

University Management and the Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in Higher Education

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Abstract

With the expansion of public policies for inclusion and the democratization of access to higher education, especially since the 1990s, there has been a growing enrollment of students with disabilities in universities, contributing to the development of new academic and professional profiles. This article derives from a Master's research in Education that investigated how the access of students with disabilities reverberates in institutional inclusion policies and university management practices. The study focused on understanding the challenges faced by managers in implementing these policies, based on narrative interviews conducted with administrators from four universities (a federal public, a state public, a community, and a private institution). The empirical material was organized into thematic clusters and analyzed through Discourse Analysis inspired by Michel Foucault. The findings reveal that although regulations establish general guidelines, management actions are strongly shaped by institutional contexts as well as by the personal and collective experiences of the managers. Their decisions reflect both possibilities of coping and the constraints imposed by cultural and institutional resistances, which give inclusion policies distinct contours in each university. It is concluded that university management for inclusion constitutes a process marked by multiple challenges, requiring the organization of priorities, modes of action, and distribution of responsibilities, thus reaffirming the importance of effective and contextually sensitive policies to ensure the rights of students with disabilities.

Keywords: university management, inclusion in higher education, students with disabilities, institutional policies, discourse analysis

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Introduction

With the expansion of public policies for inclusion and the democratization of access to higher education, especially from the 1990s onwards, there has been a growing enrollment of broader segments of the population in universities, particularly students with disabilities, a movement that has contributed to the formation of new academic and professional profiles.

This scenario imposes on university management a set of highly complex challenges, which are the focus of our investigation, as it requires the formulation and implementation of institutional policies capable of ensuring not only access, but also the permanence and academic success of these students, in dialogue with the pedagogical, structural, financial, political, and cultural demands inherent to the university context.

According to Law No. 13.146/2015 (Brazil, 2015), Article 2, which establishes the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, a person with disability is defined as someone who “has a long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment which, in interaction with one or more barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

This definition points to a paradigm shift, in which disability is no longer understood as an attribute exclusively of the individual, but rather as a relational condition resulting from the interaction between individual characteristics and contextual barriers, whether physical, communicational, attitudinal, or institutional. It is, therefore, a matter of shifting the focus from the individual to the ways in which social spaces are organized and norms are constructed. In this context, the educational inclusion of people with disabilities is understood as a dimension of social rights, requiring the State to implement public policies and managers to implement institutional policies that ensure access, permanence, and effective learning conditions for students with disabilities.

However, the materialization of these guidelines does not occur in a homogeneous or conflict-free manner, since educational policies, even when framed within humanitarian and benevolent discourse, inherently carry structural contradictions that reflect the social disputes and historical conflicts present in the educational field. As argued by Shiroma, Moraes, and Evangelista (2002), these contradictions are not mere accidents, but rather expressions of the power relations that permeate the educational context. For Foucault (2009), truths are produced throughout history, permeated by power relations; that is, societies possess their own regime of truth depending on time and context. Thus, this study seeks to show how the legal imperatives of inclusion influence university managers, the focus of our investigation, in creating institutional policies that foster access and accessibility for students with disabilities in higher education.

This paper is based on completed research that resulted in a Master’s dissertation in Education. The research problem that guided the study was formulated as follows: how does the access of students with disabilities in higher education reverberate in institutional inclusion policies and in university management practices concerning the rights of this group? The general objective of the study was to analyze how the access of students with disabilities in higher education reverberates in institutional inclusion policies and in university management practices.

From this general objective, three specific objectives were derived, among which we chose to focus the analysis on the following: to understand the challenges faced by managers in applying policies related to the inclusion of students with disabilities in the university. This is a research cutout aimed at understanding the challenges faced by university managers in implementing inclusion policies, highlighting the multiplicity of obstacles they identify in establishing and operationalizing institutional inclusion and accessibility policies. These challenges encompass academic demands, financial management, adaptations in the university's infrastructure, and personnel management, involving processes of accountability and coping with the cultural and organizational resistances specific to the university context.

Our motivation for conducting this study lies in the fact that the inclusion of people with disabilities, although a widely explored theme, has predominantly focused on teachers, the students themselves, or inclusive education policies, and less on university managers. However, the involvement of management is fundamental for institutional policies to be created and implemented.

The paper is organized into four subsections: initially, we present the methodology adopted; next democratization of higher education, we analyze and discuss the results; and finally, we present the concluding remarks, which summarize the main contributions of the study.

Methodology

For this study, managers working at four universities located in Chapecó, SC/Brazil, were interviewed: one federal public, one state public, one community, and one private institution. Although these higher education institutions (HEIs) have different legal statuses, they generally follow the same regulations regarding academic and administrative organization, since, in the field of inclusion, they are equally subject to federal regulations that must be observed by all institutions regardless of their composition.

