

Implementation of the legal framework for inclusive education in Portugal (Decree-Law 54/2018) – A qualitative assessment by primary and secondary school teachers

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Abstract: Successful inclusive education requires school transformations and changes to the education system. In Portugal new legislation passed in 2018 (Decree-law 54/2018) brought a new perspective in inclusive education for all educational agents. Three years later, it is essential that the legislation is evaluated by the teachers implementing it. Forty-three primary and secondary school teachers and two coordinators of multidisciplinary teams providing inclusive education support were the participants of our study. The data collection instruments were a questionnaire and interviews. This study values the participants' narratives, highlighting the new concepts and attitudes required for the implementation of the new inclusive education legal framework in Portugal. The results of the thematic analysis were organized around four key themes: 1. Theoretical representations; 2. Practices; 3. Challenges; and 4. Training. It is also worth noting the notions of collaborative work, the need for reflective teachers and the development of learning communities to support the implementation of the new legislation.

Key words: inclusive education; Teaching and learning; Teacher training; Qualitative research

Introduction

The World Conference on Education for All (Thailand, 1990), the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in the Field of Special Needs Education (1994), and the Charter of Luxembourg on Education for All (1996) contributed strongly to raising awareness and changing practices and attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms.

The World Conference held in Salamanca (1994) reaffirmed the concept of “Inclusion” and the need for educational systems to adapt to provide “Inclusive Schools” capable of welcoming any student and facilitating maximum development and success. According to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), “[t]he fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, resource use and partnerships with their communities” (p. 11-12).

The Salamanca Statement opened up new perspectives and ways of understanding the mission of inclusive schools as intended for all students (Capucha, 2010). Sanches and Teodoro (2006) highlight five main characteristics of inclusive schools: a) they reflect the community as a whole; b) their members are open, positive and diverse; c) they do not select, exclude or reject; d) they have no barriers and are not competitive; and e) they practice democracy and educational equity. Inclusive education is becoming the guiding principle of policy and strategies aimed at eliminating barriers to schooling and identifying the appropriate conditions for all student learning and human development (Schuelka, 2017). Underlying this purpose is the effort to respond to diversity through the provision of quality education for each and every student and to consolidate the ideal of inclusion. This requires the reorganization of school resources, the involvement of all educational and social actors and teachers, in collaboration with each other and other professionals, in meeting challenges and sharing experiences.

Florian et al. (2017) state that in addition to universal access and school attendance for all students, the main educational commitment of inclusive schools is the right to learn. Hence it is the responsibility of the school to ensure that everyone, despite the severity of their disabilities, can access

free quality education taking into account their characteristics, and diverse needs. Ferreira et al. (2015) define inclusive schools as regular institutions that accept differences and promote equal opportunities by adapting teaching and learning to the needs of the student so all students with their diverse abilities, characteristics and needs can learn together. According to Sanches and Teodoro (2006), the objective of inclusion is not to erase differences, but to allow students to be unique and belong to an educational community that validates and values their individuality.

Ainscow (2016) emphasizes that simply attending mainstream school classes and being in the same space is not enough for students with special needs. They have to feel part of the school community they belong to and be seen as intervening members. According to Silva (2009)

[a]ll students are at school to learn by participating, however, it is necessary not to forget that being included takes much more than physical presence: it is a feeling and a mutual practice of belonging between the school and the child, i.e., the students feeling that they belong in the school and the school feeling responsible for them". (p. 148)

In this way, students come to be seen as active agents in the construction of their learning, which requires a differentiated pedagogy, that is, a pedagogical approach that is tailored to the differences and specificities of each student, providing learning conditions to all to ensure equal opportunities for success. The current concern is for students' individual differences to be understood as an enriching asset for each and every student (Villa & Thousand, 2016).

Underlying the inclusion process is the assumption that the teacher has knowledge of and understands the needs of different students, as well as teaching techniques and methodologies. Florian and Rouse (2009) state that "Initial teacher education should aim to prepare teachers to enter a profession that accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of all children" (p. 596). Savolainen (2009) opines that teachers play an essential role in quality education and that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. Bailleul et al. (2008) suggest that the quality of the teacher contributes more to student performance than any other factor, more than the number of students in the class or the resources available. Highly qualified teachers equipped to meet the needs of all students are essential for providing equal opportunities for all, but also for creating an inclusive society. Forlin and Chambers (2011)

state that knowledge, teachers' beliefs and values underpin the creation of student learning environments, which means the teacher has a decisive influence on education and on the creation of an inclusive school.

