TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how teachers understand inclusive education, seeking to know its difficulties and needs for the implementation of this policy. To this end, it conducted and analyzed interviews with eight teachers from regular elementary schools, from three public schools in a city on the coast of São Paulo. The teachers' conceptions about inclusion ranged from a teaching process aimed at students with special educational needs with difficulties in following the regular contents to the mere socialization or simple realization of a right. Among the difficulties pointed out are the long working hours, the large number of students per class and the lack of specialized support. The analysis of these notes refers to the neoliberal reforms of the State, especially with regard to its supervisory functions and cost containment, which affects the implementation of social policies. It was concluded that the implementation of this policy presupposes urgent reforms in the general education system.

Keywords: Teachers; inclusive education; health.

Concepciones de profesores sobre la política de educación inclusiva: un estudio de caso

RESUMEN

En este estudio se investigó cómo profesores entienden la educación inclusiva, buscando conocer sus dificultades y necesidades para la efectividad de esta política. Para eso, se realizó y analizó entrevistas a ocho profesoras de clases regulares de lo enseñanza básica, de tres escuelas públicas de un municipio del litoral paulista. Las concepciones de las profesoras acerca de inclusión abarcan desde un proceso de enseñanza volcada a alumnos con necesidades educacionales especiales con dificultades de acompañar los contenidos regulares hasta la simple socialización o simple concretización de un derecho. Entre las dificultades apuntadas están la extensa jornada de trabajo, el gran número de alumnos por clase y la falta de apoyo especializado. El análisis de esos apuntes remete a las reformas neoliberales del Estado, sobre todo en lo que se refiere a sus funciones fiscalizadora y de contención de gastos, lo que impacta la ejecución de políticas sociales. Se concluye que la efectividad de esta política presupone reformas urgentes en el sistema general de enseñanza.

Palabras clave: Profesores; educación inclusiva; salud.

Concepções de professores sobre a política de educação inclusiva: um estudo de caso

RESUMO

Este estudo investigou como professores entendem a educação inclusiva, buscando conhecer suas dificuldades e necessidades para a efetivação desta política. Para isso, realizou e analisou entrevistas com oito professoras de salas regulares do ensino fundamental, de três escolas públicas de um município do litoral paulista. As concepções das professoras acerca de inclusão envolveram desde um processo de ensino voltado a alunos com necessidades educacionais especiais com dificuldades de acompanhar os conteúdos regulares até a mera socialização ou simples concretização de um direito. Entre as dificuldades apontadas estão a extensa jornada de trabalho, o grande número de alunos por sala e a falta de apoio especializado. A análise desses apontamentos remete às reformas neoliberais do Estado, sobretudo no que tange às suas funções fiscalizadora e de contenção de gastos, o que impacta a execução de políticas sociais. Concluiu-se que a efetivação desta política pressupõe reformas urgentes no sistema geral de ensino.

Palavras-chave: Professores; educação inclusiva; saúde.

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INTRODUCTION

Discussions about school inclusion involve countless others, not being an isolated process, but with broad implications in the political, cultural, economic and social fields. We live in a formally democratic society, which contains in its legal provisions the defense of plurality, social coexistence and dialogue in diversity. The right to participate in the common teaching and learning spaces and processes carried out by the school is provided for legislation and educational policies must be compatible with these assumptions (Brasil, 2008).

In Brazil, one of the important guiding documents in this area is the National Policy for Special Education in the Perspective of Inclusive Education (Brazil, 2008). This document criticizes the school as an institution that historically reproduces the inequality and discrimination present in the basic functioning of our society. The document points out that the process of democratizing education, as longing for the working classes and simultaneously guided by the interests of the ruling classes, highlights within the school, the paradox between inclusion and exclusion from which our society is built: no one is outside society, but it works by excluding huge sections of the population from access to minimum conditions of dignified life. Likewise, the universalization of access to formal education does not guarantee access to school knowledge and consequent development for all, since exclusion is reproduced inside classrooms, especially for individuals and groups considered to diverge from the school homogenizing standards. The inclusive education paradigm seeks to combat such exclusion, making the school system responsible for physical and attitudinal adaptations so that everyone can learn, including students with disabilities.

