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Inclusive Education: The Dilemmas of the 21st Century

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to discuss inclusive education in the 21st century. The methodology used was a bibliographic review, which included articles and books on this subject. The conclusion was that the trajectory of special education in Brazil reflects advances and challenges since the initial efforts in the imperial period, with the creation of specific institutions for people with disabilities, until the advances of the 20th century, marked by public policies such as the LDB (Law of Guidelines and Bases) of 1961 Law No. 10,436/2002 and international milestones such as the Salamanca Declaration, which boosted the search for an inclusive educational system. Despite this, structural and cultural barriers, such as inadequate teacher training, lack of infrastructure and persistent prejudices, show that inclusion requires continuous efforts for social and pedagogical transformation, going beyond the physical insertion in schools to ensure that each student is valued and receives support for their integral development. Thus, the consolidation of inclusive education in Brazil depends on the coordination of public policies,

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investments in training and infrastructure, and the strengthening of a culture of respect for diversity, ensuring that the right to education is realized for all.

Keywords

Education; Inclusion; Teachers

Introduction

Inclusive education represents a milestone in guaranteeing fundamental rights, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their differences, have equal access to learning. However, even with the legislative and social advances achieved in recent decades, educational inclusion still faces numerous dilemmas, especially in a global scenario marked by inequalities, prejudices and structural limitations. The challenges go beyond enrolling students with special educational needs, encompassing issues such as teacher training, curricular adaptation and the construction of truly welcoming school environments.

Among the main obstacles to inclusive education in the 21st century are economic and social inequalities, which limit many students' accesses to adequate teaching resources. Public schools, especially, often lack accessible infrastructure and trained staff to address the diversity of students' needs. In addition, cultural resistance and lack of awareness on the part of some communities and educators make it difficult to implement inclusive policies effectively.

Teacher training has emerged as one of the central pillars for addressing these dilemmas. Despite the availability of teaching materials and official guidelines, the lack of specialization and pedagogical practices focused on inclusion is still a reality in most education systems. This deficit not only limits the ability to meet students' demands, but also compromises the creation of an inclusive and welcoming school environment that values individuality and promotes collaborative learning.

Furthermore, society faces the challenge of transforming inclusion into a practice that is integrated into everyday school life, and not just an administrative formality. For this to happen, a joint effort is needed between governments, educational institutions, educators and families, ensuring that inclusive discourse is transformed into concrete actions. Only with this approach will it be possible to overcome historical barriers and build an education that respects plurality and promotes the full development of all students.

This topic is extremely relevant, as inclusive education is not only a legal requirement, but also an ethical and social commitment. Understanding and addressing the dilemmas of educational inclusion in the 21st century is essential for schools to fulfill their role as spaces for transformation and equality, contributing to a more just and humanized society. This research allows us to reflect on the necessary advances and points the way to building educational practices that respect differences and promote equity.

The work aimed to discuss inclusive education in the 21st century. The methodology used was a bibliographic review, where articles and books that dealt with the topic were used.

Special Education In Brazil

In Brazil, at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century, liberal ideas influenced the advent of education for children with disabilities, which initially began in institutions (Silva; Garcez, 2019).

With liberalism, some colonial institutions were abolished. Furthermore, criticism began to be made of dogmatism, autocracy, and state interference in the economy, in addition to a more prominent defense of freedom of expression and private property, (Gugel, 2020).

What we see at this time is a moral and political philosophy that ideologically underpinned the anti-absolutist revolutions that occurred in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries and in the fight for the independence of the United States. Liberals primarily defended the freedom of individuals in the economic, political, religious and intellectual spheres. This movement influenced the beginning of education for people with disabilities in Brazil because it was linked to the democratization of the rights of all citizens. (Buss; Andrade; Stoltz, 2019).

According to Casagrande and Mainardes (2021), The Santa Casas de Misericórdia (Holy House of Mercy) played a very important role in the education of people with disabilities, since, as in Europe, they served poor and sick people. In São Paulo, from 1717 onwards, the Santa Casa de Misericórdia began to take in abandoned children up to the age of seven. Although there are no official records of how these children were cared for, there is evidence that many of them had physical or mental disabilities. Children over the age of seven were sent to other seminaries and institutions that prepared them for the future.

However, Special Education itself in Brazil began during the Empire, in the 19th century, when interest in including students with some kind of disability, whether physical or mental, began. The first foundation created in Rio de Janeiro by D. Pedro II in 1854 was the Imperial Institute for Blind Children. Secondly, in 1857, they created the Institute for the Deaf and Mute - currently the National Institute for the Education of the Deaf (INES). With the creation of these institutions, in 1883, the emperor called for the First Congress of Public Education to discuss the problems that the disabled experience, even proposing that there should be theories and practices in the training of teachers to deal with the blind and deaf - a fact that did not materialize.