The criterion for defining the managers interviewed was the position held within the institution, such as academic director, administrative director, or equivalent. These professionals occupied management positions with responsibilities directly related to accessibility actions and the inclusion of students with disabilities in the university. Therefore, their selection was based on their institutional roles. Initial contact and the indication of participants were mediated by the person responsible for the accessibility sector in each university. Job titles were kept according to the organizational and hierarchical structures of the institutions studied.

The empirical material for the research was generated through narrative interviews. According to Andrade (2014, p. 175), the narrative interview is “[...] a research possibility redefined within the field of post-structuralist research from an ethnographic perspective.” The author emphasizes that “[...] narratives are constituted from the connection between discourses that articulate, overlap, add to one another, or, still, differ or contemporize” (Andrade, 2014, p. 181).

The interviews were organized into Thematic Groupings, considering the relevance and recurrence of the statements, and examined through Discourse Analysis inspired by Michel Foucault. From this perspective, the analysis does not aim to approach language as an abstract system, but rather to focus on its role in the production of meanings and effects. As

Sales (2014, p. 127) notes, “[...] it is about analyzing why something is said, in that way, at a given time and context, questioning the “conditions of existence” of discourse.”

Democratization of Higher Education

The understanding of formal education as a universal right has been gradually constructed throughout history, influenced by national regulatory frameworks and by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which set guidelines for the global educational context, significantly impacting the Brazilian educational system.

In the so-called “knowledge era,” access to education has come to be seen as an essential condition for national progress, strongly influenced by international organizations and normative documents that link educational qualification to global citizenship and economic growth. However, the analysis of educational indicators reveals that access to quality education, even at basic levels, is still far from a universal reality, especially for historically marginalized populations. In this regard, not only people with disabilities have been excluded from school systems over time, but also Indigenous, Quilombola, riverside, and peripheral populations, who, for distinct social and structural reasons, have been denied access to inclusive and quality public education. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020), on a global scale, many students still face significant barriers to studying:

Many students still face major barriers to a quality education. Even before the current pandemic, one in five adolescents, youth, and children were entirely excluded from education. In addition, the existence of stigmas, stereotypes, and discrimination means that millions more are excluded within classrooms themselves. (UNESCO, 2020, p. 5).

According to Conte (2011), the 1932 Manifesto of the Pioneers of New Education already pointed out that, between the 1920s and 1940s, the illiteracy rate in Brazil exceeded 65% of the population, a figure that did not even account for the majority of Indigenous and Quilombola populations, historically rendered invisible in official statistics. In this context, the presence of people with disabilities in schools and, more recently, in universities and graduate programs, is part of a broader and more complex process of contesting exclusionary logics within Brazilian education.

The scenario of educational inequality and exclusion of various social groups, including people with disabilities, triggered throughout the 20th century and the early decades of the 21st century the publication of important normative texts. One milestone was the Salamanca Statement of 1994 (UNESCO, 1994), which established principles, policies, and practices addressing special educational needs, giving the school inclusion movement greater strength and visibility on a global scale. Also noteworthy is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007), considered one of the most comprehensive international documents on the subject, which, once ratified by Brazil with constitutional amendment status, reverberated in the elaboration of Law No. 13,146/2015 (Brasil, 2015), known as the Statute for Persons with Disabilities, consolidating principles of equality, non-discrimination, and accessibility in Brazil’s legal framework across various social spaces, including education.

In the context of higher education, Law No. 13.409/2016 (Brasil, 2016) represented a milestone by amending Law No. 12.711/2012 (the “Quota Law”), granting people with disabilities the right to reserved places in federal higher education institutions. This measure expanded the scope of quota policies, contributing to strengthening permanence policies and promoting diversity in academic spaces. Complementarily, Law No. 14,723/2023 (Brasil, 2023) introduced new guidelines to expand access for historically excluded groups, including people with disabilities, to federal higher and technical education. In this legislation, Article 7-B, for the first time, explicitly established the legal requirement for institutions to adopt affirmative policies for people with disabilities in access to graduate programs.

This regulatory framework reinforces the Brazilian State’s commitment to the democratization of higher education, while also highlighting new challenges for university management. Enforcing quotas and affirmative policies involves not only creating mechanisms for access but also managing the complexity of diverse demands that permeate higher education and students’ academic lives. Among these demands are challenges related to ensuring quality academic training and internship opportunities; financial management, which involves the allocation of resources to cover adaptations and inclusive actions; and personnel management, which requires investment in continuing education, still marked by low adherence of faculty and staff to training opportunities. In addition, there is a need for adjustments in university infrastructure, with physical and organizational modifications to guarantee accessibility conditions.

