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## For a Qualitative Leap in Inclusion: Illusions and Delusions from Teacher's Perspective

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### Abstract

Five years after the introduction of the Special Education DL 3/2008 in Portugal there is a sense that not much has changed in continuous training and a proper evaluation about the effect of inclusive practices is need. Considering teachers as the central pillar of the inclusion in schools, the present paper seeks to examine their beliefs about inclusive education and practices, using a quantitative methodology with a sample of 150 regular and special education teachers. Results allow us to verify some inconsistencies between their beliefs about the benefits of inclusion and the difficulties in the implementation of Individual Education Programs or in the collaboration with other specialists. Inferential studies highlight the differential role of specialized training and teaching experience.

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### 1. Introduction

The last few decades have been marked by ongoing attempts to provide a quality education to all students, including students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), making real the proclaimed principles of inclusion. Especially after the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), we have witnessed the development of new policies and instruments to allow all students to learn together, regardless of their difficulties, characteristics or individual differences. Schools were then stressed to identify and meet all students' needs and, therefore, to assume the responsibility to provide a quality education for all.

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Inclusive education is thus an attempt to answer positively students' educational needs, requiring that schools adopt the necessary organizational and structural adjustments for the promotion of positive attitudes towards diversity. Despite the two decades of the Salamanca Statement, it is important to perform investigation about the effective implementation of inclusive education and evaluate the need for improvement of policies and practices. In this process it is important to understand if the implementation of inclusive practices is necessarily being done by teachers with adequate training, knowledge and experience to develop favorable attitudes and skills to promote the inclusion. The role of the teacher is central to the implementation of these ideas. Therefore it is necessary to carry out studies to characterize, identify and evaluate the most effective inclusive practices, and to identify the factors that affect the quality of inclusive education. Considering this gap, the purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to examine teachers' beliefs towards the inclusion of pupils with SEN; and (b) to explore the factors that influence them.

## 2. Teachers' central role in inclusion

Although much has been done to promote inclusive education, situations that generate inequality remain more or less significant even today. These difficulties should be seen as a shared responsibility, accepting the principle that it is possible to make more and better schools, and thus contribute to a more just and inclusive society, consolidating democratic values of equal opportunities. Schools should therefore make a concerted effort to try to understand the causes of the attitudes of exclusion that still remain and to communicate the benefits of inclusive schools, surpassing unfounded fears that still exist in schools. To do that, the literature highlights the need for teachers' professional development in terms of specific training and specialization to promote positive attitudes and efficacy towards inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Kalyva & Avramidis, 2007; Jobe, Rust, & Brissie, 1996; Kosko & Wilkins, 2009; Praisner, 2003; Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998). In fact there are several studies that emphasize the role of training (Avramidis et al., 2000; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Dias, Leal, & Díaz-Pérez, 2013; Minke, Bear, Deemer, & Griffin, 1996; Stoiber et al., 1998) as well as the role of personal or professional experience with children with SEN (Avramidis et al., 2000; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Jobe et al., 1996; Minke et al., 1996; Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2010) to promote positive attitudes and adjusted practices toward inclusion. Teachers with higher education and with specialized training in special education tend to have more adjusted and positive beliefs about the potential of inclusion, a trend that is also replicated in studies with headmasters (e.g. Praisner, 2003). Due to the scarcity of studies in the Portuguese context, not only with Special Education but also with General Education teachers (Kosko & Wilkins, 2009), this research aims to explore teachers' beliefs and practices toward inclusion.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Sample

The sample included 150 teachers, 20 males (13.3%) and 130 females (86.7%). Most of them had ages that ranged between 31 and 35 years old (n=82, 54.7%). Almost all of them had a first higher education degree (*licenciatura* in the Portuguese educational system) (n=143, 95.3%), 61.3% had no specialized training (n=92), 28% had training in special education (n=42) and 10.7% had training in other areas (n=16). Most of the sample had 6 to 10 years of in-service experience (n=71, 47.3%), taught in primary schools and already worked 1 to 5 years with children with SEN (n=50, 33.3%).

Table 1. Description of the sample

Variable	Group	n	%
Gender	Male	20	13,3
	Female	130	86,7
Age	30 years or less	17	11,4
	31-35 years	82	54,7
	36-40 years	34	22,7
	41-45 years	12	8,0

	More than 45 years	5	3,3
Teaching Experience	Less than 1 year	3	2,0
	1-5 years	23	15,3
	6-10 years	71	47,3
	11-15 years	41	27,3
	More than 15 years	12	8,0
Teaching Level	Kindergarten	17	11,3
	1 <sup>st</sup> to 4 <sup>th</sup> grade	63	42,0
	5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> grade	54	36,0
	7 <sup>th</sup> to 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	12	8,0
	Secondary School	4	2,7
Specialization	No	92	61,3
	Special Education	42	28,0
	Others	16	10,7
Inclusion experience	None	17	11,3
	Less than 1 year	44	29,3
	1 to 5 years	50	33,3
	6 to 10 years	30	20,0
	More than 10 years	9	6,0

### 3.2. Instruments

We used a demographic questionnaire (to gather personal and professional information, such as age, gender, educational level, years of service, their highest grade, specialization and experience with SEN) and a closed answer questionnaire (Prata, 2009) with 30 items about teachers' beliefs about inclusion and 14 items regarding inclusive practices. Teachers rated the extent to which they agreed with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree to 5 = completely agree).

