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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AS A RIGHT: CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOLS, TEACHERS AND THEIR TRAINING

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Abstract: This article presents the results of an exploratory study focusing on inclusive education as a right and the challenges faced by schools and teachers following the implementation of Decree-Law 54/2018[1] , which regulates inclusive education in Portugal, with the specific objectives of: i) understanding the perceptions of elementary school teachers about inclusive education as a right; ii) identifying the challenges of inclusive education faced by schools and teachers. This is a qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews with 2nd and 3rd cycle elementary school teachers from two school groups in the Greater Porto region, who work in classes that include students with neurodiversity. The data was submitted to the content analysis technique from a multi-referential epistemological perspective, seeking to understand the complexity of the phenomena in question. The results point to a diverse understanding of inclusive education, underlining that this is a purpose that has not yet been adopted by schools and all teachers. The main challenges to the realization of inclusive education as a right the lack of conditions and resources, and the need for initial and ongoing training to form inclusive teachers capable of intervening in multicultural contexts, adopting practices of attention, respect and appreciation of and for the diversity of students.

Keywords: Inclusive education; School inclusion; Right to education; Challenges to teacher training; Educational policy

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been growing interest from international organizations and governments in establishing guidelines focused on human rights, inclusion and social justice (UNESCO, 2015, 2019; European Commission, 2020). In the field of education, these guidelines have repercussions on the educational policies implemented in each country (Ball, 2001). As Ball says, this "a process of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from other contexts" (p. 102) that needs to be contextualized to the realities of each country, in this case Portugal. In this process of contextualizing policies, schools and their leaders, as well as teachers, have a central role to play in preserving organizational and teacher work cultures that move away from *performative* logics (Ball, 2000) based on processes of competition and professional individualism, and closer to processes of collaborative work (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2001). According to Marinho & Fernandes (2021) "we are living in times of conflict between (teachers') thinking and action, between educational-curricular perspectives and the possibilities of their realization" (p.2). These are times when "policies promoting inclusive education and curricular flexibility (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2019) and neoliberal-inspired policies associated with market logics and the adoption of central and local regulation procedures for teaching work" are simultaneously being implemented (Fernandes & Marinho 2021). In this scenario, schools and teachers are faced with new challenges, now related not only to the quality of students' learning, but also to guaranteeing conditions that ensure education as a right for all, an inclusive education that promotes greater curricular and social justice (Santomé, 2013; Sampaio & Leite, 2020).

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1. It should be noted that on the same day, Decree-Law 55/2018 was implemented, which determines the autonomy and flexibility of the curriculum

It is within the framework of these ideas that the study presented in this article is situated. Based on the inclusive education policy determined by Decree-Law 54/2018, the study aims to identify and understand Portuguese elementary school teachers' perceptions of inclusive education as a right and the challenges facing schools and teachers and their training. It is hoped that, six years after the implementation of this policy measure, it will contribute to a reading, albeit circumstantial, of how teachersin a context of binomial curriculum policies (Roldão & Almeida, 2018), position themselves in relation to inclusive education as a right.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AS A RIGHT FOR ALL - ASSUMPTIONS, CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a key milestone in affirming and recognizing, among other things, the right of everyone to education as a fundamental right (UN, 1948, Art. 26), and paves the way for significant changes in the field of education policies, education systems, schools and their actors. Even so, it is recognized that the journey has been slow, especially with regard to the recognition of equal rights and, in the case of education, the inclusion of social groups in vulnerable conditions, such as people with disabilities. The terminology "person with a disability", although the result of a terminological evolution (UN, 2006), is far from being consensual (Piccolo & Mendes, 2013), carrying with it the idea of "deficit", "inferiority" or "incapacity" (Maciel, 2020). As this author points out, "language is capable of producing, modifying and directing thought and social practices and, dialectically, it is also modified, produced and guided by changes in concepts" (Maciel, 2020, p. 72).

In this trajectory, a central role has been given to policies, both in terms of discursive production and guidelines for educational practices that pay attention to diversity and inclusive education. As early as the 1970s, the Warnock Report (1978), which "gave birth" to the concept of Special Educational Needs (SEN), signaled the inclusion of students with specific learning difficulties in school, and demanded attention and more pedagogical resources and materials than those used with children of the same age, leading to changes in the curriculum, assessment and social and educational structures to cater for them (Correia and Fernandes, 2019, p. 21). Ensuring inclusive education, education as a right for all (Armstrong & Rodrigues, 2014), has been a major challenge for political and educational systems, schools and teachers.