Management is also faced with accountability processes, expressed in institutional and social demands for the effectiveness of inclusion, as well as with cultural and attitudinal resistances, which range from questioning the “right to be” in higher education to the effectiveness of students’ permanence. In this scenario, managers are constantly required to meet multiple demands, balancing budgetary constraints, legal pressures, and social expectations regarding inclusion.

Thus, legislation functions as a regulatory framework whose effectiveness, however, depends on the articulation of financial resources, political will, and institutional engagement—elements that vary significantly according to the nature and context of higher education institutions, as well as the characteristics and level of commitment of their managers. These provisions are directly aligned with international commitments and express the growing strength of inclusion discourse as a social and political value in contemporary times. Nevertheless, even with the expansion of the normative framework for inclusion, educational indicators highlight the structural challenges in the context of higher education.

Data from the 2023 Higher Education Census (Brasil, 2024) show that the number of students enrolled at this level of education is close to 10 million. According to Table 13, “undergraduate enrollment reached a total of 9,976,782 in 2023, representing an increase of 5.6% compared to the previous edition of the Higher Education Census” (Brasil, 2024, p. 23). According to the Ministry of Education, in 2013 there were 29,221 students with disabilities enrolled in higher education, corresponding to only 0.4% of total enrollment. Ten years later, in 2023, this number rose to 92,756 students, including people with disabilities, pervasive developmental disorders, and giftedness, raising participation to 0.9% (Brasil, 2024, p. 28).

However, this percentage does not reach 1% of total enrollment in higher education across Brazil. This data highlights the deep underrepresentation of people with disabilities in higher education, demonstrating that, despite normative advances and inclusion policies, the

realization of the right to higher education still faces structural and institutional barriers that limit the participation of this social group.

The data also reveal that attending university is not a reality for the majority of people with disabilities, a result of the continuous reduction of this group throughout schooling. In 2023, the number of enrollments in special education reached 616,394 students in the early years of elementary education, but only 223,258 in secondary education (Brasil, 2024, p. 51).

This decline appears as a “funnel,” marked by structural, pedagogical, and social barriers that hinder the permanence of students with disabilities and limit their chances of progressing to higher education. These indicators reveal discontinuity, interruption, or even dropout from schooling. In this sense, they expose the complexity involved in managing a higher education institution, which includes not only administering resources and meeting goals but, above all, conceiving a collective project of integral education, social inclusion, and regional development.

Analysis and Discussion of Results

The discursive recurrences show that managers do not contest the inclusion of people with disabilities, revealing their subjectivation to this unquestionable right. They acknowledge the need to implement institutional policies, even as a condition for the satisfactory evaluation of undergraduate programs, whose instruments include aspects related to inclusion and accessibility. However, as the dialogue deepens, they begin to express challenges that, at times, suggest forms of resistance.

University managers express numerous challenges in establishing and implementing institutional inclusion policies and ensuring the necessary architectural, attitudinal, communicational, methodological, and digital accessibility. *Academic demands* are broad and multifaceted, encompassing ethical and professionalization issues inherent to the objectives of higher education. They are based on the understanding that inclusion cannot be reduced to mere facilitation but must guarantee access to academic content, activities, quality education, fair assessment, and professional success. Manager A, representing the State Public University, laments:

[...] even those who are not learning are being passed along. That is what is happening in many elementary schools. [...] You are only making that person coexist, but not contributing to their becoming independent in the future. You include in the sense that they are developing, but you exclude in the sense of knowledge. [...] In higher education, you cannot close your eyes to the objectives the student must achieve by the end of the semester. They must develop skills and competences by the end of the program [...].

Manager C, from the Federal Public University, highlights the legal imperative of inclusion as the driving force behind the creation of institutional policies, stating:

[...] I think that if we did not have this federal-level pressure, the institution on its own would not manage. It would be just another thing left aside, forgotten. The macro legislation comes with force, it imposes. [...] The Ministry of Education requires two semester reports on what has been done.

This statement demonstrates the perception that institutional action regarding inclusion and accessibility is conditioned by the pressure exerted by the *legal apparatus* and the mechanisms of federal regulation and supervision. By declaring that “if we did not have this federal-level pressure, the institution on its own would not manage,” the manager expresses a central element of public education policies: the ongoing tension between legislation and its concrete implementation in the daily life of higher education institutions.