### 3.3. Procedures

To achieve the goals of the study, we requested authorization for the use of the instruments and to gather data at schools. The questionnaires were then distributed to Kindergarten, Primary and Secondary school teachers using a snowball process. All data were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), v. 18.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive analysis allowed us to verify that teachers highly agree that the Individual Educational Program (IEP) should be developed according to students' characteristics and learning abilities ( $M=4.53$ ,  $SD=.68$ ), considering a need to promote the acceptance and understanding of all colleagues for individual differences ( $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=.69$ ); that the collaboration and team work with professionals and special education teachers ease the inclusion of SEN ( $M=4.43$ ,  $SD=.68$ ) and that the responsibility for the development and implementation of programs should be up to this team ( $M=4.39$ ,  $SD=.83$ ). The teachers also agree that students with SEN would be more successful if they had more support within the regular classroom ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = .76$ ) and the necessary adaptations ( $M=4.36$ ,  $SD=2.42$ ). The rest of the items were rated more neutrally, without revealing negative attitudes toward inclusion.

#### 4.2. Inferential studies

In an attempt to deepen our understanding of teachers' perceptions and practices regarding inclusion, some inferential statistical tests were performed to verify if some personal or professional variables had a statistically significant impact on the dependent variables. Using respectively the Student's t-test and the Spearman correlation, we were able to conclude that there are no significant differences according to gender or teachers' age in both perceptions and practices ( $p > .05$ ). However, when considering the teaching experience (years in-service), we found a significant correlation with the beliefs about inclusion ( $r = -.18$ ,  $p = .033$ ). That means that higher experienced teachers tend to present more negative beliefs regarding inclusion than less experienced teachers. Considering the specialized training variable, results obtained using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed significant differences in beliefs ( $F = 4.82$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and practices ( $F = 4.36$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Gabriel post-hoc multiple comparison tests revealed that teachers with expertise in special education had significantly higher scores than teachers without specialized training ( $MD = 4.48$ ,  $p = .04$ ) and than those who had a specialization in other areas ( $MD = 8.20$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Thus, we can see the important role of training in teachers' beliefs and practices. Comparing teachers' responses according to the school level that they are teaching, the differences were significant only with regard to the inclusive practices ( $F = 2.46$ ,  $p = .04$ ). Gabriel post-hoc multiple comparison tests indicated that the results are lower among secondary school teachers when compared to all other education levels (respectively  $MD = -8.47$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $MD = -8.22$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $MD = -7.35$ ,  $p = .04$ , and  $MD = -9.58$ ,  $p = .03$ ). To some extent these results can be explained by the little experience of higher education teachers with students with SEN, something also evidenced by the negative and statistically significant relationship between perceptions and inclusion experience ( $r = -.24$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Considering the moderate relationship between beliefs and inclusive practices ( $r = .43$ ,  $p < .01$ ), we also realize the need to prepare teachers for effective inclusion.

#### 5. Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we aimed to explore teachers' beliefs and practices toward inclusion, considering special education teachers but also general education teachers (Kosko & Wilkins, 2009). Results seem to support a positive attitude toward inclusion, the recognition of the benefits for all students and the recognition of the importance of the collaboration between general and special education teachers. These are apparently positive results. However, the information of the inferential studies seems to reinforce the crucial role of the professional variables, especially professional development and experience with students with SEN, as determinants for their beliefs and practices. As in other studies (e.g., Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Kalyva & Avramidis, 2007; Kosko & Wilkins, 2009; Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998), teachers with specific training in special education tend to present more positive beliefs and adjusted practices toward inclusion. Two other issues should be addressed. Firstly, it is clear that secondary school teachers don't feel that they have the necessary expertise to include students with special needs in the classroom, given their lower rates in the practices domain when compared with other school levels. This is important if we consider that the compulsory education was recently extended to the secondary level in Portugal. Results highlight the importance of focusing on this specific group of teachers and the need to promote adequate training to improve their practices. Secondly, the negative correlation between teachers' overall experience, experience in inclusive settings and their beliefs (with no correlation with age), is an indicator of the actual limits of inclusion or, eventually, the need to revise legislation and resources for an effective intervention. Despite almost twenty years after Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the debate about inclusion in schools is still actual. Policymakers, universities and institutions are then urged to consider the results of some research that has been noticing some delusions regarding inclusion, pointing out the lack of efficacy in promoting wellbeing and functional skills in children and youth with SEN (e.g., B. Cook & Schirmer, 2003; Duchnowski, Kutash, Sheffield, & Vaughn, 2006; D. Fuchs & L. Fuchs, 1995). A considerable leap is then necessary for an effective Special Education, being urgent to consider the adoption of adequate practices according to scientific evidence, in line with the almost hundred references in the No Child Left Behind Act (Jones, 2009). Future studies should replicate this research using a more representative sample of Portuguese teachers (both from regular and special education) and considering other context variables such as the school resources and policies, as well as other individual variables such as self-efficacy toward inclusive practices. The results of these studies shall provide a broader comprehension of the state of

the art and contribute to define priorities for training and intervention. Despite these interesting conclusions, this study challenges educational policy experts, academics and teachers to deeply discuss the best ways to achieve this social value that is inclusion: the respect for equality of opportunities, justice and acceptance of the individual differences.

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