This paradigm is present in international documents such as the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) and the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994), which guide inclusive education policies around the world. However, there is a long way between the formulation of public policies and their implementation. In this sense, several factors contribute to the materialization of inclusive education: the institutional structure of the school system, the marks left by previous policies, the conceptions about the act of educating and the population to which it is directed, the investments destined to the functioning of the school, teacher training policies, among others. However, these factors converge for what teachers do and think in schools. They are the ones who make educational policies concrete in the classrooms. It is from this observation that this work is ready to analyze the teachers' conceptions about the current policy of inclusive education, seeking to understand its real effectiveness.

The analyses carried out here also start from certain conceptions of education and society, of the State and of public policies. In summary, education is understood from its dialectical relationship with society. Education and society are mutually constituting, however, being part of the social whole, education predominantly reproduces social functioning. However, education also plays a contradictory role, that of transformation. This is because the very society in which we live is marked by the contradiction between the classes that constitute it, reserving the vast majority of exploitation and precarious living conditions, so that minorities can accumulate wealth and govern for their own benefit. The State is the apparatus from which this government is exercised, not without intense disputes. The contradictions that run through capitalist society also run through the state and the policies from which it seeks to organize the various social sectors. Thus, the policy of inclusive education manifests, in its ideals and practices, the paradoxes of its historical time, marked by the neoliberal ideas and the struggle for the maintenance of social rights.

Conceptions about inclusive education

The theme of inclusive education is often ruled by difficulties and vagueness that arise in school life, as opposed to the apparent solidity and clarity exposed in the guidelines and legislation. In this way, recurring considerations are made by teachers in view of their experiences with inclusive education, reiterating the importance of training regular class teachers for the educational care of all children, with or without disabilities.

The need for training for educational agents is advocated in the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) and in the current National Special Education Policy in the Perspective of Inclusive Education, which guides education systems to ensure "... training teachers to provide care educational system and other education professionals for school inclusion" (Brasil, 2008, p. 10). Likewise, the Inclusive Education Program, implemented by MEC in 2005, promoted a broad process of training managers and educators in Brazilian municipalities to guarantee the right of everyone to access schooling and specialized educational services (Brasil, 2005).

However, at the time, Sant'Ana (2005) already shows us issues frequently raised by educators regarding the lack of previous training and experience, as well as the absence of specific strategies with students with disabilities, and the success of their intervention depends on the implementation of wide changes in pedagogical practices, namely: the adoption of new concepts and strategies, the adaptation or (re) construction of curricula, the use of new techniques and specific resources for this clientele and the establishment of new forms of assessment.

Sant'Ana (2005) also points out that teacher training should not be restricted to participation in occasional courses, but it must also include training, supervision and evaluation programs carried out in an integrated and permanent way. In addition, the teacher needs to be assisted in the exercise of reflecting about his/her practice, so that he/she understands his/her beliefs in relation to the process and becomes a researcher of his/her action, seeking to improve it. As Pletsch (2009) points out, training is needed to enable the teacher to mobilize his knowledge, articulating it with his skills through theoretical and practical action and reflection. In this sense, Anjos (2015) develops a "research-training", through which it establishes a relationship between university and teachers, attributing to them a role in the continuous training process. This role comes from the reflection, on the part of teachers, about their own stories as educators, the intertwining between these stories and the history of educational policies and, in this process, the formation of their professional identities, always in transit. In this way, it would be possible to face frequent negative evaluations by teachers about training programs, considered insufficient and inadequate to school reality (Matos & Mendes, 2015). However, it is also necessary to consider that the success of the teaching-learning process for everyone in the school depends on a positive attitude not only from the teacher, but from all the agents involved in this process.