How can we manage such a diversity of demands in a university spread across six campuses? It is one thing to provide this in only one place. We have seven sign language interpreters and we know we do not meet the demand. And investments? Because we will be held accountable for that. But we are not the ones who determine the amount of resources transferred to the university for investment. (Manager A2)

Financial management emerges as one of the greatest obstacles to implementing inclusion policies. Managers mention the lack of specific financial resources for accessibility, particularly within community universities. Demands include investments in human resources, assistive technologies, and architectural adaptations, often costly and without targeted funding. These universities have no owners and are non-profit; their resources come mainly from student tuition fees and, when from public funding, are returned to students in the form of scholarships. Manager B, representing a Community University, explains this pressure:

I can stress that it is a management decision to prioritize this, because for community institutions resources are scarce, the blanket is short. So, inclusion also has this side, which is often not adequately addressed, but making inclusion happen is something very expensive. In many cases, it is not just a matter of decision or attitudes. Although attitudes are the hardest aspect to change, because it is easier to build a ramp or install an elevator than to change the way people perceive the possibilities of a student with disabilities.

This manager expressed the institutional commitment to inclusion, directing resources as a priority toward accessibility, a decision that requires confrontation and the sensitization of the academic community.

In terms of *personnel management*, continuing education for faculty and staff is seen as essential to guarantee inclusive practices, although participation is not always satisfactory. Accountability also emerges as a key issue, reflecting the multiple demands placed on university management by various social actors, including faculty, students, government, and partner organizations. The recurring statement “the need to cope” reflects a perceived obligation to meet inclusive demands despite institutional limitations.

The excerpts presented here are representative of the institutions studied. The managers’ narratives reveal dynamic and varied challenges, marked by a tension between achievements and resistances. In contemporary educational contexts, the notion of in/exclusion exposes the limits and discontinuities of inclusion processes, since in some situations, student insertion occurs in contexts that perpetuate exclusion.

This complexity demonstrates that inclusion is not a linear process but a field of tensions where inclusion policies and practices face structural and cultural barriers that shape the academic trajectories of students with disabilities. Nevertheless, access to university and to

professional careers derived from higher education also highlights ableism, which for a long time closed doors to people with disabilities, often generalized as incapable. For Mello (2014, p. 54), ableism is manifested through “prejudiced attitudes that hierarchize subjects according to the adequacy of their bodies to an ideal of beauty and functional capacity. Based on ableism, people with disabilities are discriminated against.”

Thus, understanding the presence of students with disabilities in higher education and the practices of managers in guaranteeing their rights and demands requires recognizing the multiplicity of events that constitute the inclusion process, beyond statistical numbers, given the ongoing need to acknowledge difference as a way of being in the world. Costa and Pieczkowski (2020, p. 17) argue that the presence of students with disabilities in universities provokes reflections on “how to think and enact Higher Education, since even if students are categorized (hearing impairment, physical disability, intellectual disability, visual impairment, multiple disabilities, etc.), each one is unique and has particular demands.” In other words, this challenges the naturalized idea of standardized students, curricula, times, and spaces.

Inclusion, therefore, is a multifaceted process, whose responsibility is shared by different social spheres, limiting the possibility of quick or simplistic solutions within university management. In this context, academic community representations of disability play both a social and political role: when based on generalizing views, they may reinforce practices of ableism, benevolence, welfarism, or even exclusion; while in the dynamic of recognizing difference, they may foster practices of solidarity, political engagement, and rights advocacy. This tension reveals that the movement toward inclusion is shaped not only by legal and political frameworks but also by the ability of universities and their managers to question their own practices and collectively build more equitable and transformative institutional cultures.

Conclusion

The study highlights the complexity underlying university management, involving administrative, economic, structural, and cultural issues. By analyzing the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education through a Foucauldian lens, the study reveals processes of subjectivation and power relations that permeate management practices. These practices are marked by the effort to meet legal requirements and by the ethical commitment to inclusive education, yet they are also characterized by subtle exclusions that expose the limitations of institutional policies which, while broadening access, do not always guarantee conditions for persistence and academic success. Within the logic of education as a commodity, inclusion is transformed into a managerial objective, regulated by metrics and indicators of academic productivity, while overlooking the singularities and specific needs of students with disabilities.

Inclusion policies guide managers into conducting strategies for managing people with disabilities, who for a long historical period remained at the margins of higher education and are now inserted in this context—both by the imperative of the right to education and by strategies of security and risk minimization.

The study makes it evident that regulations establish general guidelines, but managerial actions are directed by the specific contexts in which they operate. Their choices are influenced by personal experiences, the groups and networks to which they belong, and their

capacity to confront and make decisions in light of the demands and challenges of their institutional environments.

Thus, inclusion policies take on distinct contours in each context, reflecting institutional specificities and the subjectivities involved in the process of university management. University management for inclusion is marked by the organization of priorities and modes of action that guide decisions and allocate responsibilities within an agenda traversed by multiple challenges, while cultural and institutional resistances persist.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

This manuscript made use of ChatGPT (OpenAI) exclusively to support the translation of the text from Portuguese into English. The use of AI was limited to language translation.

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