Nowadays schools are expected to be capable of handling different languages and student experiences, being culturally and gender sensitive, promoting tolerance and social cohesion, responding effectively to disadvantaged students and students with learning problems, using technologies and keeping up with the rapid development of educational sciences. Consequently teachers need to have confidence in their abilities and to develop new skills and knowledge on inclusive education. Only then will they be prepared to face the challenges of today's schools (Marin, 2014).

Arnesen et al. (2009) argue that "inclusion may be understood not just as adding on to existing structures, but as a process of transforming societies, communities and institutions such as schools to become diversity-sensitive" (p. 46). For these authors the international commitment to human rights has contributed to disability being viewed on a socio-cultural rather than an individual level. This perspective is consistent with the view that inclusive education is guided by the principles of social justice and the recognition that disability is an "interesting way of being alive" (Smith & Leonard, 2005) and that individual support is the norm for all students.

In line with current international thinking on educational equity and inclusion (UNESCO, 2020), the Portuguese legislation emphasises the school's responsibility to identify barriers to individual students' learning and develop strategies to overcome these (Decree Law 54/2018). It also calls for a change in the school culture to encourage more multilevel and multidisciplinary interventions with a demonstrated commitment to inclusive practices and a move away from student categorization.

Furthermore, depending on the social, economic and cultural contexts, to be truly inclusive, schools must have structures and inner dynamics that are capable of responding to diverse needs and promote the potential of all students. That means they need to ensure that all students have opportunities of "access, participation and achievement", which constitute the three pillars of inclusion established by UNESCO (2017), especially given the multicultural nature of Portuguese classrooms at the various different education levels.

In Portugal, in the last three decades, the removal of architectural barriers

has improved physical access to schools and school dropout rates decreased steadily from 50% in 1992 to 10% in 2019 (DGEEC, 2020). In addition, the majority of students with disabilities are already integrated into mainstream classrooms. However, student inclusion cannot be achieved by simply placing students with disabilities in mainstream classes, without the accompanying structural changes (Alves et al., 2020). Furthermore, in the last decade, the number of migrant students has grown substantially (OECD, 2020), making classrooms increasingly more diverse and challenging.

In this context, teachers play a critical role in the creation of inclusive schools and so should enter the teaching profession with an understanding of “how they might create classrooms and schools that address issues of respect, fairness and equity ... [and of] the historical, socio-cultural and ideological contexts that create discriminatory and oppressive practices in education” (Ballard, 2003, p. 59). However, according to Verdugo et al. (2012), for schools to become truly inclusive, it is not enough for teachers to adopt this concept and objective; they need to have the knowledge and skills to teach students of different learning abilities in their classrooms.

This study is a response to the publication of Decree-Law 54/2018 in Portugal, which is an attempt to legally consolidate the image of inclusive schools as institutions where each and every student, regardless of their personal and social situation, finds answers that enable them to acquire a level of education and training that facilitates their full social inclusion. The legislation is a commitment to reinforcing the autonomy of schools and their professionals, namely by reinforcing interventions by special education teachers as an active part of educational teams when defining strategies and monitoring curriculum diversification. The Decree-Law also sets out the need for each school to recognize the added value of the diversity of its students, find ways to deal with differences, adapt teaching approaches to the student’s individual characteristics and health conditions, and mobilize the resources required for everyone to learn and participate in the life of the educational community (Decree-Law 54/2018).

Three years after the adoption of the Decree-Law, we are interested in understanding whether and how primary and secondary school teachers in Portugal have incorporated the new legal framework into their pedagogical practices. The objectives of our study are twofold: 1) to examine the teachers’ understanding of the new legal framework, and 2) to reveal the teachers’ experiences of integrating the theoretical principles and practices set out in the new legal framework into their practices.

Method

In view of the research objectives and the exploratory nature of our study, a qualitative methodology was adopted. This study places teachers at the heart of inclusive schools as the main agents of the educational commitment and challenge of today's schools: to fulfil the right to a high-quality, free, public education for all students.