Inclusion, according to Jesus (2004), advances in the understanding that the school must function as a social space and make changes to include all its students, including those who demand greater support in the educational process, assuming a position of constructing capable equity to collaborate to include in the social fabric those who have been systematically excluded, so that human diversity can make itself present as a universal value. In other words, according to Figueiredo (2002), inclusion means an educational advance with important political and social repercussions, so that it is not a question of adapting the individual to institutional functioning, but of transforming the reality of educational practices.

Some authors, such as Sant'Ana (2005), indicate apparent changes in the educators' conceptions, which would be more related to the ideas of inclusion than of integration. This would be related to the recent discussions about inclusion in the various social spheres, including the media, as well as the influence of readings and training that facilitate the understanding and distinction of meanings.

Other authors, such as Anjos, Andrade and Pereira (2009), identify ambiguous discourses in relation to the theme, in which inclusion appears both as a process and as a product. In the first case, it represents a human action characterized by trial and error, in which

the teacher can put himself more or less implicated. In the case of being conceived as a product, it takes the form of something idealized, which occurs or not and depends mainly on the understanding of those involved, reserving less space for the teacher's action. This ambiguity can be associated with a period of transition, in which a crisis towards new educational experiences would motivate feelings of unpreparedness, improvisation, inventiveness and impotence, in the face of an institutional apparatus that appears as external to the actions of teachers.

Based on these considerations, the present study aims to investigate how teachers understand inclusive education, also seeking to know the difficulties and needs pointed out by professionals in the process of including children with disabilities in regular public education.

METHOD

Eight teachers from regular elementary school rooms participated in this study, working in the municipal network of a city on the coast of São Paulo, and these were, at the time of the research, teaching classes for children with disabilities in their classes. The teachers were from three educational units from different regions of the city and with different socioeconomic profiles. All of them were female, with the lowest and longest working hours of them being 7 and 30 years old, respectively, both in the state and municipal networks. Regarding the work with children with disabilities, the report of the least experience is of 1 year and the greatest of 30 years.

The interviews were conducted at the schools and at times chosen by the teachers. The participants signed Free and Informed Consent Terms, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of São Paulo under the number 1628/07.

A script for semi-structured interviews was used, in addition to recording equipment for data recording and subsequent transcription and analysis of the material. The script intended to focus on the following dimensions: concepts, ideas and opinions that professionals expressed about Inclusive Education as a public policy (institutional structuring to promote inclusion at the national and municipal levels) and as a practice (previous experience, daily work, use of technologies assistive rooms, multifunctional resource rooms, family participation and collaboration of specialized institutions).

After the transcription of the reports, a wide reading of the material obtained was made. Then, the content analysis was carried out (Bardin, 1977/1979), involving:

a) Identification of topics and their subsequent division into units of responses;

b) Cut the texts according to the content presented;

c) Grouping and categorizing the response units, which represent the set of ideas common to the researched group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In addition to the data collected through the interviews, it was possible to observe with the teachers the unpredictability of the school, the accumulation of tasks inside and outside the classroom and the double or triple workday. Thus, the times scheduled for the interviews, at least a week in advance, were often taken by the lack of another teacher and the demand for replacement in the classroom, by the need to fill out numerous documents and forms or by other unforeseen events. Thus, we experience the difficulty of teachers in exercising a minimum of autonomy, in dedicating themselves to activities that do not reproduce the chronic, troubled and accelerated school routine.

It can be said that most of the interviewees participated in the transition process of the paradigms of special education, starting from integration and currently experiencing the search for practices that respond to the assumptions of inclusive education.

