Teachers' continuous training and inclusive education – A critical stance supported by teachers' narratives

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Abstract
Placing students with diverse abilities, cultures and ethnicities in schools implies a critical look at teachers' continuous training to ensure high-quality education for all learners. This study explores teachers' continuous training and inclusive education. A qualitative study was conducted in Portugal and took on an exploratory form, emphasising the narratives of 58 participants. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire, allowing the respondents to answer spontaneously. The participants responded to questions about 1) inclusive pedagogical practices; 2) continuous teachers' training offered for their professional development as inclusive educators; 3) main needs for continuing professional development in inclusive education; and 4) the sustainability of inclusive education. For data analysis, we adopted the procedures of the thematic analysis method. Two main themes and five subthemes were identified. The data revealed that inadequate teacher training has been delivered throughout the years, and this is a barrier to implementing inclusive education. Teachers reported that they neither know the theoretical foundations nor the pedagogical practices required to adapt the teaching methodologies for classes with a diverse cohort of students.
Keywords: inclusive education, teachers' continuous training, evidence-based knowledge, written narratives, qualitative methodology.

Непрерывная подготовка учителей и инклюзивное образование: критический взгляд на основе нарративов педагогов

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Аннотация
Обучение в школах детей с различными способностями, культурными и этническими особенностями требует критического переосмысления системы непрерывной подготовки учителей для обеспечения качественного образования всех учащихся. В данном исследовании рассматриваются вопросы непрерывной подготовки педагогов и инклюзивного образования.

Качественное исследование, проведенное в Португалии в поисковом формате, основывалось на нарративах 58 участников. Данные были собраны с помощью открытого опросника, позволившего респондентам давать свободные ответы. Участники отвечали на вопросы, касающиеся: 1) инклюзивных педагогических практик; 2) непрерывной подготовки, направленной на развитие профессиональных компетенций в области инклюзивного образования; 3) основных потребностей в непрерывном профессиональном развитии в этой сфере; 4) устойчивости инклюзивного образования. Для анализа данных использовался метод тематического анализа. Было выделено две основные темы и пять подтем. Результаты исследования показали, что на протяжении многих лет профессиональная подготовка учителей остается недостаточной, что создает барьеры для реализации инклюзивного образования. Педагоги отметили, что они не обладают ни теоретическими основами, ни практическими навыками, необходимыми для адаптации методик преподавания в классах с разнородным составом учащихся.
Ключевые слова: инклюзивное образование, непрерывная подготовка учителей, научно обоснованные знания, письменные нарративы, качественная методология.

Introduction

Inclusive education builds upon the assumption that teachers have certain knowledge and understanding of the needs of all students and a repertoire of teaching techniques and methodologies that they mobilise to inform the selection of the most appropriate technique for each student. This individualisation of teaching and learning requires increased teacher training to improve the quality and diversity of inclusive classroom and school strategies. It must be supported by international legislation and policies (UNESCO, 2013). Given the essential role that teachers have in delivering quality education, the educational system needs to be equipped with competent teachers to meet all students' needs (Savolainen, 2009).

A study with teachers undertaken by the OECD (Schleicher, 2016) found that one of the biggest challenges teachers face in their teaching routines is the lack of preparation to deal with students with specific needs. In this study involving all OECD countries, teachers reported that the initial training they received did not provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to teach students with different abilities. The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE, 2010) published a study involving several European countries. One of the main conclusions, similar in all countries, was the inadequate preparation of teachers for teaching students with specific needs.

Bailleul et al. (2008) refer to the fact that teachers' quality is a factor that contributes more to students' achievement than factors such as the number of students per class or the availability of resources. Forlin & Chambers (2011) state that the teachers' knowledge, beliefs and values are fundamental to building inclusive learning environments. These authors place teachers as decisive influencers in developing an inclusive school. Humphrey & Lewis (2008) refer to two premises of teachers' pedagogical practices that impact inclusive education: a) reduced classroom differentiation and b) poor articulation between teachers. These situations provoke decontextualised teaching and the non-existence of collaborative practices, hampering students' educational equity.