In view of the research objectives and the exploratory nature of our study, a qualitative methodology was adopted. From an epistemological point of view, this study adopts a constructivist stance since the teachers' experiences that our study aims to reveal are by nature construed from the participants' points of view and therefore do not have a "neutral value" (Ormston et al., 2014). The study adopts a phenomenological stance as it seeks to explore the participants' lived experiences in order to gain a more profound understanding of the phenomenon under investigation based on evidence obtained through the participants' eyes (Vagle, 2018).

Procedures – Sampling, Data Collection and Data Analysis

For the purpose of this study, we adopted a qualitative approach with the use of an open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The textual data option was included to allow participants to freely and spontaneously discuss the conceptions, practices and challenges of inclusion and inclusive schooling under Decree-Law 54/2018. Unlike closed-ended questions, open-ended questions allow the researchers to gain valuable detailed information about the issues under investigation and thus probe deeply into the respondents' answers (Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019).

The open-ended questionnaire was administered to a group of teachers who were recruited using the snowball sampling technique through their network of colleagues. The only selection criterion was that they had to be classroom teachers in direct daily contact with their class. Of the 150 questionnaires distributed in the Lisbon area (Portugal) we received 43 responses. Thus, the sample for the open-ended questionnaire consisted of 43 teachers, 35 females and 8 males, teaching at different education levels: 15 primary school teachers, 19 middle school teachers and 8 secondary education teachers. Their ages ranged from 31 to 64 years, with a mean age of 46. Length of service ranged from 6 to 40 years ($\bar{x}$ = 21 years).

The open-ended questionnaire was designed based on a review of the literature on inclusive education and informal conversations with several teachers with professional profiles similar to the ones in our sample. Three inclusive education experts with experience of qualitative research were asked to review the initial version of the questionnaire. In response to the experts' feedback we reformulated/rephrased some questions. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of a set of five open-ended questions, such as: "In your experience what are the biggest current challenges in the implementation of Decree-Law 54/2018 on inclusive education?"; "What actions do you usually promote in your practice with a view to inclusive education? Please give specific examples of your practices". The questionnaire was confidential and anonymous and took about 30 minutes to complete. The questionnaires were sent and collected via Survey Monkey. They contained a consent statement along with information about the general objectives of the research and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. By returning the questionnaire, participants provided informed consent to participate in the study.

A semi-structured interview protocol (Seidman, 2019) was created including basic questions similar to those in the open-ended questionnaire. The interview was conducted face-to-face with two special education team coordinators with more than 30 years of teaching experience, including 20 years in special education teams (EMAEI). Given the experience of the two interviewees, we valued the informal nature of the conversation and their narratives capturing data about processes and phenomena related to inclusive education. Upon the request of the participants the interviews took place in the schools where they worked. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the interviewees' consent. The interviews were then transcribed *verbatim* and the participants were asked to read their own transcription, a procedure for validating the interview data (Cohen et al., 2018).

The qualitative data collected via the open-ended questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and software NVivo – Version 12. To ensure anonymity and for data processing and analysis, the teachers were coded from P1 to P43 and the two coordinating teachers were coded C1 and C2. The manual thematic analysis was performed by both authors individually and then the individual results were compared, discussed, re-analysed and combined as the final outcome. The analysis involved three main stages. The descriptive treatment was part of the first stage of the analysis. That entailed

transcribing the questionnaire, creating a table of the interview responses and carefully reading each transcript, then highlighting words, expressions and/or phrases uttered by the participants. In the second stage of the analysis, a table was created of the themes, sub-themes and corresponding context units. Finally, in the third stage of the analysis, the entire process was reviewed in order to eliminate overlaps and ambiguities.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the textual data, following the procedures described, above led to the identification of four main themes: theoretical representations, practices in the implementation of inclusive education, challenges in the implementation of inclusive education, and training for the implementation of inclusive education (Table 1).