We observe reports from teachers who illustrate this moment of transition in education, when they speak of the gradual insertion of students with disabilities who, with many restrictions and concessions to only a few diagnoses, had access to the special rooms of the regular school, reproducing, therefore, the exclusion within school walls, with the constitution of spaces strictly differentiated to the "different", as we can see in the speech of a teacher:

> *Before, there was very little inclusion, and you had more students with hearing impairment; mental disorders were few because they were more at X* [Special Education School in the Municipality]*, in other institutions ... Then I remember that they started to insert those who had Down, and autism. But they had separate monitoring within the same period* [special room]*, you had those rooms like you have S.A.N.E.E.* [current Multifunctional Resource Room] *today, but they worked much more there and less with us.* (Teacher 1)

This panorama begins to be transformed with the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education (Law nº 9.394, 1996), which states that it is up to the education systems to ensure that students have specific curriculum, methods, resources and organization to meet their needs. The law thus exceeds the limit of integration, as it adapts the system to the needs of the student, seeking to transform the school context and reducing its restrictions, which were previously understood to belong to the students. The school starts to be seen as discriminatory and, in this way,

the search for a new perspective of understanding the disability becomes effective, a social understanding, through which one can overcome the service restricted to homogeneous standards of existence.

It is, however, the legislative plan, which does not immediately transfer to the complexity of school life, as reported by the interviewees. When asked about the inclusion, outburst, anguish and difficulties appear immediately, which speak of a process that has imposed itself on pedagogical practices without the participation of teachers with regard to formulations and decisions, as they claim to participate only in the execution of the law, without, however, understanding it. They disagree largely, often conceiving of the process as flawed or ineffective.

As pointed out by Ainscow (2000), those who defend the need for reforms in educational systems, which legislate and generate new paradigms for understanding education, need to remember that education policies are, in the final analysis, what is going on behind the classroom door. In this sense,

> ... teachers are policy makers. The way in which they decide to interpret external guidelines while interacting with their classes, is, in fact, the relevant political action. Thus, for changes to take place, it is essential that they are managed in such a way as to ensure the participation of a committed and confident faculty. Consequently, full attention must be paid to the ways in which this process of involvement can be promoted. (Ainscow, 2000, p. 2).

Among the reports, several conceptions emerge about a process that has been based on intuition, goodwill or even through the attempts and errors of teachers who work with students with disabilities; teachers who deal, within classrooms, with the flaws in the training and support processes for the effectiveness of the inclusion process, which does not always materialize, as reported by teacher 1: "There are many things that I don't know, that I don't feel able to be working with them, just goodwill sometimes doesn't work. It is not enough". Or even as illustrated in the speech of teacher 7: "Until today we are taking it a little bit in the research itself, in intuition, in affection, that we get attached to the child".

Some teachers conceive inclusion as a process that needs to be reviewed, disagreeing with the way it has occurred, but they believe it is a necessary process. However, they question whether, at the current situation, they would be benefiting or harming students, in view of the lack of partnership with specialized assistance to support and complement the work done in the classroom, as well as precarious basic structural conditions, which will from the inadequacy of the

physical space to the scarcity of resources and methods.

In this context, teachers often feel overwhelmed and lonely, unable to put the inclusive education guidelines into practice, collaborating for a process that can turn themselves inside out, in exclusion, or even expressing the idea that the child should fit in a certain profile to be included in the school, as shown in the following statement:

> I think inclusion is valid as long as the child is able to be included, because I think there are cases, there are syndromes that are unable to stay in a room with thirty or thirty-five students, without support, without structure. Then it ends up not being inclusion, it ends up being exclusion. The inclusion is then valid as long as the child is able to be included. (Teacher 3).

The idea of inclusion also appears, in the teachers' speech, as differentiated teaching aimed at children who are unable to accompany the other students in the classroom, demanding individualized attention, with methodological and curricular adaptations, so that the student has opportunities to development according to their skills, potential and limitations, with some of these statements associated with a concept of inclusive education as a way of social insertion, necessary for the full development of the student, as a subject of rights.