Nowadays, society expects that schools and their professionals have the knowledge and ability to deal with different languages of human development, be culturally proficient and tolerant, be capable of valuing social cohesion, and provide appropriate responses to disadvantaged students and those with specific needs. In this way, teachers need professional confidence to develop new expertise and proficiency in inclusive education practices (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Marin, 2014). Respect for difference must be a constant in the school to respond to every student by adopting differentiated pedagogies, focusing on cooperation, accepting differences, supporting learning and meeting students' individual needs in different learning situations (Verdugo et al., 2012). Teachers are critical in the students' development and learning processes and in constructing an

inclusive school (Ferreira, 2022). Therefore, teacher candidates must be instructed, right from the beginning, that being a teacher involves a set of values and ethical behaviours fundamental to a modern and inclusive society, such as respect, justice and equity, with the school always fighting against discriminatory and oppressive practices (Ballard, 2003).

Teachers who adopt more inclusive practices reveal more meaningful collaborative work with their peers, are more available to learn new teaching methodologies and strategies and demonstrate an attitude of greater availability when faced with the daily pedagogical challenges posed by the heterogeneity in the classroom (Ferreira & Reis-Jorge, 2022). Inclusive education requires developing practices based on mutual help and cooperation. However, it is not expected that teachers possess all the knowledge necessary to deal with the development processes of the entire school population. Thus, the school administration must make supervision practices and pedagogical support available to help teachers become more autonomous in solving problems and improving their pedagogical practices (Durksen & Klassen, 2012). Carter & Abawi (2018) state that the success of an inclusive school cannot be based on perceptions but on practical, objective, and measurable results for all students, with and without specific needs. School leaders have a relevant role in this path.

Despite recognising the advances in inclusive education in the last twenty years, Florian et al. (2016) consider that some matters must not be underestimated. Topics such as the poor diversity of teachers' practices inside the classrooms, the special cohorts of students inside the schools, the allocation of resources, the initial and continuous training of the teacher, the transition from school to adult life and the labour market still have a route to be accomplished.

Concerning educational policies with an inclusive orientation in Portugal, the publication of Decree-Law 54/2018 brought new concepts to the debate (Ferreira & Reis-Jorge, 2022). This decree is intended to reinforce the commitment to an inclusive school where every one of the students, regardless of their personal and social situation, will find answers that will allow them to acquire a level of education and training that will facilitate their full social inclusion. Concomitantly, a new commitment is needed to reinforce the application of the law. Teachers must receive adequate training to support their pedagogical practices, and even though there is a lot of more or less ad hoc teacher training, it seems that the existing gaps in teachers' knowledge are not being filled with the training courses available (Carrington et al., 2010).

Consequently, five years after the publication of the new Portuguese legislation on inclusive education, it is essential to ascertain what training teachers have received and how they incorporate that training into their practices. Furthermore, it is important to interpret teachers' attitudes towards the available training and determine whether it meets their needs. To accomplish this, the following objectives and research questions were developed: The study aims to investigate teachers' ongoing training for the advancement of inclusive education. (i) How do teachers perceive the continuous training for their development as inclusive educators? (ii) In teachers' opinions, what should be the focus of training for the sustainability of inclusive education? The following objectives were established: 1) To identify the types of training that have been delivered to teachers and how they incorporate that training into their practices; 2) To interpret teachers' attitudes towards the training available and to understand whether it meets their specific needs.

Method

This is a qualitative and exploratory study carried out with teachers at different levels of education. The core of the research is to investigate teacher training on inclusive education in short courses and post-graduate certifications. Thus, from an epistemological

perspective, this research adopts a constructivist view since the teachers` experiences, engagements and activities that our research aims to uncover are assumed from the participants' points of view. Thus, the study acquires a phenomenological position as it explores the participants' experiences to better understand the phenomenon under research.