In fact, since the last decade of the 20th century, the global agenda for education has been marked mainly by the dissemination of the paradigm of social and educational inclusion. This inclusive paradigm, manifested in important documents such as the Jontien Declaration (1990) and the Salamanca Declaration (1994), triggered a vigorous worldwide movement in favor of education for all, making it an international requirement. This movement has continued into the 21st century since the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, which sought to review the progress made in the previous decade and propose new goals for the following years. It has been further expanded since the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015) and the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2017) with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among these, Goal 4 calls for the provision of quality education for all, based on the principles of equity and inclusion.

The assumption of this commitment by all UN signatory nations is the result of an entire historical struggle by educators, activists and legislators who support education as a human

right and argue that the main challenge for education worldwide is to make it inclusive (Ainscow, 2009, p. 11).

From this author's perspective, the aim of inclusive education is "to eliminate the social exclusion that results from attitudes and responses to diversity in relation to ethnicity, age, social class, religion, gender and ability." (Ainscow, 2009, p. 9). From his perspective, inclusive education is not just an approach that focuses on people with disabilities or the ambiguous term of people with special educational needs. With all human diversity in mind, the idea is that by effectively becoming everyone's right, all education becomes inclusive. It is also in this same line of argument that Stubbs (2008) argues that "inclusion presupposes the conviction that educating all children is the responsibility of the regular education system (p.48), a view that makes sense of the idea that "inclusive education is a basic human right and the foundation of a fairer and more supportive society" (Favero et al, 2009, p. 6).

Ratifying this view, more recently Ainscow (2020) explained a number of reasons why the pro-school inclusion movement should be solidified:

> (...) the movement towards inclusive schools can be justified on a number of grounds. There is an *educational justification:* the requirement for inclusive schools to educate all children together means that they have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and therefore benefit all children; a *social justification*: inclusive schools are able to change attitudes towards difference by educating all children together, and form the basis for a fair and non-discriminatory society; and *an economic justification:* it is likely to be less expensive to create and maintain schools that educate all children together than to create a complex system of different types of schools specializing in specific groups of children. (Ainscow, 2020, p. 8)

Agreeing with the authors perspective, we also consider it very important for governments to define consistent public policies that allow inclusive education practices to be effectively implemented in everyday school life. In this context, we would stress the importance of initial and ongoing teacher training that enables them to deal with the diversity of students and leads to their understanding that inclusive education is much more than catering for children with disabilities. As we have argued elsewhere, meeting the principles of inclusive education as a right for all presupposes "a permanent search for pedagogically differentiated responses to all students (...) regardless of their situation of vulnerability" (Prychodco; Fernandes; Bittencourt, 2019, p. 3). Training for inclusive education as a right for all is a major challenge that political systems, training institutions and teachers need to address. In line with international guidelines (UNESCO, 2015; UN, 2017), Ainscow (2020) points out that understanding inclusive education as a right for all "is an essential strand of a new international political agenda" (p. 8). When discussing the challenges that inclusive education brings to education systems, Ainscow (2020, p. 9) formulated a proposal on key factors for promoting inclusion and equity in education systems, which is systematized in Diagram 1.

According to the author, the promotion of inclusion and equity presupposes taking into account five factors that are related to each other: principles of inclusion and equity; community involvement; the use of evidence; and school administration and development. These five factors can be summarized as follows:

