

## TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY IN NORTHERN PORTUGAL

### Vnímanie vzdelávania žiaka so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami učiteľom: kvantitatívna štúdia realizovaná v severnom Portugalsku

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**Abstrakt:** *V súčasnosti sa nesnažia len učitelia a rodičia o to, aby sa školy stali inkluzívnymi, ale celá spoločnosť sa snaží pochopiť a rešpektovať tento trend. Premýšľame však o inklúzii rovnako? Vnímajú učitelia rovnako to, čo ich žiaci potrebujú? Cieľom tejto štúdie je nájsť odpovede na tieto otázky použitím dotazníkovej metódy a porozumieť tomu, ako učitelia vnímajú vzdelávanie žiakov so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami (SEN). Respondentmi bolo 249 učiteľov základných škôl v Brage, severnom Portugalsku. Dotazník obsahoval 25 položiek, ktoré boli rozdelené do troch základných oblastí: (1) Postoje, (2) Zdroje a (3) Spolupráca. Výsledky ukazujú signifikantné rozdiely medzi odpoveďami respondentov na jednotlivé položky v závislosti od pohlavia, dosiahnutého vzdelania a dĺžky praxe. Na základe týchto výsledkov bolo zistené, že napriek tomu, že si respondenti uvedomujú, že je dôležité implementovať filozofiu inklúzie v portugalských školách, je nevyhnutné vytvoriť v Portugalsku viac príležitostí pre vzdelávanie učiteľov žiakov so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami.*

**KLúčové slová:** *Vzdelávanie detí so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami. Inklúzia. Poruchy učenia.*

**Abstract:** *Nowadays, not only teachers and parents hope for schools to become inclusive, all society seems to understand and advocate for this need. However, when we talk about inclusion are we thinking about the same thing? Do teachers have the same perceptions about what are their student's needs? The aim of this study is to answer these questions using a questionnaire in order to understand how teachers perceive the education of their students with special educational needs (SEN). Participants of this study were 249 teachers from elementary schools in Braga, Northern Portugal. The questionnaire has 25 items, divided into three main factors: (1) Attitudes, (2) Resources, and (3) Collaboration. The results showed significant differences between some of the items and the variables gender, academic qualifications and professional experience. Based on these results, this research indicates that, although participants recognize that it is important to implement the philosophy of inclusion in Portugal, it is necessary to provide more training for teachers involved in the education of students with SEN in Portugal.*

**Keywords:** *Special Education. Inclusion. Learning Disabilities.*

### Theoretical background

Educational system in 70s, in Portugal, suffered a significant change making the schools to open their doors to all students, what resulted in a deep change of how children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are attended (Correia 1997).

This change became even more evident with the Law 319/91 of 23 august, although both regular and special education was still operating in different fields, with segregation and

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exclusion of the students with SEN, addressed at special schools and institutions. However, the need of new processes that promote the success of these students gave rise to a movement that called inclusion of students with SEN in regular classes where, whenever possible, should be provided all supports and specialized services according to their characteristics, abilities and needs. The inclusion in Portugal received a special attention after the "World Conference on Special Needs Education", held in Salamanca, Spain, in June 1994, which resulted on Salamanca Statement. Portugal begins to work with an educational system that consider and respect the principle of equal opportunities, providing free and quality education for all students with SEN.

In this context, it is pertinent to develop studies that contribute to the construction of a school for all, where the rights of students with SEN are ensured (Correia, Martins 2000).

## **Methods**

### *Purpose of the study*

With this study we attempted to understand the perceptions of teachers towards the inclusion of students with SEN and, whenever possible, in the classes of those schools, based on the attitudes of a group of 249 teachers of the elementary primary schools of Braga, Northern Portugal. With this research we had as objective to analyze how the teachers understand the education of the pupils with Learning Disabilities (LD), and analyze their perceptions about the inclusion.

