

## THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULA IN PSYCHOLOGY COURSES: ANALYSIS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TRAINING

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of new areas of practice in Psychology has required changes in the training process. In order to analyze how the training in psychology has prepared the future professional to work in special education, the curriculum of 34 national undergraduate courses with better evaluation was conducted. By consulting the websites of the institutions, the subjects that presented some direct reference to special education were selected, in 36 different subjects, grouped into three categories: those that present such modality restricted to some type of deficit or disorder, those that do not specify the focus of special education and those focused on giftedness. The results showed that most courses concentrate, on average, two subjects of this nature throughout the course, usually offered between the 3rd and 10th semester of the course, mostly in the form of optional subjects.

**Keywords:** Professional training; psychologist training; school psychology.

### Planes de estudios de los cursos de graduación en psicología: análisis de la formación para educación especial

#### RESUMEN

El surgimiento de áreas emergentes de actuación en la Psicología ha exigido cambios en el proceso de formación. Con el objetivo de analizar cómo la formación en psicología ha preparado el futuro profesional para actuar en la educación especial, el plan de estudios de 34 cursos de graduación nacionales con mejor evaluación fue realizada. Por intermedio de la consulta a los *websites* de las instituciones, las asignaturas que presentaban alguna referencia directa a la educación especial fueron seleccionadas, en un total de 36 distintas asignaturas, agrupadas en tres categorías: las que presentan tal modalidad restringida a algún tipo de déficit o trastorno, aquellas que no especifican cual el enfoque de la educación especial y aquellas volcadas a las altas habilidades/superdotación. Los resultados apuntaron que la mayor parte de los cursos concentra, en media, dos asignaturas de esa naturaleza a lo largo de la formación, usualmente ofrecida entre el 3<sup>er</sup> y 10<sup>o</sup> semestre del curso, mayoritariamente bajo la forma de asignaturas optativas.

**Palabras clave:** Formación profesional; formación del psicólogo; psicología escolar.

### Grade curricular dos cursos de graduação em Psicologia: análise da formação para educação especial

#### RESUMO

O surgimento de áreas emergentes de atuação na Psicologia tem exigido mudanças no processo de formação. Com o objetivo de analisar como a formação em psicologia tem preparado o futuro profissional para atuar na educação especial, a grade curricular de 34 cursos de graduação nacionais com melhor avaliação foi realizada. Por meio da consulta aos *websites* das instituições, as disciplinas que apresentavam alguma referência direta à educação especial foram selecionadas, em um total de 36 diferentes disciplinas, agrupadas em três categorias: as que apresentam tal modalidade restrita a algum tipo de déficit ou transtorno, aquelas que não especificam qual o foco da educação especial e aquelas voltadas às altas habilidades/superdotação. Os resultados mostraram que a maior parte dos cursos concentra, em média, duas disciplinas dessa natureza ao longo da formação, usualmente oferecida entre o 3<sup>o</sup> e 10<sup>o</sup> semestre do curso, majoritariamente sob a forma de disciplinas optativas.

**Palavras-chave:** Formação profissional; formação do psicólogo; psicologia escolar.

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## INTRODUCTION

Historically, since the creation of undergraduate courses in Psychology, in which the minimum curriculum prevailed until the institution of curriculum guidelines, professional training was based on the offer of isolated disciplines that were disconnected from the real issues of daily life and the reality imposed on psychology. Rethinking training methodologies proved to be an essential step towards real change in this scenario (Bock, 2015), especially the expansion of possibilities for professional performance in emerging areas of the labor market. It is important to remember that an important change was established in 2004, with the publication of the National Curriculum Guidelines (Bernardes, 2012). This document intended to make sure that professionals would be able to adapt to the reality of professional practice. It also provided professionals with better ethical and technical preparation to act successfully in the face of diversity and the current challenges of professional reality (Cruces, 2010).

Since then, professional training in psychology has been the subject of studies and debates (Ferrari, Camargo, Albanese, Pan, & Bulgavoc, 2016; Hutz & Flag, 2003; Noronha, Carvalho, Miguel, Souza, & Santos, 2010), involving the curricular issue, scientific training, complementary training, academic internship, teaching and supervision methodologies, and teacher training among other aspects (Lisboa & Barbosa, 2009). According to the authors, so many discussions point to one thing in common: dissatisfaction with Brazilian psychologist's formation, which is considered inefficient. A series of questions have been raised in the national scientific literature. Does the qualification offered in undergraduate courses give professionals a solid foundation for professional practice in any area, including emerging ones? If the answer is negative, should it be necessary to propose a curricular change that includes new disciplines, or should specific training be provided in specialization courses? What will be the most appropriate measure to meet the new demands? (Carvalho & Sampaio, 1997).