In 1857, Brazil was experiencing a period of great economic growth and stabilization of imperial power. At that time, the influence of thoughts brought from Europe, especially from France, and from people whose actions were highlighted at an international level was growing (Silva; Garcez, 2019).

At that time, Brazilians, inspired by experimental research carried out by American and European doctors, philosophers and educators, began to organize services aimed at helping people with sensory, mental and physical disabilities (Baptista, 2019).

In 1854 and 1857, respectively, the institutions that are now known as the Benjamin Constant Institute (focused on assisting the visually impaired) and the National Institute of Education for the Deaf (INES) were created. Established in the city of Rio de Janeiro by the imperial government, they represented a major milestone that inspired all the institutions created since then (Silva; Garcez, 2019).

According to Casagrande and Mainardes (2021), After the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889, Congress became responsible for developing the arts, sciences and literature, without restricting the actions of local governments. As a result, each federative unit could develop primary, secondary and higher education. However, Congress was granted the right to focus its attention on higher and secondary education, without being obliged to also take care of primary education. In addition, the free of charge nature of education, provided for in the 1824 Constitution, was revoked at that time.

According to Gonçalves and Gräff (2023), During the 19th century, initiatives, whether official or private, aimed at assisting people with disabilities occurred in isolation.

In some states, there was concern about primary education and the development, albeit timid, of the organization of schools for the disabled. Several professionals began to work in the area and, at the end of the 1920s; they structured, through professional associations, a field of reflection in search of an effective space to consolidate their pedagogical actions (Mantoan, 2020).

The work of these professionals, on the one hand, reflects the expectations of society at the time and acts in a way that segregates people with disabilities. On the other hand, they improve the quality of life of the most severely disabled through more systematized knowledge and the search for more efficient social practices.

Significant advances for people with disabilities were made in the 20th century, especially in the area of technical aids or assistive technology. The instruments that were being used were improved, such as wheelchairs, canes and teaching systems for the deaf and blind. Society, although affected by the effects of successive wars, began to organize itself better to serve people with disabilities. Funds were raised to maintain institutions, and there was growing concern about the conditions of the spaces that housed them (Gugel, 2020).

An important event for special education was the enactment of Law No. 4,024 of 1961, the first Law of Guidelines and Bases (LDB). In this legal document, the education of people with disabilities is addressed in two articles, namely:

- **Art 88:** The education of exceptional children must, as far as possible, be included in the general education system, in order to integrate them into the community.
- **Art 89:** Any private initiative considered efficient by the state education councils, and related to the education of exceptional children, will receive special treatment from the public authorities through scholarships and subsidies. (Brazil, 1961, p. 11).

Thus, LDB nº 4024/61 (Brazil, 1961) protected the education of people with disabilities in special classes, in institutions separate from regular schools, directly demarcating the differences between students in both institutions.

The enactment of the 1961 LDB can be considered as the landmark of the beginning of official actions regarding special education, since, before; these actions were limited to initiatives separated from the Brazilian political and educational context (Gonçalves; Gräff, 2023).

In the late 1960s, the national scenario was marked by the expansion of the area of special education. In relation to our economic situation, in the period consecrated as an economic miracle, that is, a set of economic and political measures were being implemented aiming at the development of the country (Silva; Garcez, 2019).

One must reflect on the importance of education in the economic and political context of the 1960s. It is important to contextualize that the importance of education occurred due to the country's economic development, which advocated maximum individual productivity. Schools therefore began to be seen and emphasized as an important element for the production of labor and human resources adjusted to the needs of the forms of production.

The valorization of work was *sine qua non* for the country's economic development. Thus, education was considered an element of individual advancement, access to better jobs, and even an increase in income. In view of this, the main function of schools was to form human capital, which, when added to the physical capital of companies, would increase economic productivity. That said, schools had an educational commitment, but this was tied to the country's economic development (Silva; Garcez, 2019).

Inclusive Education And Its Integration In Schools

School inclusion is a topic of increasing relevance in educational and social debates. Based on the acceptance of diversity and the guarantee of equal opportunities for all, inclusion aims to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities and other specificities. Historically, the concept emerged in Brazil focused on the integration of students with disabilities in regular schools, but has evolved to include ethnic, gender and other differences.

