

Rethinking Inclusive Education in Portugal

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Abstract

After the Salamanca Statement, UNESCO (2017) reiterated the challenge that every student matters and matters equally. Therefore, the policies, practices and culture of inclusion must dictate the guarantee of equity, coating with authenticity an education aimed at “for all,” “with all” and “by all,” through political decision-makers, educational agents and of societies that have the duty and mission not to let the fundamental values inherent in human coexistence fade away. In this context, being able to learn, relate and cooperate with others is particularly important, in the context of the growing complexity of contemporary societies. The school plays an important role in valuing learning for a democratic experience, which has led to the adoption of new forms of collaborative work, justified by the resulting benefits. The narrative of the educational policy, in the field of Inclusive Education, has enabled the understanding of the pedagogical space, beyond the walls of the school. The vision of a school that doesn't close in on itself and that finds spaces for pedagogical and curricular emancipation in its glocal territory presents itself as a future scenario for education. This essay is a critical reflection, based on a hermeneutic approach that, structured in pedagogical thinking, underpins Inclusive Education in Portugal, and juxtaposes it with the potential of teachers' collaborative work and the assumption of the territory as an educational space. It insists, therefore, on the mobilization of knowledge that conveys several possibilities of together (UNESCO, 2021) imagining other possible scenarios for an education with equity.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Collaborative Work, Education Policy, Portugal

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Introduction

The inclusive school is an unshakable right. However, constructing an inclusive school demands the collaboration of different decision-makers and actors to ensure it becomes a reality, effective, and efficient. Therefore, the dynamism inherent in the educational process and knowledge should not be exhausted in terms of individualistic performance but should be based on collaborative, dialoguing, and enlightened practices. These practices lead to horizons of exploratory exercises that allow students to blossom and link transforming skills. These skills offer them the possibility of intertwining theoretical and practical elements, which constitute their present expectations, with the teachings from actors and scenarios that have laid the foundation of the past, leaving us a legacy prodigal in possibilities.

In this sense, we agree with Hannoun (1997) when he states:

The educator is a navigator who studies his route by all the scientific means at his disposal, but who, before leaving, freely chose the direction to take and bet on it. Navigating implies obedience and a wavered choice: obedience to the weight of the means to carry out the route and personal choice of the route (...). This is reflection and choice. The instruments of the first are observation, induction, deduction, and other verification; the second is a matter of extra-rational decision (...) (p. 163)

Indeed, the last few decades of contemporary times have been prodigal in the struggle for Inclusion, judging by the emphasis on intentions, speeches, recommendations, and regulations and by the efforts made to put it into practice, in a harmonious and effective way.

Gradually, the philosophy of inclusion dictated the choice of effective and efficient care measures. In this regard, Correia (2008) declared:

The existence of a process that allows adequate responses to the needs of students with special needs (SEN) is the first step towards their educational success. In this sense, any process that we intend to implement, must make the collaborative work between regular education teachers, special education teachers, other education professionals and parents based on reliable interventions, proven by research, that facilitate the individualization of teaching, the implementation of strategies that meet the abilities and needs of these students and the monitoring of their performance, considering their global functioning. (p. 21)

The Potential of Collaborative Work and the Rationale for Inclusion

Collaborative work and its potential, particularly in the school space, have gained notoriety as strategies to improve the performance of school institutions.

This emerging process is referred to in several legal regulations, which highlight the necessity of collaborative work between teachers. For instance, Law 137/2012, of July 2, approves the regime of autonomy, administration, and management of public establishments of pre-school education and basic and secondary education. Considering the development of the educational project, the structures that collaborate with the pedagogical council and the director are established in the internal regulations in order to promote collaborative work and “the articulation and curriculum management must promote cooperation between teachers.” (Portugal, 2012, articles n.º 42 and n.º 43, point 1).