Consequently, in the last 20 years, Dimenstein and Macedo (2012) have highlighted the existence of a movement towards the expansion of psychology in the field of public policies and social practices, although Costa et al. (2012) defend the need for more in-depth and consistent reflections on professional preparation. This is because psychology training has been questioned in the face of new professional and social demands (Conde, 2017), which are constant themes throughout the history of Psychology as a science.

For this reason, training and teaching have become areas in which the Federal Council of Psychology has continuously invested. The realization of events,

debates and publications, notably in 2018, chosen as the Year of Psychology Education, are a characteristic of an important scenario, which involves a discussion on the reformulations to be carried out in the national curriculum guidelines for undergraduate courses in Psychology (Guareschi, 2018).

School psychology was one of the first areas in Brazil to initiate a critical debate on professional training and the model of psychological action in education (Souza, 2009) while highlighting, among other emerging areas, the need to look into the inclusive education of people with disabilities and children with special educational needs. This is because, especially in this context, research on psychology training for inclusive education is still very restricted, both in Brazilian and international scientific literature (Barbosa & Conti, 2011), which seems indifferent to the important role that psychology professionals can play in this context.

Educational Psychology has a lot to contribute to the quality of schools. Some of these contributions are related to the implementation and evaluation of pedagogical projects that meet the different profiles of students present at the school, participation in teacher training, support to parents, diagnosis and referral of problems related to school complaints, development of individual work programs, a realization of curricular adaptations, guidance to teachers on models of action aimed at inclusion and overcoming school failure, and multidisciplinary teamwork to support the learning process (Barbosa & Marinho-Araújo, 2010; Cruces, 2010).

In this sense, the need to define what exactly psychologists are supposed to do in the school context, and the difficulty to articulate practice and theory are issues discussed by researchers in the area (Neves, Almeida, Chaperman, & Batista, 2002). For a long time, schools ignored the heterogeneous reality of students, and such exclusionary context ended up characterizing the Brazilian educational practice (Bock, 2005). By reviewing this scenario in terms of theories, attitudes, and practices, Psychology can play a pivotal role. It is up to Psychology to change this situation by establishing the so-called inclusive education, that is, a process that truly includes and benefits students of all profiles.

Inclusive education "can be understood as the process of welcoming, maintaining, and promoting the development of people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in common classrooms of regular schools" (Barbosa & Conti, 2011, p. 232). Given this fact, the authors affirm that the academic education of professionals who deal with the inclusive process is fundamental for developing of positive attitudes, ethical principles, and social commitment. Concerning Psychology in particular, training in school psychology,

among various specialties, is the one that deals more directly with individuals with SEN. However, little attention has been paid to the training of professionals who will operate in inclusive contexts. For this change to occur, according to the authors, institutions that offer degrees in Psychology must rethink their courses' curricular structure if their goal is to prepare professionals to work with people with or without special educational needs.

Conde (2017) emphasizes the exclusion of people with disabilities as a historical practice, so that, more recently, a range of public policies have been developed to recover the process of social inclusion. Among them, the author emphasizes the Statute of People with Disabilities (Law 13.146/2015), which imposes a series of challenges to psychologists, and leads to questions such as: How to work with traditional psychological assessment instruments, which have no evidence of validity for use with specific populations? How to adapt their use?

As an attempt to answer some of these questions, this research was elaborated to assess how psychology education has prepared future professionals to work in special education through an analysis of the curriculum of the best-ranked undergraduate psychology courses listed in important national ranking systems.

### **MATERIAL**

The analysis included the 15 best psychology courses according to the 2017 ranking of the Folha de São Paulo newspaper (2017) and those that received the five-star ranking by the Student Guide (2018), a total sum of 34 undergraduate Psychology courses.

### **PROCEDURES**

The proposal involved an assessment of the curricula in each of these courses, according to the availability of data provided by these higher learning institutions' websites. It is important to emphasize the fact that only the curriculum of undergraduate courses was consulted. This research excluded postgraduation (including both undergraduate and psychologist training disciplines, when such differentiation was described on the websites), extension, and specialization courses offered by these institutions.

### **DIFFICULTIES**

Unlike the situation that had initially been raised as a hypothesis, the institutions' websites' consultation indicated that most of them provide only the name of the disciplines, without a menu containing further details. Thus, identifying and classification of disciplines that deal with the theme of special education was hindered. Also, there was still a large margin for subjectivity if these disciplines' contents were to be deduced only by name. It is important also to take

into consideration the huge diversity of courses and institutions available nowadays.