The fight for inclusion was strengthened by the Salamanca Declaration (Brazil, 1994) and other documents that advocate an educational model capable of embracing diversity. However, the inclusion model still faces challenges such as the lack of school infrastructure and adequate human resources. For inclusion to be effective, it is necessary to restructure the educational system, ensuring not only access, but also permanence and active participation of all students.

The inclusive paradigm argues that disability should be understood as an interaction with society, and not as an individual problem. In this way, inclusion is not limited to the physical presence in schools, but involves transforming institutions to meet the needs of all, recognizing diversity as an integral part of the educational and social process.

Although the terms inclusion and school integration are often used interchangeably, there is a significant distinction between them. In integration, students must adapt to the school system, while in inclusion, schools must transform themselves to meet the needs of all students, regardless of their circumstances. Inclusion involves reformulating the curriculum, assessment, infrastructure, ongoing teacher training, and educational policies focused on diversity.

The 1994 Salamanca Conference (Brazil, 1994) was a landmark for inclusion, promoting the right to equal opportunities and serving as a global reference. This movement directly influenced education in Brazil,

especially with the dissemination of inclusive special education. The practice of inclusion involves the participation of the entire school community, reinforcing acceptance and collaboration among students, families and educators.

In Brazil, since the 2000s, legislation such as the National Education Plan and the National Guidelines for Special Education have reinforced the commitment to inclusion, although challenges such as inadequate teacher training still persist. True inclusion requires more than simply inserting students into the school environment; it requires a continuous effort to ensure that everyone feels they belong and receives the support they need for their development.

In the pedagogical context, as explained by Miranda (2019), The resolution determines that pedagogical practice focuses education on the student's potential and not on their disability; that the pedagogical project meets the principle of flexibility; that a continuous process of comprehensive evaluation is maintained; that each school unit diagnoses its educational reality and implements alternative services, as well as the system for these services to function.

In the administrative sphere, Resolution CNE/CEB No. 2/2001 establishes that education systems are responsible for creating and implementing a sector responsible for special education and that educational and school manager are responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities have access to physical spaces and knowledge. These guidelines include Specialized Educational Assistance (AEE) for all those who need special assistance due to learning difficulties. These guidelines provide an inclusive policy focused on the educational context (Brazil, 2001).

The following year, Law No. 10,436/2002 defined LIBRAS (Brazilian Sign Language) as a form of communication and expression whose linguistic system, of a visual-motor nature and endowed with its own grammatical structure, is used to transmit ideas and facts originating from communities of deaf people in Brazil, recognizing it as a legal means of communication and expression (Brazil, 2002).

Decree No. 5,296/2004 established criteria for promoting accessibility for people with disabilities or reduced mobility. According to the decree, public administration bodies, companies that provide public services and financial institutions must guarantee priority service for people with disabilities or reduced mobility (Brazil, 2004).

A relevant milestone in this period is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2006 and ratified by Brazil. This document aims to ensure, protect and promote the full exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities, reaffirming the commitment of the signatory countries to inclusion and equality. (Franco; Gomes, 2020).

The Special Education Policy from the Perspective of Inclusive Education created in 2008 is a document that underpins public policy for inclusion, taking into account all movements, laws and documents created to date to establish this inclusive proposal. It stipulates special education as a teaching modality that encompasses all levels of education and defines the public that will be served by this modality, complementing the regular education of each student, taking into account their specificities and

emphasizing accessibility for all without any discrimination (Brazil, 2008).

Observing the documents and national legal diplomas presented, it can be seen that significant changes occurred during this period regarding the education of people with disabilities. In 2011, the organizational structure of the Ministry of Education (MEC) was changed, with the word inclusion being added, thus creating the Secretariat of Continuing Education, Literacy, Diversity and Inclusion (SECADI) (Brazil, 2011). In 2016, the Brazilian Committee of Representative Organizations of People with Disabilities (CRPD) was founded. The Secretariat of Specialized Education Modalities (SEMESP) was consequently created in 2019, extinguishing SECADI (Barbosa; Bezerra, 2021).

According to Decree No. 9,465/2019, SEMESP is made up of the “Directorate of Accessibility, Mobility, Inclusion and Support for People with Disabilities; Directorate of Policies for Bilingual Education for the Deaf; and Directorate of Policies for Specialized Modalities of Education and Brazilian Cultural Traditions” (Brazil, 2019, [p. 3]).

It is worth highlighting the signing of Decree 10,502/2020, which institutes the National Policy for Special Education (PNEE). Its article 1 presents the general provisions and definitions of the key terms of the Policy, as follows:

Art 1: The National Policy for Special Education: Equitable, Inclusive and with Lifelong Learning is hereby established, through which the Federal Government, in collaboration with the States, the Federal District and the Municipalities, will implement programs and actions with a view to guaranteeing the rights to education and specialized educational services for students with disabilities, global developmental disorders and high abilities or giftedness (Brazil, 2020, [p. 1]).