Participants

200 questionnaires were distributed to teachers in the Lisbon metropolitan region. The selection criterion was that they had to be classroom teachers in direct daily contact with their class and to have participated in at least one training related to inclusive education in the last 12 months. The recruitment of the participants followed a kind of snowball sampling where each participant who volunteered to participate in the study indicated other colleagues they knew and might be willing to participate. For the study, 58 questionnaires were fully completed. The socio-demographic characteristics of the participants are as follows: 46 females and 12 males; 24 primary school teachers, 22 middle school teachers and 12 secondary education teachers; ages from 28 to 65 years ($\bar{x}$= 48 years); years in service from 3 to 39 years ($\bar{x}$ = 23 years).

Procedures – data collection and analysis

A literature review on inclusive education and teacher training was carried out to elaborate the open-ended questionnaire (Ferreira, 2022; Ferreira & Reis-Jorge, 2022). In addition, as a certified professor for continuous professional development, we usually had countless informal conversations with teachers. This engagement with teachers allowed us to place in the open-ended questionnaire objective and meaningful questions. Subsequently, two experts in inclusive education with deep experience in qualitative research methodologies were asked to review the questionnaire.

The final version of the questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions asking teachers about 1. their inclusive pedagogical practices; 2. The continuous teachers' training available for their professional development as inclusive educators; 3. their main needs for continuing professional development in inclusive education; 4. the focus of teachers' training for the sustainability of inclusive education. For informed consent, a cover letter was included with information about the research objectives, confidentiality, anonymity and the future use of the data. The return of the questionnaire indicated acceptance to participate. Each participant was assigned a code (P1 to P58).

For data analysis, we adopted procedures of the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, a critical reading process separated the first clusters of relevant data. The next step was to look carefully at each cluster and interpret the results obtained by considering the study's objectives. This analysis allows for a detailed and meaningful data analysis and is particularly appropriate when trying to understand the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the thematic analysis is a bidirectional process, the analysis progressed in numerous stages. First, inductive analysis was predominantly used, moving forward and backwards through each transcript to identify similarities in the meaning units to construct emergent themes and subthemes. In the second phase, our analysis embarked on a deductive analysis guided by the research questions and objectives. This mixed approach during the coding phase allowed the identification of provisional themes and subthemes. Subsequently, more specific analyses were made to eliminate overlaps and thematic ambiguities. Finally, a conceptual framework of themes, subthemes and meaning units was developed.

Findings

The thematic analysis described above led to the identification of two themes and five subthemes:

1. Teachers' perceptions of continuous teacher training
    1a. Training delivered /available to teachers
    1b. Training and relation to the practices
2. Teachers' training attitudes, focus and future for inclusive education
    2a. Teachers' attitudes regarding training
    2b. Teachers' training needs
    2c. Scenario thinking – the future teachers' training for inclusive education

Regarding theme 1 (Teachers' perceptions of continuous teacher training), expressive examples of the teachers' written narratives are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. *Theme 1 – subthemes and meaning units*

Themes	*Subthemes*	*Meaning units – a critical perspective (some examples)*
1. Teachers' perceptions of continuous teacher training	1a. Training delivered / available to teachers	"The training courses are mostly theoretical" (P7); "The training forget about the number of students per class and the few resources available to differentiate teaching" (P16); "I look for training that promotes knowledge such as, in peer-to-peer work, differentiated instruction and tutorial teaching, but at the end of the training I always feel a little bit frustrated" (P25); "There is much training available, but it's always the same thing" (P34); "There is no training that can fill the reduced number of specialised teachers in schools to support the specific needs of students" (P42); "There is a lot of dispersed training. In the training courses there are few pieces of evidence on national and international interventions. No results are presented and discussed" (P53).
	1b. Training and relation to the practices	"I take courses that allow me to acquire inclusion strategies for all students in the class" (P2); "If we want inclusive practices, we need training on the procedures of the new decree-law" (P19); "There is a new law, but the different support measures for learning and inclusion have not been implemented on schools" (P32); "In many schools, there is still a philosophy of education and a culture that does not favour inclusive education at all" (P39); "Everyone is a little bit lost with the concepts included in the new legislation. Curricular accommodations, non-significant and significant curricular adaptations, … What distinguishes and what is comparable between these concepts?" (P56).