Table 1: Thematic analysis – themes and meaning units

Themes	Meaning units
1. Theoretical representations 1.1. Flexible curriculum management	“to mobilise knowledge in order to guarantee the development of competences of all students” (P2) “suitability and modification of subjects to be taught taking into account the specificity of the class and the profile of the students” (P7) “possibility of each school autonomously organising and managing the teaching/learning process” (P24) “an approach that is open to knowledge and experiences, making the subjects flexible and always in an interdisciplinary dialogue” (P28)
1.2. Universal design for learning	“a teaching approach that aims to maximise learning opportunities for all students, implying intentional and strategic pedagogical planning and management” (P8) “a teaching approach aimed at exploring and enhancing the diversities and needs of each student” (P14) “a philosophy that takes into account the diversity that exists in classrooms, creating opportunities for all students to achieve success” (P20) “it is a model that focuses on flexible pedagogical practices, where opportunities and alternatives are made possible in terms of methods, materials, tools, support and forms of evaluation, without changing the level of difficulty and maintaining high learning expectations” (P36)

2. Practices in the implementation of inclusive education	“I create different teaching and learning materials... and use different assessment instruments” (P3) “I establish a close relationship of trust with my colleagues based on collaborative work, sharing materials and experiences” (P8) “systematic follow-up and monitoring of students’ progress and use of formative assessment” (P11) “creation of digital or analog support documents ... microteaching for some students with more difficulties while other students work autonomously” (P19) “differentiated teaching strategies in the classroom... involvement and active participation of students in all dynamics and processes” (P23) “adequacy of content... enhancement of oral participation...”. P29 “collaborative work with teachers and families, promoting parental involvement and self-determination” (P34)
3. Challenges in the implementation of inclusive education	“lack of human resources and the inadequacy of educational practices” (P3) “large classes and the bureaucratization of teaching with loads of paperwork” (P8) “there are cases where it is also difficult to deal with families” (P14) “teachers lack of awareness or poor knowledge of the Decree-Law 54/2018” (P21) “difficulty in getting all those involved in the educational process to work collaboratively” (P26) “there is a lack of consistent training for specialized multidisciplinary teams” (P17) “lack of training and strategy on the part of the school management” (P40)
4. Training for the implementation of inclusive education	“approaches to differentiated teaching” (P4) “training in the area of special education itself and training in the area of sociology to better understand the different people that inhabit the space of the school” (P5) “information and communication technologies and conflict mediation” (P7) “training in management” (P26) “knowing how to operationalize different measures to support learning and inclusion” (P28) “specific training on the new Decree-law 54/2018” (P33) “learning how to make curricular adjustments... understanding the scope of the concept of universal design for learning” (P39) “knowing how to design intervention projects in the community” (P40)

Theme 1 – Theoretical Representations

In expressing their understanding and representations of the theoretical underpinnings of the new legal document regulating inclusive education our participants tended to emphasize two key concepts relating to accommodations in inclusive practices set out in Decree-Law 54/2018: “flexible curriculum management” and “universal design for learning”.

Flexible curriculum management

In expressing their representations of the term “flexible curriculum management” our respondents tended to focus on teachers’ autonomy to adapt the syllabuses and modes of delivery to suit the students’ characteristics and needs as opposed to a uniformed vision of the curriculum:

flexible curriculum management allows the teacher to autonomously adapt and adjust the contents to be taught, considering the specificity of the class and the profile of the students (P7).

this concept gives schools an opportunity to break away from traditional teaching-learning practices and adapt the syllabus, which should be different in terms of its purposes and learning content (P8).

schools have the possibility of managing the curriculum, with greater autonomy and meaning, taking into account the community and the school context, that is, the interests, strengths and weaknesses of students (P17).

Inclusive education calls for schools to value a holistic view of the child, not just the child as a student and consequently seeks to respond to the needs of all students in a flexible context supported by planning and appropriate human and material resources (Correia, 2003). Only in this way can schools respond adequately to the students’ needs and provide them with educational experiences that allow them to optimize their potential, thus counteracting the disabling society that emphasizes students’ limitations more than their potential.