a) *Principles of inclusion and equity:* These principles should be the basis of all educational practices, ensuring that all students have equal access to learning opportunities.
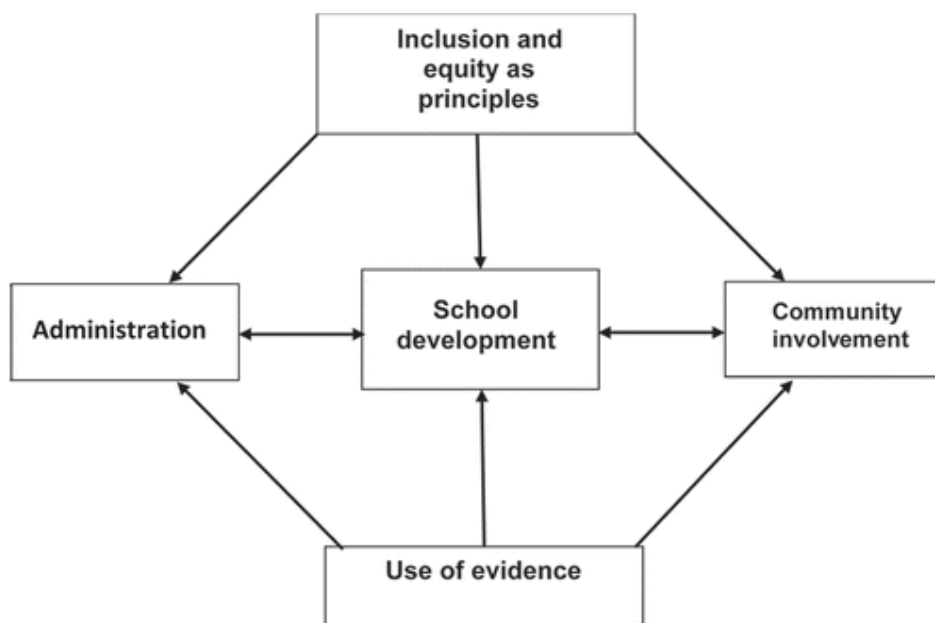
Diagram 1: Factors promoting inclusion and equity

(Ainscow, 2020, p. 9).

b) *Community involvement:* The active participation of the community is essential to creating an inclusive educational environment. This includes parents, teachers, students and other community members working together to support education for all.

c) *Use of evidence:* Decision-making should be based on concrete data and evidence. This helps to identify areas that need improvement and to implement effective strategies to promote inclusion and equity.

d) *School* management: School management must be committed to inclusion and equity, implementing policies and practices that support all students, regardless of their individual needs.

e) *School development:* For Ainscow, this is the central element of the whole process. He believes that the continuous development of schools, through inclusive and equitable practices, is fundamental to ensuring that all students succeed academically and socially.

The above-mentioned factors are interdependent and must be addressed in an integrated manner in order to promote inclusive and equitable education are referred to in various texts by the author (Ainscow, 1997; 1998; Ainscow & Ferreira, 2003).

Perhaps it should be added that schools and their teachers also need to respond to interactions with the socio-economic environment, as well as paying attention to political decisions that affect the appreciation and health of professionals at national, local and individual levels so that education is inclusive. This means keeping an eye on the ideal of inclusion without losing sight of school realities in order to prevent situations of exclusion

Ainscow's (2020) perspective on inclusive education as a right for all fits in with the foundations of the biopsychosocial model and a vision of education as a social responsibility (Prychodco; Fernandes, & Bittencourt, 2019) involving different systems and sectors of society in creating conditions and adopting strategies that promote educational success for all students.

Returning to the Portuguese context where the study was carried out, like other education systems, Portugal has been building its trajectory in terms of inclusion policies, moving, albeit in an oscillating movement (Fernandes, 2011), especially since the publication of Decree-Law 54/2018, towards a sense of inclusion as a right for all. Advocating a vision of an "inclusive school 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 (Preamble to Decree 54/2018), this legal diploma creates conditions to better ensure "the right of each student to an inclusive education that responds to their potential, expectations and needs" (ibidem)

This political context has presented schools and teachers with the challenge of meeting the diversity, in all its many facets, of all students. This is not an easy challenge. As Rodrigues (2006) reminds us, "many schools are trying - responsibly - to comply with this legislation as best they can and know how, and this makes this process very demanding, given that it is not a question of a change in "Special Education", but rather in the whole school" (Rodrigues, 2006, p. 15). And, he adds: "it takes time to consolidate and solidify this legislation, but it is (also) essential not to let the feeling of being 'left to their own devices' grow in schools". (Rodrigues, *op. cit.*, p. 15)

In line with the ideas already mentioned, the author emphasizes the importance of in--service training, recognizing that it is a means of fostering reflection with and between teachers that allows them to debate and share experiences and, consequently, lead to the improvement of educational practices and innovative and inclusive educational environments (Rodrigues, 2018).

