

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL

Definition

In Portugal inclusion is recognized as a complex process, involving several spheres of personal and of institutional lives. An inclusive society is defined as a society where everyone shares fully the condition of citizenship and is offered opportunities for social participation and access to continuous learning, as a way of fostering individual development, social progress and a more democratic society (UNESCO/European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, nd). Participation is considered a keystone for driving the change of attitudes in society, to ensure equal opportunities and rights. For persons with special needs, it is about achieving equal status to the other members of the community (DGIDC, 2009).

In order to achieve that aim Inclusive Education is enshrined in law (Law on Special Needs Education - Decree-Law 3/2008) seeking educational equity, in terms of both access and outcomes. In Portugal inclusive education refers, thus, to the process of fostering participation of all children, supporting not only those with disabilities or developmental delays, but also all groups of vulnerable and marginalized children, namely because of their cultural and social backgrounds.

A. Policy

The support to children with special education needs (SEN) is nowadays framed by Decree-Law 3/2008, which sets out "specialized support offering (...) aimed at creating conditions for improvement of the educational process to the special educational needs of pupils" who have continued difficulties at the level of communication, learning, mobility, autonomy, interpersonal relationship and social participation. This kind of specialized support is available within mainstream schools. But DL 3/2008 also establishes that when the regular school cannot give adequate response to the inclusion of children and young people, due to the type and degree of disability, those involved in the referral and evaluation processes may propose the attendance of a special education school.

In summary the new law on Special Needs Education states that pupils with SEN should not only receive their education in a mainstream school, but also fully join their peers in the curriculum and in school life; that pupils with SEN should generally take part in the mainstream class rather than be isolated in separate units; that separate provisions can occasionally be necessary for specific purposes; that schools should review and adapt their approaches in order to achieve greater inclusion.

The current legislative framework, however, clearly distinguishes the educational needs that result from social, cultural and economic disadvantages, considered to be possible to be overcome through "quality education" (a more flexible and adaptive education combined with measures such as alternative paths and individualized support, recovery plans, and

cultural mediation between the school and the community), from those mentioned above that are considered to require additional and highly differentiated and specialized support and resources. This distinction aims to enhance the intervention with children who have more severe problems, redirecting the available specialized resources to them (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, nd). However, it has led in fact to a large discrepancy between the general political statements and the specific legislative framework, which focuses almost exclusively on children with severe problems and on the so-called *special education*. Legislation and implementation for children with special needs/permanent problems is thus well-developed, but that is not the case for other groups of potentially vulnerable and marginalized children.

B. Implementation of the policy

In the last decades Portuguese governments have been making a great effort to support children with special needs. In a brief summary, the evolution of the legislative framework has been establishing some principles that are guiding principles of the educational practices: 1. The right to be in mainstream schools; 2. The prohibition and punishment of discrimination concerning disability and severe health risk; 3. The principle of accountability of all regular education teachers for children with special needs, including those with severe disabilities; 4. The change of the expression “children with disabilities” into “children with special needs”; 5. Compulsory schooling for all children and youths at school age (under 18 years of age) and the guarantee of universal right to pre-school education for 5 year-old children. At the same time, legislation has been published regarding special education staff, which led in 2006 to the creation of a specific recruitment group for special education teachers.

As already mentioned, with the implementation of Decree-Law 3/2008, the target group embraced by special education was limited to those children with permanent needs (children and young people with major limitations in terms of activity and participation in one or more of the following areas: communication, learning, mobility, autonomy, interpersonal relationship and social participation), redirecting the available specialized resources to them. Based on the assumption that some target groups need more sophisticated and specialized human resources and logistics, four different structures have been created in mainstream schools: 1. reference schools for bilingual education of deaf pupils, 2. reference schools for blind and partially sighted pupils, 3. structured teaching units for pupils with autism, 4. and specialized support units for pupils with multi-disability and congenital problems. These units are located in regular schools and present adaptations of the educational environment. Children with SEN remain in those units only part-time, in order to promote their integration in regular classrooms and in school life. Regarded as platforms for the promotion of inclusion, these units enable the

regular mainstream school to be attended by children who were traditionally sent to institutions (Rodrigues, 2010).

Within Decree-Law 3/08 it has also been established that most of the former special education schools should be subject to a process of reorientation for becoming Inclusion Resource Centres (IRC). This process has already begun. In partnership with the community, these resource centres support the inclusion of children and young people with disabilities, facilitating access to education, training, work, leisure, social participation and an autonomous life, while promoting the full potential of the individual. The IRCS work in partnership with school clusters.

It is the responsibility of the reference schools and schools with units to assure and manage the specialized material and human resources. Schools have also the responsibility of creating the conditions for the expression and development of exceptional capacities. Through a set of activities around the curriculum and curriculum enhancement, a development plan is supposed to be available to those pupils who demonstrate exceptional learning capacities, which can include methods such as differentiated pedagogy in the classroom, tutoring programmes for study strategies, guidance and advice for the pupil or enhancement activities at any point in the academic year or at the beginning of a cycle.