In the teachers’ responses it is interesting to note the emphasis on the micro context of the classroom in detriment to aspects such as the organization of spaces, timetables and human and material resources within the wider context of the school. These latter aspects are set out in the new

legislation as effective mechanisms for responding to the singularities of students (Decree-Law 54/ 2018). This is in line with the current view that schools are organizations that are able to recognize and accept differences, not only social and cultural ones, but also in students' learning pace, interests and abilities, and to find the means and the strategies to practice real inclusion (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2010). Diverse teaching and learning pathways are necessary for the successful achievement of students' goals (Carpenter et al., 2017), which involves the teacher adopting a proactive role in creating meaningful learning contexts for every single student.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal guidelines for multiple learning paths build upon three levels of performance. The first level concerns the forms of representation; the second level is concerned with forms of expression; and the third level relates to forms of involvement/commitment (Rose & Meyer, 2002). UDL is a framework that provides flexibility in the way of presenting information, in the way students demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the way they engage in the learning tasks. This teaching and learning framework is designed to reduce barriers to instruction, provide adequate accommodations and support, and maintain high achievement expectations for all students (HEOA, 2008).

These views of UDL were partly reflected in our respondents' representations as they tended to define UDL in association with its affordances in terms of the enhancement of learning opportunities and the promotion of academic success for all students as illustrated in the following quotes:

The Universal Design for Learning is the construction of diversified learning and to which all educational agents can make their contribution (P16).

it is a resource available for learning, providing students with a different way of internalizing the proposed curriculum. It gives support for teachers that allows them to differentiate according to the groups they teach (P38).

it maximizes learning opportunities through the recognition and removal of obstacles, by using resources that motivate students, facilitate understanding and promote their active participation (P41).

Many teachers feel that they lack a guiding structure, that is, a framework for their practices, an instructional design that takes into account the vast linguistic, cultural and cognitive diversity present in classrooms (Rose & Gravel, 2010). One of the main features of UDL is its focus on the manner of teaching and learning, which one of our respondents aptly conveyed: “The Universal Design for Learning can be defined as a support instrument for pedagogical practice that emphasises differentiated and flexible pedagogy and facilitates different learning paces” (P43). These practices, which have often been taken as essential for students with educational needs, can be implemented effectively with most mainstream classroom students.

It is noteworthy that some teachers tended to reproduce the language/ wording of the legal documents in their testimonies.

Theme 2 – Practices in the Implementation of Inclusive Education

Humphrey and Lewis (2008) report two main aspects of practices developed by teachers in most educational contexts: a) there is little differentiation in the teaching and learning process, which leads to decontextualized inclusive practices that contribute little or nothing to the inclusion of special needs students in their classes; and b) little clarification of who is responsible for the learning and participation of special needs students – the class teacher or the special education teacher. In a similar vein Watkins (2007) states that classrooms that include students with special needs often have problems stemming from ineffective responses to their needs.

The creation of spaces and the implementation of strategies to promote the inclusion of special needs students in mainstream classrooms were aspects brought up by our participants. The following testimonies illustrate the types of practices they usually implement in their classes to promote inclusion:

in my pedagogical action I focus on educational practices that take place in environments that promote the integral formation of students. To this end, I encourage the participation and cooperation of all the students in the most diverse activities so that they can develop skills such as autonomy, responsibility and a critical and reflective spirit (P9)

it is up to the teacher to use strategies that facilitate the integration of all students. In my case I do my best to perceive the rhythm of each

student in the different areas, I try to get students to look for areas in which they feel more comfortable and build on those to achieve other learnings, I also use differentiated assessment resources to meet my students' needs, I respect their pace and involve them in the assessment (P15).

Schools have to move away from curriculum-centred models of teaching and learning towards the adoption of student-centred models in which the construction of teaching is based on the learners' individual needs (Sailor, 2015). This new approach implies "breaking up" many of the daily routines of the classroom and requires the integration of teaching and learning procedures that provide each student with a challenging and motivating learning situation (Ferreira, 2017). This kind of assumption was best illustrated in the following testimony of one of our participants:

in my daily practice I take into account the individuality of each student. Given the heterogeneity of our classes, it is essential to be aware that each student is a unique being. It is necessary to respect the different rhythms, ways of learning and interests of the students so that each one takes full advantage of the learning moments (P20).

Teachers' collaborative work, sharing of experiences and the establishment of rewarding relationships with peers are fundamental references for the promotion of meaningful and motivating practices and, at the same time, professional well-being (Shank, 2005). The way in which teachers experience the diversity of contexts in which they work and carry out reflective practice throughout their career influences the way they face challenges and adversities (Webb et al., 2009). One way to promote and support change and innovation is through involvement in collaborative work as expressed by our interviewees in the following terms:

Collaborative work between teachers is perhaps one of the best practices for developing an inclusive school culture. Then, I would say that the reflective process that the teacher can do individually or in a shared way can transform practices and change attitudes (C1).

the development of inclusive education involves the development of a learning community. That is, a school that transforms itself with the support of all educational agents and that highlights two key factors for learning, interactions and community participation (C2).