In fact, creating spaces for reflection/training with the professionals who work in schools is, in our view, a challenge and a possibility for promoting and achieving *inclusive education as a right for all*. Breaking with practices and languages imprinted stigmatizing visions and conceptions of education, which are socially and politically established, is the biggest challenge in achieving inclusive education as a right for all.

METHODOLOGY

This study, which is exploratory in nature (Marconi & Lakatos, 1996), follows a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with elementary school teachers (Amado, 2017) who work in two school groups (Agrupamentos de Escolas - AE) in the greater Porto region, Portugal. The basic criterion for selecting the interviewees was that they were teachers working in inclusive classes. As a result, eight teachers were interviewed, four from each AE, who were willing to collaborate in the research. All the ethical procedures were followed for this : informed consent, with a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity for the interviewees.

Fitting in with the multi-referential epistemology proposed by Ardoino (1986), the methodological approach adopted highlights: a) the *complexity of the phenomena* addressed, which can be understood from different angles, theories and disciplines; b) considers *the social, historical and cultural context* in which the phenomena studied occur; c) pays attention to its Interdisciplinarity, by seeking to integrate knowledge from different areas in order to understand phenomena apparently restricted to education; d) provides an opportunity for *reflexivity*, by questioning our own perspectives and prejudices; e) values *dialogicity* through the exchange of ideas with the actors involved in the educational process due to the public policies and legislation that affect

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them. In this sense, we sought to understand contexts, meanings and relationships, exploring and mapping the terrain of inclusive education public policies (Ludke and André, 1986) and the context of practice, through the vision of teachers, seeking to obtain a holistic and plural view of reality (Amado, 2017; Martins, 2004).

The data was analyzed using the content analysis technique (Bardin, 2009), using a categorical system defined *a priori* based on the objectives of the study, and on categories that emerged from the data analysis itself.

RESULTS

The presentation of the results begins with a characterization of the teachers[2] who collaborated in the research, preserving their identities, anonymity and confidentiality by using pseudonyms of flower names, freely chosen by them from a list of twenty flowers made available by the author. Table 1 summarizes this characterization.

All the interviewees have a degree and only two have no training in the field of inclusive education. Seven of them have worked for 20 years or more, and have 12 years or more of experience with students with special educational needs.

As already mentioned, the analysis of the interview data was based on a categorical system, organized into two main categories and emerging subcategories, as shown in Table 2.

Categories	Sub-categories
Inclusive education as a right	- *Understanding(s) of/about Inclusive education* - *Equity and excellence in education*
Challenges for schools and teachers	- *Challenges of inclusive education* - *Teacher training for inclusive education* - *Application of support measures*

Table 2 - Categories and subcategories of analysis

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AS A RIGHT

In order to understand the teachers' perceptions of *inclusive education as a right*, the data was analyzed based on two subcategories: *Understanding(s) of/about inclusive education and Equity and excellence in educational provision.*

Understanding(s) of/about Inclusive Education

In general, the interviewees revealed that they understood inclusive education *as a right for all,* as the following statements illustrate

> Inclusion is being available to all the children in the class, whatever their needs. (...) Inclusive education for me is just that... it's all-encompassing... Not just for the children who really have special educational needs, but for the whole class as a whole... (Cravo, 2024)

> Inclusive education means including... it means belonging, it means not being discriminated against... It means taking part in the same things... having the same equal opportunities as others (...). This is inclusion in the true sense of the word... in my understanding, isn't it? (Margarida, 2024).

> Education should be for everyone... Learning is lifelong, but if we don't start from a young age to get these children to learn with meaning and guide them, they often end up getting lost... Education, learning, is a right for me (...) how can I put it? It's the first right, if I say so myself, for me it's a fundamental right... (Lírio, 2024).

> ... I think what they're trying to do by changing the term is to show that, in fact, all students, regardless of their characteristics, their profile, their difficulties, all students... are entitled to the same opportunities..., ... everyone manages to... can fit in... Or you have to be able to fit all the pupils into the education system and respond to the characteristics of all the pupils... whether they have more barriers or not... (Tulipa, 2024)

2. All the interviewees declared themselves to be female, which is why the term "female teachers" was chosen, excluding the variable "gender" in the characterization table.