### *Participants*

The participants were 249 teachers of 52 elementary primary schools of Braga. Of the 249 teachers, 202 (81%) are female and 47 (19%) are male, aged between 27 and 62 years ( $M=44$ ,  $SD=.640$ ). The professional experience of the participants varies from less than five years to more than 30 year ( $M$ =between 16 and 20 years). In academic qualification, participants have from mastership to PhD, and the majority (65.5%) is graduated.

### *Instrument of data collection*

Were used a questionnaire developed by Correia (2005) and adapted by Correia, Santos and Cruz-Santos (2011), titled: "*Teacher's perceptions toward the education of students with Special Educational Needs*". It has 25 items, divided into three clusters: (1) Attitudes, (2) Resources and (3) Collaboration.

This questionnaire has two parts, the first is the sociodemographic data, including: gender, age, academic qualification and professional experience. The second part consists of 25 items, organized into three clusters related to the perceptions of teachers regarding the education of students with SEN. The items are sorted based on the Likert scale with four options: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) or Strongly Disagree (SD).

The questionnaire also contains an explanation of its purpose and the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality in data analyze.

### *Procedures of data collection*

All schools of Braga were contacted in order to require a right the questionnaire, available online<sup>12</sup>, to the teachers of the elementary primary schools.

## **Results**

The following data is presented according to a descriptive analysis, divided into three clusters: attitudes, resources and collaboration.

The first cluster includes the items 1, 2, 4, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20, 21 and 22, and refers to the attitudes of teachers about the inclusion of students with SEN in regular classes. Table 1 shows the frequency of participants' responses.

Table 1 Attitudes

Item	SD		D		A		SA	
1. All students have the right to learn together.	3	1,2%	16	6,4%	120	48,2%	110	44,2%
2. Students with SEN fit well in regular classes.	6	2,4%	64	25,7%	158	63,5%	21	8,4%
4. Students without SEN and accept their colleagues with SEN.			11	4,4%	158	63,5%	80	32,1%
7. The needs of students with SEN make them vulnerable in the regular room.	7	2,8%	76	30,5%	143	57,4%	23	9,2%
11. The school leadership is essential to the success of inclusive philosophy.					161	64,7%	88	35,3%
13. The teacher of regular education should be responsible for the education of all students of their classes.	16	6,4%	69	27,7%	122	49,0%	42	16,9%

<sup>12</sup><https://docs.google.com/forms/d/149I5r1OJdrRnnBuEqMrznPIQLEuQdspl84EmCOZFHok/viewform?formkey=dFBMRkcxUVBHaEdkTIZ5QIozM0dHTEE6MQ>.

14. Students with SEN are more successful in regular classrooms.	11	4,4%	81	32,5%	138	55,4%	19	7,6%
15. Students with SEN affect the students without SEN in the regular classroom.	30	12,0%	121	48,6%	86	34,5%	12	4,8%
16. The teachers of regular education are resistant to the idea of inclusion of students with SEN in their classrooms.	24	9,6%	118	47,4%	99	39,8%	8	3,2%
20. Students with SEN have the right to attend regular classes where this is possible.	2	0,8%	3	1,2%	135	54,2%	109	43,8%
21. My school is prepared for the inclusion of students with SEN.	26	10,4%	58	23,3%	132	53,0%	33	13,3%
22. The regular education teachers are prepared to meet the needs of students with SEN.	25	10,0%	131	52,6%	85	34,1%	8	3,2%

This group reveals that the regular education teachers are favorable of inclusion of students with SEN, whenever possible in regular classes, however, much remains to be done: we emphasize the importance of teacher training that includes special education in their curriculum, and the participation of the school leadership in the educational inclusion.

The second cluster, "resources", explores the issue of the interdisciplinary team and a school structure that favors the inclusion of all students who need adaptations. Table 2 shows the frequencies of the responses to items 3, 5, 6, 8, 12, 21, 23, 24 and 25.