Regarding theme 2 (Teachers' training attitudes, focus and future for inclusive education), meaningful examples of the teachers' written narratives are represented in Table 2.

The two themes developed from the data collected allowed us to understand how teachers look at existing continuous training and how they envision the future of teachers' training to create a truly inclusive school. The following discussion will validate the themes and subthemes constructed in this study with current international literature.

Table 2. *Theme 2 - subthemes and meaning units*

2. Teachers' training attitudes, focus and future for inclusive education	2a. Teachers' attitudes regarding training	"Teachers want practical training because mastering inclusive education practices is a priority" (P9). "I feel the need to have tools to do good work in terms of inclusive education" (P14); "I like to study practical and interdisciplinary courses" (P28); "Training should be learning-based on cases and the articulation between the new concepts of the legislation and the reality of the schools" (P41); "I try to take advantage of the training to change my practices and learn strategies for group work, making thematic posters, dramatisations, educational games, etc." (P50);" Bureaucracy continues to be a barrier in terms of time and hampers mental availability for training (P53).
	2b. Teachers' training needs	"There is no training on meaningful collaborative work" (P4); "There is a lack of training on different assessment instruments" (P7); "I would like to understand better what strategies to adopt and better understand each developmental disorder" (P11); "Knowing ways and tools to monitor student learning" (P17); "Knowing how to deal with students' frustration and demotivation. Little training in the area of affections, emotions, school climate and inclusion" (P33); "Training in evidence-based teaching strategies for the classroom that allows us to learn by observing successfully implemented practices" (P55).
	2c. Scenario thinking – the future teachers' training for inclusive education	"Training courses for the entire educational community" (P5); "We spend a lot of time looking at our school's navel and we don't have time to look around us. It will be fundamental for us to learn from each other and give "pieces of the world" to our school" (P11); "The possibility of having other educational experts full-time in the classroom" (P23); "Specific training in inclusion for school leaders" (P29); "Sharing successful practices between schools" (P34); "Training teachers in the development and implementation of community intervention projects" (P45).

Discussion

The study aimed to investigate teachers' continuous training for the development of inclusive education, and we've formulated two research questions. Based on the first research question (i), how do teachers perceive the continuous training for their development as inclusive educators? We have found meaningful teacher narratives.

Most participants expressed the need for specialised training for teachers, "*Without adequate and meaningful training, nothing will be possible*", said one of the participants. In most teachers' training related to inclusive education, theoretical and legislative aspects overlap with the topics associated with teaching and learning practices (Sharma et al., 2015). We believe a considerable boost is needed in the teachers' continuous training. Previous studies report that associating students' educational needs with a particular teaching methodology and strategy does not yield pedagogical benefits (Davis & Florian, 2004; Slee, 2011). The authors state that teachers must receive training to identify and overcome obstacles that these students typically face in learning situations. Initial teacher training provides solid theoretical knowledge in learning and teaching. However,

learning throughout the profession is fundamental to developing teaching skills based on differentiated instruction, cooperative and peer learning, and transformative teaching. Activities of supervision and collaborative reflection are crucial for teachers' lifelong professional development (Durksen & Klassen, 2012). The participants in our study stated the necessity for specialised training for teachers. One of them wrote: "*Teaching all students is probably a demanding professional task for teachers, but to be carried out correctly, a considerable impulse is needed in the continuing professional development courses.*"

The data collected shows that teachers are concerned about their lack of training. Some teachers expressed their preferences: "*All types of training directly related to special educational needs*"; "*specialised training in pedagogical differentiation*"; "*specialised training in the different topics related to children's development*". One participant was very eloquent in stating that "*…to put inclusion into practice is not enough to accept students with special needs in the school, it is essential to know how to work with them, to decide, to adapt the proposed activities to their needs, interests and this requires adequate teacher training.*" Integrating into the teachers' training analysis of specific events and challenging situations inside the classroom improves teachers' ability to manage diversified students' learning behaviours and attitudes and succeed in their interactions with multi-contextual environments (Egalite & Kisida, 2017). Allday et al. (2013) mentioned four basic skills that must be developed and applied during teacher training: 1. Familiarity and practical experience with the diversity of student characteristics; 2. The development of teaching skills adapted to the plurality and variety of students; 3. Skills for building a positive and healthy classroom climate with resources for effective management of teaching and learning strategies; 4. Competence to work collaboratively with peers. The authors found that teachers' training courses do not provide them with sufficient competences concerning these four skills. Some participants wrote, "*There is no training on collaborative work*"; "*There is a lack of training on different assessment instruments*"; "*Little training in the area of affections, emotions, school climate and inclusion*".