The researcher came up against a whole new series of difficulties. Examples include the presence of more than one current curriculum, the lack of information about the workload or period of the day in which the course is offered (especially in the case of optional disciplines), the workload information presented in terms of the number of credits, not in classroom hours, and the difficulty in accessing the curriculum matrix on websites (including, in most cases, the need to go through a series of pages before the desired information could finally be found). Such aspects may certainly have influenced the final results so that they need to be interpreted with caution.

Considering that the study's objective was not to assess specific institutions and/or courses, but to draw a profile on how training for special education has been offered in undergraduate courses, the researcher chose not to identify the courses. Based on the research limitations mentioned above, this decision was made to avoid any misunderstanding that might have occurred in the nominal classification of institutions.

It is important to emphasize that disciplines that did not present in their title any direct reference to special education were disregarded by the analysis. However, they may take on this phenomenon. Examples include "Psycho-pedagogical Intervention in Daily School Life", "School Psychology and Learning Difficulties", or "Special Topics in Educational and School Psychology".

### **RESULTS**

The researcher searched the websites of each of the listed institutions for information concerning course curricula. The disciplines that presented, in their names, some direct reference to special education were selected, along with information on the total course workload, the workload of the identified discipline, its character (mandatory or optional), and the semester of the course in which it is offered, so that a broader picture of this training could be established. It is relevant to point that only 4 of the 34 courses analyzed did not present disciplines aimed at special education.

The first analysis involved the total workload of the course. The average number of hours for psychology training pointed to a total sum of 4,545. By more than 10%, it exceeded, the minimum hours established by the Ministry of Education and Culture in the National Curriculum Guidelines for this course (4,000 hours, distributed over five years).

Then, a survey on the disciplines that possibly address special education was carried out. A total sum of 36 different disciplines was being offered in the institutions analyzed. Most of them focused on basic notions of sign language (n=17), so that it

corresponded to 47.22% of the disciplines in the area of special education. It was also possible to verify that most courses present only one or two special education (30.5% each). There were very few courses that included three disciplines, focusing on their training formation (16.6%). Even fewer courses offered four (2.7%) or five disciplines (2.7%), situations found only in one institution each.

Another important point to make is that it is possible to distribute the target audiences of the disciplines into three groups. The first group, including an important set of disciplines, focuses on special education aimed caring for individuals who have some deficit or disorder (n=6, 16.6%). The list of disciplines is provided in Table 1.

The analysis shows us that half of the disciplines are offered as elective and the other half as mandatory. Considering the workload, it ranged between 34 and 72 hours between the third and ninth semester of the course. A second group was then analyzed, and the disciplines in this group did not specify the focus on special education. The results are presented in Table 2.

The second group, composed of 34 disciplines, does not specify the focus on special education. The names of the disciplines are characterized by various terminologies, such as inclusive education, people with special needs, exceptional or atypical development, people with disabilities, and so on. These subjects' workload ranges from 30 to 135 hours/classes, with an average of 59 hours. 14 of these disciplines are offered as mandatory (41.1% of the cases), and the others are of optional or elective nature and offered between the second and the tenth semester of the course.

A discipline that focuses its attention specifically on students with giftedness, consisting of a third focus, was found in only one institution, entitled "Giftedness, Talent and Human Development", offered as an elective discipline, without information about their workload or the semester in which the discipline is offered.

## DISCUSSION

The small number of disciplines focused on special education in the assessed Psychology undergraduate courses reveals a scarcity in training programs for

professional practice in this specific area. It also hints at the unpreparedness of Psychology professionals. These data confirm Barbosa and Conti (2011) findings, who, when looking into the graduation experiences of 163 students, found that 39.88% of the students stated that they had not participated in activities and/or disciplines on inclusive education during their graduation years. Those who reported having done some extracurricular activity related to inclusive education (74.85%) explained that this occurred in the fourth or eighth semesters, a situation also more commonly found in the analysis of the curricula presented here.

If we consider that a psychologist's practice in the world of school psychology is the one that deals most directly with people with special needs, what is verified is that little attention has been paid to the training of professionals who will operate in this specific context. In addition to the disciplines of the common nucleus, developmental psychology, psychology of learning, psychology of groups and institutions linked to educational psychology should be prioritized in training (Cruces, 2010), not only as elective disciplines but mainly as mandatory ones, so that the academic training of professionals will really prepare them to deal with students with and without special needs (Barbosa & Conti, 2011).