International Classification of Functionality

Until the 1980s Portuguese definitions of special educational needs/disabilities were based on the classification of handicaps in categories that were based on medical concepts. In the 1980s the concept of specific educational needs was introduced, classifying disabilities more on an educational basis. Children and young people with SEN started to be described as pupils who demand special resources and/or adaptations in their learning process in order to access the individualized curricula established for them. Nowadays, and in accordance with Decree-Law 3/2008, the definition of the target group covered by the special educational services is made with reference to the International Classification of Functionality, Disability and Health (ICF) from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2007). ICF is the WHO framework for measuring health and disability at both individual and population levels. The Individual Educational Programme must integrate the indicators of functionality as well as the environmental factors that act as facilitators or barriers to the child's participation in school life.

Early Child Intervention (ECI) in Portugal

In October 2009 new legislation for the provision of ECI services was also approved (Decree-Law 281/2009) thereby creating the National System for Early Childhood Intervention (Sistema Nacional de Intervenção Precoce na Infância, SNIPI). The SNIPI covers children between 0 and 6 years, with "changes in body functions or structures that limit participation in typical activities for their age and social context or serious risk of developmental delay, as well

as their families” (DL 281/2009, 3rd article). Within SNIPI ECI is defined as a range of comprehensive developmental services to be provided by local teams of professionals from health, education and social services, focusing not only on the child but also on the environment and including the family. The country has 5 regions, each with a coordinating commission, and 149 Local Intervention Teams (LIT). These teams are composed by doctors, nurses, early childhood teachers, psychologists, social workers, speech therapists, physiotherapists, and require the involvement of local community services. The intervention model framework grounds on three major features: enhancement of everyday child learning opportunities, family centred practices and transdisciplinary teamwork.

Teachers education

In Portugal teachers training covers initial, specialized and in-service training. *Initial training* is organized in two cycles: a bachelor’s degree in Basic Education and a master’s degree in the area of teaching. Teachers can graduate from a public or private University or College of Higher Education. *Specialized Training* is offered in some areas (e.g. special education, counselling, pedagogical supervising, school administration, curriculum development), and lasts for one or two academic years. This is the main training process for teachers to become special needs specialists and work in special education teams and contexts. *In-service training* is available for teachers who wish to update and broaden their knowledge and their skills – through training courses, action programmes, workshops, study circles, conferences, among others. In-service training can be implemented by higher education institutions, by school clusters in training centres, by training centres of scientific or professional associations, by central or local administration centres, provided that they are accredited by the Scientific Pedagogical Council for Teacher Training. Lifelong training modalities entitle those who attend them to a certificate and to some credits vital to their career progress as teachers.

Teachers training in ESEC

The College of Education of the Polytechnic (Institution) Institute of Coimbra (ESEC/IPC) has been offering curricular units on Special Needs in initial teachers training since 1990. During the last 25 years ESEC has also been developing in-service training, as well as specialized training. A bachelor’s degree in Portuguese Sign Language also started in 2005. Since 2008 a master’s course has been under development as well, focusing on Special needs of children with cognitive and motor skills problems. Moreover, due to the diversity and interdisciplinary studies that feature in the educational offer of ESEC, a broader approach to inclusive education is part of most of its study programmes.

C. Needs and Challenges

In order to monitor the new SE model, the Ministry of Education has commissioned to an international team of experts the external evaluation of the current model. The conclusions of that external evaluation, presented in December 2010, have been incorporated into a Recommendation recently published by the National Education Council on Special Education Public Policy (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2014). The analysis presented in this Recommendation highlights the broad consensus on the idea that inclusive education is assumed in all major lines of public policy for special education and that the new legal framework represents a qualitative leap over the previous regulatory framework.

However, several problems have been also identified in the Recommendation as well as in other recent documents and literature.

The eligibility criteria is one of the aspects that seems to divide most the professional, academic and scientific community. It is pointed out that the current legislation leaves helpless one considerable group of children who have manifest need of special education but are not eligible within the current legal framework. Emphasis on the criterion of "permanence" of SEN may mean that the lack of response to these children leads to the accumulation of transitory needs, which, lacking a specialized intervention, become then chronic difficulties and therefore permanent. The adoption of the International Classification of Functioning, as an instrument for classification of the pupils and decision-making about their access to Special Education, has been also criticized. Academics and professionals question the choice of an instrument from the field of health to guide a process that should be educational and inclusive, based on educational needs and not on deficits (Rodrigues, 2010).

In general, the decision to set up service networks, in particular reference schools and specialized units, is positively viewed, as it leads to alternative responses and fosters inclusive models in mainstream schools. However, an evaluation of these structures is needed, especially in situations where, due to geographic dispersion, children are forced to attend schools far from their communities. In these situations, the aim of creating social support networks for inclusion that are community-based is jeopardized.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the risks that result from underfunding affecting the Portuguese education system in general and special education in particular. While public policy and the special education legal frame adopt the principle of inclusive education are even object of international recognition for their quality, the analysis of the real schools shows a discrepancy between the principles and their achievement. This gap reflects the inadequacy of the current framework to the real resources that are made available, both in quantity and quality, to schools and other partner institutions. As mentioned in the Recommendation, the proactive attitude of the legislature has not been supported by the corresponding mobilization of resources.