Law n.º 55/2018, of July 6, which establishes the basic and secondary education curriculum and the guiding principles of learning assessment, highlights in its guiding principles the “valuation of collaborative and interdisciplinary work in planning, carrying out, and evaluating teaching and learning” (Portugal, 2018). This new legal framework aims to promote educational quality and efficiency, stating that different forms of the organization of pedagogical dynamics can be implemented. Notably, these include those that assume collaborative work, the exchange of knowledge and experiences, through collaboration practices between teachers from the same year or cycle, from different cycles and levels of education, and from different subject areas, as well as temporary exchanges between teachers from the same area or subject area (Portugal, 2018).

This vision is also reinforced by Law n.º 54/2018, of July 6, which establishes the legal framework for inclusive education in Portugal. In terms of the lines of action for inclusion, it sets out that:

Schools must include in their guiding documents the lines of action for the creation of a school culture where everyone finds opportunities to learn and the conditions to fully realize themselves, responding to the needs of each student, valuing diversity, and promoting equity and non-discrimination in access to the curriculum and progression through compulsory education. (Portugal, 2018a)

In this framework of inclusive education, it should be noted that support measures for learning and inclusion should be developed in a collaborative work logic and co-responsibility with special education teachers, depending on the specificities of the students (Portugal, 2018a). This collaborative effort (UNESCO, 2021) is reinforced by the UNESCO report, *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education* (2021), when it states in the field of proposals for renewing education that: “teaching should be further professionalized as a collaborative endeavor where teachers are recognized for their work as knowledge producers and key figures in educational and social transformation” and that “schools should be protected educational sites because of the inclusion, equity and individual and collective well-being they support – and also reimagined to better promote the transformation of the world towards more just, equitable and sustainable futures” (UNESCO, 2021, p. 4).

Nevertheless, evidence points to difficulties in implementing collaborative work among teachers, in part due to individualistic practices, which have long typified teaching work. These practices are built and rooted in the professional and organizational culture of teachers and schools (Roldão, 2007). This teaching isolation originates from factors such as the architecture of schools, the structure of their schedules, work overload, and the history of the teaching profession itself (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2000).

According to Pacheco (1998), the teacher’s pedagogical action in a single teaching regime also contributed to this teaching individualism. It's based on pedagogical practices that took place in the refuge of their classroom, with their students, their own methods, their manuals, and their “lack of multidisciplinary competence” (p. 161).

Today, emerging collaborative cultures create and sustain “more fulfilling and productive work environments. By empowering teachers and reducing the uncertainties of their work – which would otherwise have to be faced in isolation – these cultures also increase student success” (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2001, p. 90).

The authors underscore the importance of collaborative work and planning among teachers, who, by sharing and developing their skills together, can optimize their pedagogical action, instead of dealing in isolation with the demands of the educational context. Sebarroja (2001) appreciates shared work and asserts that “the main driving force of change are the teachers who work in a coordinated and cooperative manner in schools” (p. 29).

Also, Silva (2002) admits that “the probability of successfully solving a problem in cooperation is much greater than individually, as knowledge and specialties are shared during this interaction and the articulation of different proposals promotes a more adequate solution” (p.49). Hopkins (2005) considers that the school should promote collaborative work with the objective of “School Improvement”, which promotes the academic success of students and facilitates change and improvement in the school.

The school committed to innovation and change is, therefore, challenged to promote a culture of collaboration, understood as a teacher’s professional development strategy, and which, according to Hargreaves (1998), leads to “a greater willingness to experiment and to take risks” (p. 209). For the author, the orthodoxy of change brings together collaboration and collegiality, and encourages the sharing of knowledge among teachers, as well as the expansion of skills, an increase in their professional development.

Identity Pathways of Inclusive Education in Portugal: The Case of the Autonomous Region of Madeira

Sustained by the previous assumptions, we wanted to situate the route taken by the Autonomous Region of Madeira, considering the peculiarity of political, operational, and cultural decisions and the positive effects that it triggered in the field of inclusion.