Teachers' continuous training has a relevant role in upgrading and expanding teacher performance, commitment and job fulfilment (Schleicher, 2018). It is a tool that cannot be underestimated since it has the potential to change beliefs and develop attitudes toward inclusive education (Ferreira, 2022). This is visible in some of the teachers' statements, "*I think continuous training should be part of any teacher in terms of professional and personal development*"; "*It is important for the teacher to look at these changes in inclusive education as an added value for everyone and to embrace them in their daily practice inside and outside the classroom. And this can be enhanced by teachers' continuous training*"; "*Teachers' continuous training allows the acquisition of new knowledge in the light of the so-called "inclusive school" or "school for all" allowing me, in this way, new reflections, new approaches, new "looks"*".

UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all. UNESCO (2013) also highlighted teachers' relevant role in inclusive education, emphasising the critical importance of teacher training as the key component to fostering successful inclusion. There is consensus among scholars that there is a direct relationship between teachers' training and teaching practices. The more teachers are trained in competences related to inclusive education, the better their performance is (Carrington et al., 2010; Ferreira, 2022).

Regarding the second research question, (ii) In teachers' opinions, what should be the focus of training for the sustainability of inclusive education? Participants were concise and accurate, providing significant statements.

Sarivan (2011) states that motivating teachers to reflect and continuously observe one another's teaching methodologies and strategies makes their teaching activity conscious and meaningful. In this sense, one participant wrote, "*Sharing successful practices between schools should be a normal activity for teachers' professional development, but we are too "Unfriendly closed".* How a teacher experiences the context in which he works impacts the practice, and how he incorporates the new legislation influences how he confronts daily challenges and adversities (Sharma et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2009). On the other hand, the teacher must adapt to the new inclusive teaching concepts and terminologies individually and with colleagues. However, the system and the legislator can create ways to facilitate this process. Teachers' continuous training is probably the best way to incorporate new competences into teachers' professional development. A participant states, "*Everyone is a little bit lost between curricular accommodations, non-significant curricular adaptations, significant curricular adaptations…*"

Ferreira & Reis-Jorge (2022) mention that the new legislation on inclusive education implies strengthening teachers' continuous training, requiring the development of competences in differentiated instruction and effective collaboration practices between teachers. This will positively impact teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, making them more confident and aware of their capacities and leading to classrooms where all students can develop their full potential (Ferreira, 2022; Sharma et al., 2015). The following quotes are representative of our participants` views of what needs to be the focus of teacher training courses: "*Discover new practices and strategies that promote the effective inclusion of children with specific needs*"; "*To know ways of monitoring students' learning, allowing a fair and formative assessment for their evolution*"; "*To know and discover new and effective resources and methodologies for the integral development of students*"; *Training that is based on classroom's pieces of evidence will allow us to learn by observing successfully implemented practices*".

Teachers' professional development must be seen as a means of promoting excellence in teaching and not a way of learning to implement practices decreed by the legislator. The need to translate the theoretical rhetoric expressed in the legal documents was well represented by one of our participants: "*The focus should be on the new legislation. The new concepts are creating too much noise in the school. Many colleagues feel lost with the new concepts and what distinguishes and is similar between them*".

Ferreira (2022) states that the specialised training of teachers is critical to the development of their professional competences as inclusive educators, claiming that change is urgent so that the school can respond to all the challenges of diversity, namely in terms of curriculum structure, academic organisation, and pedagogical practices. Only teachers can make a difference. Regarding the training needs, some participants summarised very well the teachers' mindset: "*… society is constantly changing, and teacher needs to update their knowledge*"; "*Training teachers in the development and implementation of community intervention projects could be the trigger to open schools and inclusion to a community level*".