Collaborative work has been advocated through involvement in so-called communities of practice, that is, groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Communities of practice can be seen as social learning systems (Wenger, 2009), that is, school-community partnerships with potential benefits to address the educational challenges of inclusion.

Theme 3 – Challenges in the Implementation of Inclusive Education

While recognizing the progress made in the area of inclusive education, Florian et al. (2017) identify some challenges posed by the need to adopt diverse practices, resource allocation mechanisms, training teaching and auxiliary staff, providing pedagogical and therapeutic support for schools, and the transition to adulthood and entrance to the job market. Many of these issues were mentioned by the participants in our study. For example, P8 claimed that “in order to meet the demands of Decree-Law 54/2018, it is necessary to provide effective conditions for the development of differentiated pedagogical practices and overcome the shortage of human resources”; and P20, in turn, was of the view that “one of the biggest obstacles to the implementation of inclusive education in classrooms is the lack of human resources and inadequate training of teachers.”

Fullan (2007) posits that a school for all is essentially a physical and temporal space in which each student finds the necessary means they need to learn and develop their full cognitive, social and affective potential, regardless of how they start their schooling journey. Slee (2010) states that students with special needs have their own characteristics and singularities, which may require specific approaches to teaching and learning. Thus, it is important to identify, from the outset, the main difficulties learners have accessing curriculum content, in order to develop a curriculum that can be modified for the different students and find and set up the appropriate resources to promote inclusion in the school context. Such concerns were expressed by P33 who referred to “the lack of resources, but essentially the practitioners’ lack of knowledge of basic aspects like pedagogical differentiation and curricular adaptations, which makes it almost impossible to adapt the school to the students and the student to the curriculum”. These views appear to be reinforced and complemented by the challenges and obstacles pointed out by the Coordinating Teachers:

many teachers are still very resistant to changing practices that were instituted decades ago. A change of mindset is essential. On the other hand, there are several management bodies that do not facilitate inclusion, as they create a series of obstacles, for instance in resource hiring, class formation, timetables, which do not streamline processes and procedures (C1)

the teacher nowadays can be considered a multitasker, a professional who may know little about pedagogy and science, but has to be an expert in legal and bureaucratic procedures. And this makes all the difference in building an inclusive school (C2)

Nowadays, the barriers to inclusive education have been identified and include inadequacies/failures in the existing legislation and legal support, resources and facilities, specialized staff, teacher training, pedagogical methodologies, curriculum management, support of management bodies, and attitudes of the society in which we live. However, current thinking suggests that it is perhaps more useful to think about ways in which existing successful inclusive education practices can be identified and scaled up, rather than focusing attention on shortcomings (Schuelka, 2018).

Theme 4 – Training for the Implementation of Inclusive Education

The need for training for the implementation of inclusive education was a topic raised by our participants in association with the challenges they faced as inclusive teachers.-

With regard to the training needs and preparation of teachers, continuing professional development (CPD) plays a crucial role in improving teacher performance, commitment and job satisfaction (Schleicher, 2018) and can become a vehicle to transform beliefs and attitudes about creating a truly inclusive school. CPD was highly valued by our participants as illustrated in the following testimonies:

society is constantly changing, as is the educational system, and it is essential for teachers to seek training that keeps them up to date to better play his role and promote inclusive education, for the good of all students (P13)

I think that continuing education is essential for educational practice, in the sense that the school must accompany changes in society and mentality. The school must be up to date as well as the teachers. Continuing training and professional development create reflective teachers and I think it is important for the promotion of inclusive education (P14).

More sustainable inclusive education requires a greater emphasis on inclusive pedagogy in both initial and in-service teacher training programmes. This also positively affects teachers' attitudes towards inclusion as part of their professional role and is not just the domain of experts (Graham & Scott, 2016; Sharma et al., 2015).