We begin by highlighting the creation of the Regional Directorate for Special Education and Rehabilitation (DREER) (the only one in Portugal) with the mission of supervising Special Education and Rehabilitation services in Madeira. The guiding beliefs of the decision-makers in DREER are: Ideology (in the determination and binding of ideals and principles); Policy (in support of regulations, measures and options); Social structure (in welcoming and legitimizing means); Places (in the singularity of contexts and influence on action); Culture (in the dissemination of attitudes, choices and commitments); Paradigms (in the relationship between knowledge and change) and Practices (in establishing and consolidating responses).

The history of Special Education in Madeira was triggered by the need to welcome and look at the differences that segregated Madeiran children and young people. Afterwards, its protagonists were weaving the indelible threads of a web that was as fragile as it was vigorous, in the harmony of their daring. Associating it with the symbolic image of Galeano (2015) we can say that we find in it the exercise of a Microscopic look - seeing what we cannot see with the naked eye and that deserves to be looked at; and at the same time a Telescopic look - to look, from the hole of our keyholes, at the grandeur into which small and insignificant things can transform.

And, because, as Gedeão (1971) stated, “(...) there are no two identical leaves in all of creation; either less vein or too many cells, there are certainly no two sheets alike (...)” (p. 65) gradually, DREER focused its gaze on otherness, not to demean or exclude those with special needs, but to build tolerance and awareness, constituted in primacy that mobilized dreams and desires, arising from people and from the recommendations of international organizations.

In fact, it is from this body, led by political and educational decision-makers, that proactive actions have been adjusted and implemented to the local reality, based on international dictates and recommendations regarding inclusion. To this end, they surrounded themselves with specialized human resources, in different functional and knowledge areas, conceived and encouraged the appropriation of instruments, rules and regulations, around which they founded ideals and driving forces, optimizing, in our opinion, the very sharp motto that the Council for Exceptional Children (USA) launched in 2017: “All Educators. Every Child. No Limits.”

Aiming to be viewed in a holistic way, Special Education services have established their foundations in the attention and acceptance of difference, in the belief that inclusion, conveyed in the different domains of family, social, economic, and cultural life, brings out the value and benefits of a fairer and more supportive society for all, in the promotion of equal opportunities, based on non-discrimination of those with special needs. Referring to this “Education for All” Camacho (2016) states:

As a dynamic process and receptacle for the multiple transformations that contemporary societies are instilling in it, inclusion demands that we revisit the paths taken, in an attempt to rediscover the roots that made it sprout, from a set of unsuspected utopias, which elected the school for all as an institution that includes all people, accepts differences, supports learning, and responds to individual needs. (p. 32)

In order to establish and promote inclusive education in Madeira, and drawing from the experience acquired and honed in the light of scientific studies and appeals from international bodies in the area of education and human rights, measures and regulations were resized to confront and eradicate the pedagogical indifference of some practices. These practices were based on the philosophy of the masterful lesson and the concept of the ideal student, as a guaranteed standard of success. Among others, we highlight the following norms: Public Law (94/42/1975), USA; Warnock Report (1978), UK; Jomtien Conference (1990), Thailand; Declaration of Salamanca (1994), Spain; Charter of Luxembourg (1996); Declaration of Madrid (2002), Spain.

To this end, among many other measures, action-research projects were launched within regular education establishments. These projects sought to push aside perfunctory assistance and didactic facilitation, which were countless times coated with drastic and obstructive curricular adaptations that hindered access to the skills and knowledge that the academic path promised. In addition, transdisciplinary intervention was chosen as a proposed course of action, opening its staff to professionals from key areas, namely, speech therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists, social service technicians, psychometricians, dieticians, specialized teachers, and those from other areas, such as music education, physical education, visual education, and manual and workshop work.