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion should be developed in teachers' initial training but mainly in continuous professional development initiatives (Sharma et al., 2015). Our participants echoed, "*The school must be updated and the teachers must be upgraded*"; "*Continuous training and professional development create better and reflective teachers* Nowadays, it is expected from a school that it must recognise and accept the differences of its students and professionals, respecting the cultures, interests and potential of all educational agents and seeking a path to transform beliefs, values and practices that lead to educational and social inclusion actions (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2010). Differentiated instruction is necessary inside the classroom, but school leaders have a

relevant role in creating different teaching and learning pathways, facilitating meaningful, continuous training adapted to the school reality (Carpenter et al., 2017). Our participants valued some insightful topics to be included in the teachers' training, "*Specific training in inclusion for school leaders*"; "*Sharing successful practices between schools, regularly…*"; "*Training teachers in the development and implementation of community intervention projects. From inclusive education to social inclusion*". How education is delivered must adapt and move forward to teach the skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century and create the citizens and leaders that our world needs.

Inclusion was established due to recognising the value of human diversity (Polat, 2011). Implementing inclusion practices in schools promotes the formation of human values among the students, parents, and teachers (Hardy & Woodcock, 2014). A pedagogy based on the principles of humanity that praises individuals' autonomy, ethical values, citizenship and human rights should be the focus of any teacher training and the path to a sustainable education (Haug, 2017). A school united and enriched by its diversity, with a safe platform for teachers' collaborative learning and efficient training, will always be closer to a sustainable school.

Concluding remarks

There is an evident discrepancy between teachers' desire to facilitate inclusion processes in their classrooms and what happens in schools (Shani & Koss, 2014). The findings of our study indicate that teachers must have specific, objective and meaningful training in inclusive education. Topics such as flexible curriculum management, the implementation of differentiated teaching methodologies and strategies, the development of diversified assessment procedures and the organisation of the resources and environment in the classroom should be introduced in teachers' continuous training and professional development. On the other hand, the reference by teachers to the need for collaborative work between peers appears as a relevant and meaningful fact in our findings.

Discussed and reflected work between teachers allows the sharing of good practices and reflective thinking that lead to personal and professional growth (Ferreira & Reis-Jorge, 2022). When teachers work collaboratively to implement changes, changes are more likely to succeed. This collaborative work, valued by sharing and reflection, can also allow the emergence of small research groups within the school, leading to the association of research with pedagogical practices in a collaborative action-research type of work (Webb et al., 2009).

It seems evident that the definitive implementation of inclusive education depends on multiple factors. Teachers are essential to ensuring inclusion in their permanent interaction with students. However, close and systematic collaboration between school leaders, education officers and policymakers is fundamental to articulating desire and reality. Scenario thinking for the future will lead to more personalised schools, adjusting the curriculum and focusing it on the interests and motivations of its school population, available to allow for interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinary knowledge. A school that facilitates teaching and learning in models based on collaborative projects, inside and outside of school. A diversity of learning situations will allow all students, independently of their abilities and interests, to be covered and, in other words, will give some "outside world" to students and teachers.

Action must be taken to transform schools into learning communities, involving all actors in the educational system and prioritising the development and implementation of policies that promote inclusion and equity in education. These actions must be seen as a continuous movement towards creating learning environments that facilitate human development, focused on each student's educational needs.

Finally, it is essential to include more explicit examples of good practices of collaborative and inclusive methodologies in the teacher training courses, valuing the personalisation of teaching and the uniqueness of each student. It is also relevant to consider the singularity of each teacher in the training courses, without neglecting the array of experience that teachers bring to the training context, the education levels they teach and their teaching subjects.

Statements on open data, ethics and conflict of interest

The author will make the data supporting this article available without reservation.
The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.
Ethical review and approval followed the local legislation and institutional requirements.

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