Table 2 Resources

Item	DD		D		A		SA	
3. Existing human resources are sufficient to meet the needs of students with SEN.	97	39%	126	50,6%	20	8%	6	2,4%
5. The special education teachers meet the expectations that await them.	9	3,6%	48	19,3%	164	65,9%	28	11,2%
6. The process of addressing students with SEN has generated success.	14	5,6%	77	30,9%	151	60,6%	7	2,8%
8. Students with SEN need more attention than the regular education teacher can give them.	4	1,6%	11	4,4%	100	40,2%	134	53,8%
12. Specialized services can make a difference in the success of students with SEN.	2	,8%	3	1,2%	107	43%	137	55%
21. My school is prepared for the inclusion of students with SEN.	26	10,4%	58	23,3%	132	53%	33	13,3%

23. My school has access to resources, knowledge, time and collaborative practices to successfully include students with SEN.	15	6%	110	44,2%	111	44,6%	13	5,2%
24. To the students with significant SEN they should be prepared an IEP.	4	1,6%	5	2%	82	32,9%	158	63,5%
25. When necessary, adjustments and curricular adaptations should be considered for students with SEN.	5	2%			83	33,3%	161	64,7%

The second cluster allows us to conclude that the participants recognize the bad preparation of schools to attend the students with SEN, since there are not enough human resources to the practice of inclusion.

Table 3 shows the frequency of responses to items 9, 10, 17, 18, 19, 24 and 25, corresponding to the third cluster, "collaboration".

Table 3 Collaboration

Item	SD		D		A		SA	
9. Teachers of regular and special education must work in partnership.	3	1,2%	1	,4%	52	20,9%	193	77,5%
10. Students with SEN are successful where there is a process that calls for the collaboration between teachers, professionals and parents.			15	6,0%	124	49,8%	110	44,2%
17. The teachers of regular education don't accept the contribution from the specialized teacher in their classrooms.	104	41,8%	127	51,0%	15	6,0%	3	1,2%
18. The regular education teachers feel the support of special education teachers regarding the care of the students with SEN.	8	3,2%	27	10,8%	175	70,3%	39	15,7%
19. Parents of students with SEN support the process of meeting their needs.	2	,8%	39	15,7%	195	78,3%	13	5,2%
24. To the students with significant SEN they should be prepared an IEP.	4	1,6%	5	2,0%	82	32,9%	158	63,5%
25. When necessary, adjustments and curricular adaptations should be considered for students with SEN.	5	2,0%			83	33,3%	161	64,7%

In theory, participants demonstrated to know what is advocated by research, and support the need to develop an IEP for students with SEN to address all their needs and capabilities.

## Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study allow us to conclude that the participants consider important that the implementation of inclusion in Portugal depends on some factors, such as: collaboration, curriculum adaptations, the development of an IEP, and parental involvement, factors also considered in the literature. Dettmer, Dick and Thurston (1999) emphasize the need to work in collaboration, stating that the inclusion goals will not be achieved if it does not take place. Also Correia (2008), and Hallahan and Kauffman (1991), when reporting to the collaboration, remembers the importance of the interdisciplinary teams to the development of effective educational provision for students with SEN. However, participants reveal that there are not enough human resources in schools to be able to create these teams. Research also suggests that parental engagement can be the difference between success and failure of a program and, in consequence, between success and failure of the students (Swick 1987).

The results also indicate that the teachers are favorable to the presence of the students with SEN in regular classes, since staying with their peers without SEN can be an asset for both. This conclusion agrees with Correia (2008), which states that whenever possible students with SEN should receive all the services they need in regular classes.

In this study, it is clear that the participants agree that the responsibility to meet the needs of all students is of the regular education teacher. However, as mentioned above, a series of curricular adjustments may be required for which the regular education teachers may not be prepared, requiring the collaboration of other educators, particularly the special education teacher.

Finally, based on the findings of this study, to the inclusion can become successful, it is essential to consider a range of measures, such as the effectiveness of leadership, collaboration, the use of research based strategies, curriculum adaptations, parental involvement, and specialized services (Correia 2008). We believe that without these measures will not be promoted a quality education for all the students. Thus, according to the results of this study, it would be advisable that the system promotes a reflection in order to train all the professionals involved in the education of the students with SEN and boosts a meaningful dialogue among all the educators, parents and community.

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