We consider that when the teacher seeks, despite all the difficulties and failures of the process, to build with the student a practice that meets his needs and particularities, he is looking for the construction of an inclusive paradigm, a leap forward, towards goals that they do not aim at pre-established standards of the ideal student, but to reach the maximum of their potential, together with their "normal" colleagues, thus guaranteeing the right to singularity. In the inclusion paradigm, it is not the "disabled" who have to adapt to the "normal", but the "normal" are the ones who need to learn to live with the difference.

Some teachers refer to a pedagogical practice that starts from the assumption presented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), combining equality and difference as inseparable values, with inclusive education just another step towards this basic assumption. In this perspective, one of the teachers conceives her work with students with disabilities according to their needs, attending differently to different ones, according to their demands. It is possible to bring such a conception closer to one of the basic principles of universal access to public health services in our country, the principle of equity, which advocates the duty to equally attend to each person's right, respecting their differences.

In addition to the difficulties discussed above,

the large number of students per classroom, which according to reports corresponds to about thirty-five to thirty-eight students, greatly impairs the differentiated service, becoming even more accentuated when the teacher cannot count on the presence of an assistant, which is pointed out as a problem by three teachers.

Only two teachers, from two different municipal teaching units, report the issue of physical space as being, even today, an obstacle to the inclusion process, referring to both the physical space of the school and the standard furniture, which is inadequate to meet the special needs related to the physical disabilities of certain students. These issues are evidenced in the account of teacher 4: "if you are a wheelchair user, for example, it is complicated, because most of the school is accessed by stairs" - and teacher 2:

> I work with a wheelchair student, for example; bathroom should be fully adapted. The assistant had an extreme difficulty of taking the girl, she doesn't have that adaptation of the vase for her. The school has to prepare to receive this student since he comes here. Last year we even put books under the chair to see if the table would go up a little further for her; the father who was running after, who is seeing if he can adapt a taller table for her. (Teacher 2).

Although numerous documents guarantee accessibility as a right, the teacher's speech clearly shows us the difficulty in producing a less restrictive environment that meets the individual needs of each student.

In this sense, we can rescue the National Policy for Special Education in the Perspective of Inclusive Education, which refers to the theme when it mentions, among its objectives to ensure inclusion, guide the education systems to guarantee "... architectural accessibility, in transport, in securities, in communications and information"(Brasil, 2008, p.14).

As reported, this process of adaptations has been taking place gradually, much less from institutional reorganization to comply with legislation and much more from specific situations and local initiatives, so that we observe, as in the example mentioned, a mobilization of all the school community and its agents, students and family, to build the inclusion process. This context leads us once again to an inclusive educational process that is reflected in society as a whole, and is involved in it, exemplifying what Michels (2006, p. 406) shows us when he says: "The school potentially assumes the role of transforming society. Therefore, it is a product and producer of social relations". However, although the mutual influence between school and society is recognized, the State, as the organizer of

social aspirations, is seen as the importer of measures that are not very plausible in the precarious conditions it provides.

Two teachers question the role of the Secretariat of Education and the Ministry of Education (MEC), as managing bodies, in specialized educational assistance, since according to them there would be a need for support or monitoring of the work of teachers, in order to offer support for the issues that have been discussed, which apparently it does not happen, as reported by teacher 6: "Nobody comes to support us so we can develop a better job". This questioning is also evidenced in the speech of teacher 1:

> They make the laws, right, the MEC determines things, it is difficult to put into practice. I think it works, as long as you have support. My expectation is this, that everyone does their part, right. Because it is useless if you want results from only one side [of the teacher]. It does not work. It won't give the result it should. (Teacher 1).

In this sense, one of the teachers highlights a mismatch between what is recommended and what is likely to be carried out in daily practice; in other words, it points to the need for approximation between these bodies and the school reality experienced, in a more intense way, by teachers and students.