Teacher	Age	Professional qualification	Training for Inclusive Education	Length of professional career	Time working with students with SEN
Pink	52	Degree in Basic Education	Postgraduate in Special Education - cognitive and motor skills	24 years old	19 years old
Carnation	54	Master's Degree	Postgraduate Diploma in Early Intervention	15 years	15 years
Camellia	63	Degree in education	Postgraduate in Education Special.	43 years old	18 years old
Lily	57	Degree in Mathematics and Teaching, Master's and postgraduate studies in Mathematics and Assessment	No specialized training in inclusive education	30 years	More than 20 years
Tulip	48	Degree in Modern French and German Languages and Literatures	Specialization Course in Special Education	25 years	12 years old
Violet	**51**	Degree in Early Childhood Education and degree in Curriculum Organization and Development	Postgraduate course in Special Education in the Cognitive Motor Field	27 years old	16 years old
Orchid	46	1st and 2nd cycle degrees, three postgraduate degrees.	Post-graduation in Special Education in the cognitive-motor field.	23 years old	20 years
Daisy	45	Degree in Biology	No specialized training for Inclusive Education	20 years	3 years

Table 1 - Characterization of the teachers

The testimonies reveal an understanding of inclusion as an educational response for all students, regardless of their characteristics and school profile. In other words, it is noted that most of the teachers interviewed have a vision of inclusive education as not exclusively designed for students with specific educational needs. Even so, some teachers reveal an understanding of inclusion as a reality that is not yet attainable for everyone, as exemplified by the following statement:

At the moment, inclusion is about wanting to do a lot, but in reality it's not being done... I think inclusion is still very much on paper, in legislation... That's the feeling I have... That, on paper, the intentions are magnificent, but in practice it doesn't happen (Margarida, 2024).

The same interviewee explains a certain lack of confidence in the practices of implementing the principles of inclusive education, leaving implicit a stigmatizing view that seems to persist, on the part of some school agents, about inclusive education, associating it with students with specific needs:

Thinking about inclusive education is sometimes just thinking about certain children (...) it's trying to show that teaching these children... Often, reference is made to inclusive schools, but in reality, we're only thinking about certain children (Margarida, 2024)

The interviewee Camélia also implies that inclusive education is a broader path that requires an understanding that it is not just an educational response for children with special educational needs, but one that is attentive to all children, respecting their diversity:

I think that's what inclusive education should be... it doesn't mean that it is yet, but we're trying to make it more and more an answer for all children... (...) Being more attentive to others, to differences, because I think we have to respect differences more and more, don't we? I think that's what inclusion is all about... It's not just about including children with special educational needs... I think it's the right to be different, that's all... (Camélia, 2024).

The synthesis of these teachers' perception about inclusive education is in line with the theoretical perspectives mobilized (Rodrigues, 2013, 2017; Armstrong & Rodrigues,

2014; Colaço et al, 2022) and with the public policies implemented since Decree-Law 54/2018, referred to by Tulipa. This decree-law, which regulates inclusive education in Portugal, sets out a vision of the inclusive school as a place "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". (Decree-Law 54/2018, Preamble)

In general, the teachers were aware of this legislation, recognizing that it was fundamental to making the school more inclusive for everyone, as the following interview excerpt illustrates:

> I see decree law 54 as an important law to help schools and teachers work with all students as a whole; to encourage teachers to understand that if today a student is not yet capable and has not achieved this goal, tomorrow, for sure, with the help of even a colleague and other types of material, the student will move forward... (Lírio, 2024).

This statement by Professor Lírio leaves open the idea that the legislation on inclusive education is a way of improving educational processes through the use of differentiated pedagogical strategies, thus contributing to educational responses that cover the needs of all students.

The interviewed teachers' understandings of inclusive education also converge with the idea set out in Decree 55/2018, which expresses the importance of

> Guarantee of an inclusive school that promotes equality and non-discrimination, whose diversity, flexibility, innovation and personalization respond to the heterogeneity of students, eliminating obstacles and stereotypes in access to the curriculum and learning, based on a multi-level approach that integrates universal, selective and additional measures to support learning and inclusion (Art. 4 of Decree 55/2018).