We can assert that, in doing so, they fulfilled what was established in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) by participants at the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality:

- To ensure that special needs education forms part of every discussion dealing with education for all in various forums,
- To mobilize the support of organizations of the teaching profession in matters related to enhancing teacher education as regards provision for special educational needs,

- To stimulate the academic community to strengthen research and networking and to establish regional centers of information and documentation; also,
- To serve as a clearinghouse for such activities and for disseminating the specific results and progress achieved at country level in pursuance of this Statement. (p. xi)

A year later, in 1994, the World Congress on Special Educational Needs was held by the Spanish Government, in collaboration with UNESCO. The event resulted in the Salamanca Statement, to which Portugal was also a signatory. This statement constituted an ideal for welcoming everyone into the school, promoting genuine inclusion.

The Salamanca Statement demonstrates how, despite the rarity or even non-existence of other similar services, regional decision-makers did not shy away from taking decisive action for those who clearly needed Special Education services as an alternative to regular education. This approach aligned with the guidelines issued by UNESCO at the time, which called upon the governments of various countries to include, in their decisions and policies, the integration of diverse individuals, acknowledging their right to equal opportunities and normalization.

In our effort to unpack the key ideas previously explored, we recognize that the milestones and events through which DREER consolidated its Special Education model were not a matter of mere chance. Rather, they were founded on political, social, and economic choices. These choices, coupled with the study and monitoring of emerging developments, especially in Europe, gradually shaped a distinctive organizational path. This was evident in the guiding principles of the service they proposed, as well as in the goals they aimed to achieve.

Surprisingly, and reinforcing what we have just stated, we found a letter from Gaston Mialaret addressed to the leaders of Madeira following his visit to the island:

(...) De retour en France, nous tenons à vous exprimer toute notre reconnaissance pour l'accueil que vous nous avez réservé lors de notre bref séjour à Madère (...) J'ai pu apprécier la qualité du travail effectué par l'équipe constituée par vous-même et trois de vos collègues.

En tant qu'organisateur du 6ème Congrès International de l'Association Internationale de Pédagogie Expérimentale de Langue Française (...) je serai heureux de **pouvoir profiter de votre expérience et de vos réflexions** en ce qui concerne les problèmes qui font l'objet du thème du Congrès.

Pourriez-vous demander à votre Gouvernement que l'équipe constituée par vous-même et vos trois collègues soient délégués comme représentants de l'île de Madère à notre Congrès?

Ci joint une invitation officielle pour le Congrès (...) j'espère avoir le plaisir de vous recevoir à CAEN en juillet 1987 (...) (Mialaret, 1987)

Conclusion

Conclusively, from the enthusiastic and significant action of decision-makers and educational actors, to which were added consequent decision-making, regulations, responses, and measures, the political-practice-culture triad was materialized and disseminated. It was equated in

different ways, through diverse protagonists, according to the concepts, principles, and philosophy of intervention that the different eras dictated.

As Silva and Fraga (2022) point out,

It is essential to admit that the educational action and the act of teaching imply making decisions, taking risks, assuming responsibilities on the part of teachers, which are not just of a technical nature. For the democratization of schools, the participation of conscious, free, and responsible subjects in the democratic decision-making process is essential, but the assumption of territories, their idiosyncrasies, and local processes of territorialization of public education policies must also be claimed. (p. 124)

It is understood that the history of inclusive education in Madeira was built, above all, from the autonomy conquered by the Region, mediated by the critical readings that it intends to construct, considering the global recommendations and policies in the field of special education and the idiosyncrasies of its educational, social, and cultural territory. People make the difference within organizations, so the role of leaders is presented as a relevant factor in the transformation of policies, institutions and specifically the processes and practices that intend to substantiate a system and an inclusive and democratic school.

We reinforce, therefore, that the narrative of the educational policy, in the field of Inclusive Education, has enabled the understanding of the pedagogical space, beyond the walls of the school. The vision of a school that doesn't close in on itself and that finds spaces for pedagogical and curricular emancipation in its glocal territory presents itself as a future scenario for education.

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