Michels (2006) underlines an important change in the scope of public management from the neoliberal reforms of the State: the abandonment of its interventionist and provider character in order to constitute itself simply as a regulatory State, so that in the field of education, under the aegis of supposed democratization, administrative decentralization is implemented. Thus, according to the author, the federal government is exempt from responsibilities, passing them on mainly to municipalities. Nevertheless, it is observed that:

> In this same logic (under the democratization discourse), school units end up taking responsibility for educational action, becoming, then, a privileged focus of management. It is the school that demands the formation of a new political and social "mentality". (Michels, 2006, p. 421).

Thus, the teacher is absolutely right when she questions the lack of effective action by the management bodies and denounces once again the overload of teachers who work in a precarious, uninformed and often lonely manner. Therefore, we observe the exemption of the public power that it advocates, but does not create effective conditions of execution, so that the teacher appears as a decisive element in the realization of this version of public management, that is, he assumes the role of merely executing education.

Ultimately, the government proposes - when it proposes - for teachers a light and utilitarian training, which has little concern for their well-being in the inclusive process, but demands from them that the process happens, in the best way, as recommended, that is, it is up to the teacher to "make it work".

There are also questions related to difficulties with adaptations of the assessment process of students with disabilities, because, according to one of the teachers, what she does, in relation to the student's evolution and qualitatively, becomes information that remains restricted to the school; however, what is taken into account by the municipality are numbers, statistics, quantitative assessments, which do not portray the students' individual development process.

Thus, as we have been discussing, the State appears as a simple regulator, demanding results. According to Michels,

The State retracts on the provision, highlighting the role of the school unit as responsible for the education of children, youth and adults, but maintaining control of what is done by the school through assessment (SAEB - National System of Basic Education Assessment, ENEM - National Exam of Upper Secondary, ENC - National Course Exam [current ENADE - National Exam of Student Performance (ENADE]). (Michels, 2006, p. 408).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is necessary to emphasize that this work does not seek to contemplate all the questions and developments that are related to the inclusive education policy. It would be an illusion to think that such a task could be accomplished. The work presented here is just a snapshot of how this process has occurred in three municipal teaching units in a single municipality, so that by establishing contact with what some of their teachers think and experience, we had the opportunity to reflect about the gaps between what is recommended and its effectiveness, as well as understanding how the dictates of this policy echo and resonate within the school and in the practice of teachers.

Although indicated and widely discussed within the scope of legislation, we note that the process of inclusive education has been taking place in an intuitive way and that it still has the sensitivity and dedication of teachers, who often walk alone in the search for better living conditions inclusion of students with disabilities.

We were able to learn from the teachers' speech a process of inclusion which they often disagree, in view of the way it has occurred. However, from the view of education as a student's constitutional right, they seek to overcome difficulties as far as possible, through intuition

or goodwill, trial and error, in favor of a process that allows openness to society, so that inclusion in school activities is only the first step, both for the development of the target audience of the inclusive education policy, and for society as a whole, which needs drastic changes in the sense of understanding differences.

In this sense, we observe that, as Michels (2006) points out, educational policies are not alone in society, but are intrinsically related to the broader social reality, so that the changes that occur in society seek education as a foundation.

We also need to understand that including people with disabilities or disorders in the current context of precariousness that was evident in the persistent reports, does not in itself break with the exclusion circuit. For this reason, the proposal for inclusive education cannot be thought of in a disjointed way in the struggle for the improvement and transformation of education as a whole.

Therefore, in view of the inclusive guidelines as opposed to the institutional reality, it was observed that it is the constitutional right of the student to enroll in the regular educational institution, however, inclusion does not mean only enrolling all students targeted by this policy in regular rooms, but it also means giving the teacher and the school the necessary support for their pedagogical action, prioritizing inclusive and dialogical practices.

Finally, many of the questions presented concern problems that have existed for several decades in the educational structure of the country, which refers to the education of all students, and not just those who have some type of disability or disorder, showing that the issue of inclusion it is not seen, and should not be, from the perspective of personal order, it is up to the individual to overcome it, but that profound changes must be made in order to improve the quality of education in general, overcoming the different challenges that arise in the context school.

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