The following quotes are representative of our participants' views of what needs to be the focus of teacher training initiatives for inclusive education:

to be familiar with new practices and strategies that promote the effective integration of children with specific learning difficulties; recognise ways of monitoring student learning, allowing a fair and formative assessment for their evolution; identify effective resources and methodologies for the integral development of students (P18)

the focus should be on the psychopedagogical training of teachers, valuing specific practices and successful inclusive methodologies, shaping national and international interventions that have obtained significant results (C1).

In this respect it is worth considering Darling-Hammond's (2006) contention that teachers need to know how and when to use a range of practices to achieve goals with different students and in different contexts. This can be best achieved if, as Ainscow et al. (2007) point out, teacher development is seen as being more than simply learning to implement centrally mandated practices. The need to translate the theoretical rhetoric in the legal documents was aptly expressed by one of our teacher coordinators:

training should focus on the concepts in the new legislation. Many teachers feel lost with terms such as curriculum accommodations, non-significant and significant curriculum adaptations...what distinguishes and what is similar between these concepts? And this is the basis of all the work of a teacher who wants to be inclusive (C2)

We share, among others, Villa and Thousand's (2016) view that the inclu-

sion process can only succeed if there are curriculum management measures that allow all students to access the curriculum and classroom learning activities through the diversification and appropriate combination of various teaching methods and strategies and the use of different modalities and evaluation tools.

Conclusion

Our study aimed to investigate how Portuguese primary and secondary school teachers make accommodations to their pedagogical practices in line with the new concepts and principles set out in Decree-Law 54/2018. More specifically, we sought to identify the main challenges faced in implementing Decree-law 54/2018 as well as the practices being implemented with a view to promoting inclusive education and to understand teachers' perceptions of their main continuous professional development needs as inclusive educators.

One of the main goals of the school system is to create inclusive schools where all students, regardless of their personal situation and social background, find opportunities to acquire a level of education and training that facilitates their full social inclusion. This requires schools to recognize the richness of and accept student diversity, find ways to deal with difference, adapt the teaching processes to the characteristics and health conditions of the individual students, and mobilize the means at their disposal so that everyone can learn and participate in the life of the educational community (OECD, 2018). The autonomy of schools and their professionals to define strategies for the implementation and the monitoring of curricular diversification must become a guiding principle of the teaching and learning process.

The findings of our study point to the need to clarify the meaning of inclusive education and the associated concepts as presented in the legal documents. It is necessary to ensure that teachers are supported in delivering inclusion through specialized training so they can manage the curriculum and the assessment procedures in a flexible manner and make use of teaching approaches that are suitable for all students. Also, teachers should be urged to get involved in collaborative work and share reflections as a pathway to professional growth and development. This kind of involvement can take the form of initiating research into their own practice (e.g., collaborative action research) (Reis-Jorge et al., 2020). Finally, action should be taken to transform schools into real learning communities (Senge et al., 2000) with

all stakeholders committed to the common aim of developing and implementing policies and practices that promote inclusion and equity. Such action calls for coordinated and sustained efforts and to view change as an ongoing endeavour towards the creation of inclusive student-centred learning environments.

At a more general level our findings also appear to reinforce the view that “good teachers are born, not made” is a false belief. Research has shown a strong link between teacher professionalism and teachers’ perceived status, between self-efficacy and professional development (Lauermann & König, 2016). We agree with Durksen and Klassen’s (2012) contention that whereas initial teacher education is expected to provide a solid foundation for teacher professional development, continuing professional development that values supervision, reflection and personal growth is essential. Therefore, the provision of opportunities for professional learning is critical for the development of a new mindset that is vital for the implementation of institutional and classroom practices that support teachers in developing inclusive education (Chapman & Ainscow, 2021).

The methodological options underlying Decree-Law 54/2018 are based around the universal design for learning model and a multilevel approach to the curriculum. Equally important is the switch away from a focus on student categorization to a focus on a supportive learning environment that facilitates a student profile of competences and skills providing different learning paths and valuing their potential and interests (Decree Law No. 54/2018). This requires flexible curricular models, systematic monitoring of the effectiveness of the interventions and an ongoing dialogue between teachers and other actors as educational responses necessary if each student is to acquire a common base of competences,

The widespread awareness and acceptance of Decree-Law 54/2018 represents a significant first step towards the promotion of equity and inclusion in the Portuguese schools.

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