Gonçalves (1996) mentions other disciplines considered priority for work in school education. Some of these disciplines are learning and human development, special education, psychoeducational evaluation, and school counseling and organization. However, in practice, many courses still rely on curricula based on the model provided by the minimum curriculum established in 1962. Considering that this document determined the establishment of specific disciplines as well as variable ones – such as Psychology of the Exceptional, which could even be left out of the training (Nico & Kovac, 2003), and that this discipline was found in four courses – we can conclude that little reformulation has been carried out in these courses since their implementation and they remain indifferent to the new Curricular Guidelines.

To make training more complete and updated,

**Table 1.** *Disciplines focused on deficit or disorder.*

Name of the discipline	Workload	Mandatory	Elective (optional)	Semester
Psychology and Disability	60	x		6
Psychology and Disability	60	x		5
Autism Spectrum Disorder	54		x	9
Psychology and Disability Studies	34		x	3
Psychology and People with Disabilities	68	x		6
Disability Studies	72		x	9

**Table 2.** *Disciplines in which the focus on special education is not specified.*

<b>Name of the discipline</b>	<b>Workload</b>	<b>Mandatory</b>	<b>Elective (optional)</b>	<b>Semester</b>
The Psychology of People with Special Needs	36	x		6
Special Education and Inclusive Processes	NF		X	8,9,10
Psychology and Exceptionality	43		X	5/6
Development of Special Needs	75	x		6
Inclusive School Education	135	x		8
Tests for Special Diagnostics	75	x		6
Psychology, Education and Social Inclusion	60		X	Up to 8°
Psychology and Special Education	68	x		4
Topics in Special Education	68		X	4
Psychology and Inclusive Education	60		X	NF
Psychology of People with Special Needs	90		x	NF
Education of People with Special Needs	68		x	5 to 9
Psychological and Educational Aspects of People with Special Needs	60		x	NF
Psychology Applied to People with Special Needs	48	x		6
Psychology and Special Needs I	60	x		5
Psychology and Special Needs II	60	x		6
Psychology of the Exceptional	60		x	2 to 10
Special Education in Basic Education	72		x	10
Atypical Development and The Role of Psychologists in Special Education	30	x		4
Psychology Applied to People with Special Needs	72		x	NF
Psycho-pedagogical Interventions for People with Special Needs	72		x	NF
Psychology and Special Educational Processes	60	x		8
The Special Child	105		x	5
Psychology of the Exceptional	105	x		5
People with Special Needs II	60	x		5
People with Special Needs I	40	x		4
Psychological Assessment of People with Special Needs	60		x	NF
Psychology Applied to People with Special Needs	60	x		6
Psychology of the Exceptional	60		x	9
Psychology of the Exceptional	30		x	4,5,6
Atypical Development	30		x	NF
Human Development and Inclusion	30		x	NF
Special Needs and Psychology	34		x	3
Inclusive Education	60		x	NF

Note: NF = not found.

authors such as Cruces (2010) argue that the preparation of future professionals to work in the school area should be done employing subsidies related to knowledge about public policies underlying the area of education, human rights, and the protection and development of children, young people, and adults. However, according to Santos and Toassa (2015), school psychology training in graduation courses is practically non-existent, especially if we consider that the disciplines that are supposed to provide such training are not sufficient. Notably, they highlight the fact that school psychology is still an unexplored territory for psychologists. It still lacks the formation of content related to inclusion, the structure and functioning of public schools, and the Brazilian populations' specificities.

Education in the 21st century has imposed new challenges in searching for alternatives to improve the quality of life for all students (Veiga, 2005). The inclusion of students who present some type of deficit or disorder and those who have high skills/giftedness is necessary in view of the proposals of inclusive education. Within this process, Psychology plays an important role in examining, diagnosing, and treating for these cases, and on teacher and family support. Actions must make sure such individuals are not neglected and will be provided with adequate support and care (Almeida, Lobo, Almeida, Rocha, & Piske, 2017). A generalization of these recommendations regarding students with giftedness can also be made for those with disabilities.

One of the biggest challenges imposed on psychology professionals includes applying of psychological evaluation instruments on the different audiences that special education can cover. It also includes, as a result, the creation of conditions that allow students to reach their full potential and use that potential to improve their performance (Chacon, Pedro, Koga, & Soares, 2017). However, what is observed in practice is that teachers still handle students with giftedness in a very limited way, especially if we consider the gaps in the training of professionals who work with these students. It is possible to observe "a huge distance between the educational policy proposed by the Ministry of Education and the practice in the country" (Piske & Stoltz, 2017, p. 169). That might be due to difficulties in training programs, which do not adequately prepare future psychologists for practice in special education and when they actually do so, they usually focus only on deficiencies and disorders. Another factor might be that trainees have no interest in this area of School Psychology. Such distance may also be attributed to difficulties in the process of psychological evaluation of these individuals.