From the perspective of inclusive education, the PNEE aims to ensure the right to education for students with disabilities, global developmental disorders, and high abilities/giftedness, promoting their inclusion at all levels of education. To this end, it guides educational systems to guarantee access to regular education with effective participation and academic progression, the provision of specialized educational services, the ongoing training of teachers and professionals to deal with diversity, in addition to encouraging the active participation of families and communities. The PNEE also emphasizes the importance of architectural, communicational, and informational accessibility, as well as intersectoral coordination for the implementation of public policies aimed at educational inclusion (Brazil, 2020).

Brazil has made significant progress in providing educational services to the target audience for special education. One of the guiding principles of the PNEE is the appreciation of uniqueness and the inalienable and preponderant right of students and their families to make decisions about the most appropriate alternative for specialized educational services (Brazil, 2020). It is important to emphasize that no rights were taken away in the 2020 PNEE.

The Challenges of School Inclusion In The 21st Century

The inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular education was officially incorporated

in Brazil after the signing of the UN Convention, which guarantees the rights of these people. However, in practice, these rights are still frequently violated. Many students with disabilities end up being sent to special schools due to the difficulties they present and the challenges faced in the teaching-learning process.

Research conducted by several scholars, however, indicates that the inclusion of students with special needs in regular education can generate positive results. Even so, segregation in special schools can, over time, because feelings of discrimination, especially when these students perceive the difference in treatment compared to those who attend regular schools.

Unfortunately, the problem of exclusion often begins within the school environment itself. Educators, who should be role models of inclusion, end up perpetuating disparities. This exclusion is not limited to students, but can also occur among education professionals themselves. Despite the efforts of the MEC, which provides specific teaching materials as resources for inclusion, many teachers resist using these materials due to lack of preparation or lack of knowledge.

Given this reality, it is essential to offer training and specialization courses, both for regular school teachers and for caregivers who work directly with students with special needs. However, most caregivers have never had access to adequate training, entering the profession without the necessary preparation. Caring for a student with special needs is a complex task that requires not only technical knowledge, but also psychological and emotional skills.

Despite advances in educational policies in Brazil, progress towards inclusion is still slow. The lack of training and support compromises the full development of students with special needs and reinforces the urgency of more effective measures to make inclusive education a reality.

Inclusive education, as long as it is subordinated only to political and economic interests, without considering the human being in its essence, cannot be considered truly inclusive. In this context, education assumes a character of exclusion, rather than inclusion. Discussing inclusion has become something common and, often, superficial, but putting this proposal into practice continues to be a great challenge, remaining as a gap that awaits effective solutions.

This scenario directly reflects the inefficiency of the Brazilian education system, which is frequently debated by experts and society in general. The paradigms that support exclusionary practices are still rooted in education networks, perpetuating divergences and hindering the implementation of truly inclusive education. To overcome these obstacles, a genuine commitment to transforming the education system is necessary, prioritizing respect and appreciation for all individuals.

The Importance of Inclusive Education In Teacher Training

Increasingly, teachers are faced with the task of working with students with disabilities in regular elementary schools. From this perspective, it is necessary to analyze the training of teachers who, since the inclusion of the inclusive paradigm in Brazilian education, have begun to work with inclusion in the

classroom context.

The impact caused by the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular basic education schools in Brazil, the professional unpreparedness resulting from the disability or the lack of training of teachers to work with this new demand, becomes one of the most significant difficulties pointed out by teachers. (Miranda, 2019).

Teacher training to work in inclusive schools is considered by some authors as a fundamental condition for school inclusion to take place. Magalhães *et al.* (2021) affirm the need to improve teacher training as a condition for effective school inclusion. Furthermore, it mentions that, in general, teachers are not prepared to receive students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Although the author emphasizes the importance of teacher training for the implementation of inclusion in schools, he does not ignore the set of conditions that can influence their work. Their economic remuneration, their working conditions, their social appreciation and their professional expectations are, along with ongoing training, factors that facilitate or hinder their motivation and dedication (Ferraz; Costas; De Freitas, 2020).

The need for quality training, combined with institutional and governmental support, should be part of the reflections on the inclusive process in basic education schools. In order to analyze the adequacy of teacher training in basic education from an inclusive perspective, the sequence of policies aimed at this topic is presented, using as a basis the year 1996, when the legal plan brought the training indications with the update of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education.

