. They do not look for us. I have been changing the attitude of some principal professors I work with this year, but not all. There are still many regular teachers who tell me that inclusion is a utopia. (E5)

- 2 The SE teacher's bureaucracy is responsible for students with SEN, which reduces the time available to work effectively and directly with students.
- 3 The board's lack of interest in the work carried out by the SE team:

The fact that the Board is not interested in the work developed by EEA. (E9)

Aspects, such as those mentioned above, seem to determine the SE teacher's role, in a sense that is more to support SEN students in the classroom directly, so they are not excluded than to provide means for teachers in the RE classroom so that they are able, themselves, to lead the process of inclusion of their students with SEN.

To act on these main constraints, so the role of the SE teacher is to support directly, but also indirectly the participants in the inclusion process, we consider that the SE teacher action must fall, firstly, on the school's board, since its role is important in defining the school's inclusive culture. Study results reveal that schools with specialized SE elements in the board team have higher and better inclusion rates in the SE team's work quality.

Data from the interviews with EE teachers implies that awareness-raising campaigns are important before students' reception with new problems, which the community is not aware of. In this way, they can more effectively accompany students, considering their specificities.

In global terms, and considering the data collected, the number of students SE teachers must work with is much higher than what it should be. Consequently, the number of hours of individualized support each student benefits from developing specific SE skills (cognitive stimulation, attention,

memorization, etc.) is reduced, being, in many cases, non-existent. The SE teacher must group students into small heterogeneous groups concerning each student's functionality profile, thereby compromising their support quality. However, there are positive aspects in this study, which meet the study results by Correia [2], namely: in general, schools are well equipped, and the SE team works collaboratively in favor of inclusion, articulating with the Board, teachers, operational assistants, and guardians.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained in this study, point us to the importance of investing in the development of the educational community, namely teachers of regular education and operational assistants, investing in specific SEN training, is simultaneously betting on the quality of school inclusion.

Considering the different conceptions of the concept of inclusion that define it as a process [8] that aspires results, we can say its operationalization still presents several weaknesses, which are related to the fact it involves people with different sensibilities and with different roles, which do not always articulate in view of the student's success with SEN.

Creating mechanisms so that children/young people with SEN, excluded from so much, can access a place in society, full of rights, is crucial. Teachers must adopt effective teaching practices for all students, in accordance with the fundamental right to an education that all children and young people have.

From the data collected in this study and considering the theoretical research done on them, it is considered there are a series of questions that could be developed in future studies, always with a sense to the inclusion of students with SEN. They are:

- What are the aspects related to the teacher's sensitivity that directly affect the student's inclusion in the classroom?
- What are the quantitative aspects that most interfere in excluding students with SEN from the classroom?
- What attitudes of the different members of the educational community influence the student's inclusion in the school?
- And which aspects are most influenced by the Board in the inclusion of students with SEN?

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