What we see is that psychologists still play a secondary role in the context of special education. Students have very few opportunities throughout

their undergraduate courses to get better acquainted with this area, and the number of professors and researchers dedicated to the theme is still very small. Consequently, there is a noticeable gap in the training of future psychologists, who seem oblivious to the fact that they may have to work with this population in their professional practice. Thus, they seem to be equally unaware that psychological tests play a decisive role in the process of early identification of students with special needs (Kroesbergen, Hooijdonk, Viersen, Middel-Lalleman, & Reijnders, 2015), which is a preliminary step in the process of providing these students with a challenging yet supportive environment (Pfeiffer & Blei, 2008).

If we consider that psychology, from its institution as a profession until the present day, has undergone an important process of expansion in its areas of activity, we can hypothesize that the need to reevaluate the minimum curricula, in addition to the traditional areas (clinic, school, and work) has ended up causing a certain oversight in these areas. The results presented here confirm this hypothesis concerning to school psychology and, more specifically, the preparation of students for professional practice in the area of special education. This is because, traditionally, the clinical area has always been the most valued, having exerted great influence in the construction of the social image of psychologists (Ferreira Neto & Penna, 2006). In contrast, school psychology is an underappreciated area in many undergraduate courses. The same underappreciation happens to some of the professionals who, in addition to their main activity, seek to complement their financial resources in this area (Santos & Toassa, 2015).

Although school psychologists' performance has changed over time, Dias, Patias, and Abaid (2014) affirm that it continues to present itself as problematic. That might be due to an educational system far from excellence or the poor quality training provided to psychology professionals who will work in this field. Consequently, psychology does not seem to have yet been able to define its field of activity and its work methods at school (Oliveira-Menegotto, & Fontoura, 2015). In this sense, "academic education is pointed out, in studies and research works, as one of the main variables responsible for the lack of satisfactory, supportive, psychological practices in the school context" (Neves et al., 2002, p. 11).

There is an urgent need to improve training in this area. Part of these changes should involve the expansion and diversification of their activities, and an understanding that such professionals can act in preventive, educational and social activities to promote health and quality of life in a positive model of action (Amendola, 2014). However, the problems

and unanswered questions of psychology training as a whole are not restricted to school psychology and have been observed in several areas of psychological practice (Santos & Toassa, 2015).

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

After analyzing the curricula of psychology courses, it is possible to affirm that the training of professionals to work in the area of special education is still quite precarious and full of gaps. Such precariousness leads to a situation in which professionals are not prepared for this specific area, and if they wish for complementary training, they must do it independently. Training for this population has been characterized by the limited number of hours and an emphasis on more general disciplines or those focused on disabilities and disorders. Consequently, many of individuals with special educational needs remain excluded in training, in studies, and research. Among these, those who present giftedness deserve special attention.

However, caution is recommended in interpreting of the data presented, since some limitations should be considered. The limitations are related to the fact that data collection was performed only on the websites of the institutions, to the difficulties of access to information, to the possibility that the curriculum consulted is not the one in use, as well as to the difficulty in selecting the disciplines based only on their names. Consequently, a series of disciplines focusing on special education, although not as their main objective, ended up being excluded. Some examples are Developmental Psychology, Education Psychology, and Psychology and Public Policies. Similarly, the report of only one discipline that directly focuses on giftedness in its title may not reflect the current teaching situation regarding this phenomenon in the courses, since such an approach can happen, for example, in those disciplines that do not specify focusing on special education. It is also worth mentioning that, in most courses, the discipline is vaguely entitled "special education". It is unknown exactly what types of deficiencies are being addressed, or if there is some focus on, for example, intellectual disability, or if they intend to go over a complete picture of all functions that may be impaired.

Therefore, it is advisable, that further studies be conducted in order to achieve further and more in-depth knowledge on professional training for special education in psychology courses. An expansion of the number of courses consulted, a consultation on the classification carried out by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), a search for menus, and direct interviews with students and teachers can be strategies to be used in future studies. No matter what criteria or methods will be chosen, a review and expansion of training in this area

is necessary. Professionals can be better prepared to deal with new demands related to emerging areas and the diversity of the population that can benefit from their services. An important opportunity for this to be put into practice took place in 2018 with the revision of the national curriculum guidelines for psychology training, based on public consultation. We hope that such a measure will be able to mitigate at least the shortcomings presented here.

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