Through the policies presented, it is possible to observe that from the 1996 LDB that regulates the training of basic education teachers, some programs and guidelines were created emphasizing the initial and continuing training of education professionals. The information allows us to assess that the inclusive perspective itself only appeared in teacher training regulations from 2008 onwards, with the National Special Education Policy from the perspective of Inclusive Education.

Before that, most training programs to serve students with disabilities were aimed at teachers who worked in special education schools; a fact that shows us that training from an inclusive perspective is still very recent in Brazil.

Including students with disabilities in regular classrooms can challenge teachers to think more carefully about the choices offered to students, the format of the lesson, the ways in which students at all developmental levels can participate in classroom activities, and the comfort and engagement of all students.

Some strategies that are most important for teachers working in inclusive classrooms include behavioral and developmental strategies, play and its vital role in child development specific to children with autism, and tactics for building the parent-teacher relationship (Da Silva; Maio, 2021).

Some of the challenges for educators according to Cunha (2019) include: planning lessons that encourage

all students to participate; helping students achieve their individual goals; supporting students' behavior in a sensitive and positive way; fostering friendships and social relationships between students with and without disabilities; adapting the physical environment for students who may be more sensitive to certain factors, such as temperature, textures, sounds, and smells.

The lack of training for teachers to work in this area is considered by many authors as one of the barriers to the implementation of the inclusive proposal. Some studies show that although many teachers are sensitive to the proposal, few consider themselves prepared to work with students with disabilities (Barbosa; Bezerra, 2021; Franco; Gomes, 2020; Magalhães *et al.*, 2021).

Although Brazilian legislation is advanced in terms of inclusion, there are still areas to be addressed when it comes to teacher training. Ensuring that students with disabilities have access to regular schools does not guarantee their inclusion in school. It is necessary to ensure that students remain in school and that they have adequate conditions for their academic development. To achieve this goal, listening to teachers and ensuring adequate training are essential actions.

Studies show that teachers do not feel prepared to work with an inclusive perspective. This lack of preparation can be considered a consequence of flaws in initial training, which in Brazil still follows a traditional line, focused on a static conception of the teaching-learning process.

This standardized teaching process has influenced and continues to influence teacher training, especially initial training. Furthermore, it reinforces the division between normal and special students; teachers who will work with special students and teachers who will work with normal students. With the inclusive paradigm, this division ceases to exist, as teachers and educational institutions must be prepared to serve the diversity of students and teacher training must comply with this principle.

Legally, teacher training has already been presented as important in building a more inclusive school. The importance is noted in training policies and programs, although there is still a need to strengthen the inclusive bias and change the traditional way in which teacher qualifications still take place (Franco; Gomes, 2020).

The importance of training that is appropriate to the teaching reality and that allows for inclusive reflection can contribute to the teacher's pedagogical practice. Furthermore, it is important that training emphasizes a change in meanings in relation to disabilities.

Training policies for inclusive teachers must go beyond legal guidelines. It is important that training courses include discussions, reflections and the exchange of experiences. Participants in these training courses must understand the concept of inclusion, and there must also be a concern for the initial training of these teachers (Barbosa; Bezerra, 2021).

Taking into account the indications of the inclusive perspective, more specifically the indications provided in documents such as the Salamanca Declaration and LDB nº 9394/96, our understanding is that all participants in the school community must collaborate in the process of including students with

disabilities. The teacher is one of the fundamental elements, but the figures of the management group, other employees, students and families also play a very important role in the implementation of the inclusive perspective.

Conclusion

The trajectory of special education in Brazil reflects the advances and challenges faced over the centuries. From the initial efforts in the imperial period, with the creation of specific institutions for people with disabilities, to the advances made in the 20th century, there has been a gradual movement towards the recognition of the rights of people with disabilities and the search for a more inclusive education system. Public policies, such as the 1961 LDB and Law No. 10,436/2002, in addition to international milestones such as the Salamanca Declaration, demonstrate the evolution of approaches to ensuring access and effective participation of all students in education.

Despite progress, Brazil still faces structural and cultural barriers to fully implementing an inclusive education system. Problems such as inadequate teacher training, lack of infrastructure, and persistent prejudices show that inclusion requires ongoing efforts toward social and pedagogical transformation. True inclusion goes beyond physical inclusion in schools; it requires a collective commitment to ensure that every student, regardless of their circumstances, feels valued and receives the support they need for their integral development.

Therefore, the consolidation of inclusive education in Brazil requires the coordination of public policies, investments in training and infrastructure, and the strengthening of a culture of respect for diversity. Only then will it be possible to ensure that the right to education, as a fundamental human right, is fully realized for all citizens.

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