On the other hand, there are also statements that emphatically question the possible advances in the policies mentioned here. When asked about possible changes to the implementation of Decree Laws 54/2018 and 55/2018, Tulipa states:

> No, I don't see any significant changes... The only thing that I think can be done more easily and more quickly is when a student needs educational measures... Because then we no longer depend on medical reports or anything else... or assessments... so it's the Class Council that assesses.... It's the student's journey that's taken into account... and we're able to act more quickly when the student needs it... That's an advantage. Now, for the rest, no... I don't see any changes or any very significant changes... (Tulip, 2024).

Although there is a certain disbelief on the part of this teacher, it can nevertheless be inferred that since the implementation of Decree-Law 54/2018, responses have been quicker and only depend on the evaluation of the Class Council, which can also be deduced as a certain reduction in the bureaucratic dimension.

Even so, this same teacher reveals a position of mistrust, both with regard to inclusion policies and the possibilities of realizing the principles of inclusive education. As she says,

> I don't know... I think that, perhaps, by trying to be very politically correct and very inclusive... some mistakes are made... Because I think this thing about education for all and these educational policies for all... it's all very well, but there are... there are children... there are pupils who would probably be better off in some other kind of institution other than school, wouldn't they?... Because the school takes in pupils with very specific health needs... and we as teachers also have to respond to these pupils... The question isn't just about responding, it's... once again, resources... Because if I have a group, for example, a group of 7 pupils; 3 of these pupils have very specific needs, I can't respond to all 7 in the same way, can I? .... (Tulipa, 2024).

It can be seen from the statements made by the teachers interviewed that the inclusion paradigm has not yet been agreed upon by these professionals, whether they have specific training or not. There are even those who advocate *special environments* for *special students*, contrary to the provisions of the law.

When asked about the principle of *inclusive education as a human right*, the teachers showed a very clear and consensual position:

> Everyone has the right to education, right? Therefore, I believe that the fundamental principle of inclusive education is that it belongs to everyone and for everyone... it means that it everyone's right!" (Rosa, 2024);

> Education (...) is part of the Charter of Rights... Education is a good and a right (...) for every child and young person... Without education, the society we know wouldn't exist. It would be anarchy, wouldn't it? Education is what makes people have a critical spirit, actively participate in a fair, balanced society... in a democratic society. (Margarida, 2024).

These testimonies seem to show a certain understanding of the principle of inclusive education as a right of all, for all and with all (Armstrong & Rodrigues, 2014). However, the analysis revealed other meanings that relate education to *equity and excellence in educational provision*, which contributed to broadening the reflection on the meaning of inclusive education as a right for all

Equity and Excellence in Education

When they speak about the relationship between equity and excellence in educational provision, i.e. reflecting on whether it is possible to provide education for all (in line with the principle of equity) while also ensuring that it is of high quality (in line with the principle of excellence), or whether they believe that universalizing educational opportunities and cultivating excellence represent *crossroads* in the quest for inclusion, three of the interviewees express a perception that, in

practice, equity and excellence are approaches that, although they "go hand in hand", are contradictory to each other:

> "A big crossroads... because I think that inclusion at the moment is very utopian... (...) It's very difficult in the current system because resources are lacking... We lack almost everything!" (Rosa, 2024)

> "It should be a convergence... but in practice it isn't, they are contradictory approaches that create ambiguities in teachers' pedagogical practices" (Margarida, 2024).

> "Yeah... Maybe it's a bit of a crossroads, isn't it? Because achieving excellence and equity at the same time... equity in the sense of balance or (...) for everyone to have excellence and for everyone to have it is a utopia... and... I don't know if it's possible..." (Camélia, 2024).

The view of these teachers is in line with the study by Souza and Torres (2022) on the fact that the democratization of access to school in the second half of the 20th century was accompanied by a demand to improve the quality of teaching and school results, as recommended in goal 4 of the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda, stressing that

> Is it possible to ensure quality education for all students, regardless of their background, and at the same time offer maximum chances of developing a wide range of competences that are truly compatible with the ambition of allowing certain students (or groups of students) to acquire excellence in a limited range of competences? (Avermaet, Houtte and Branden, 2011 *apud* Souza & Torres, 2022, p. 1028).

Along the same lines are other studies which, although they consider that progress has been made in terms of educational reforms, draw attention to the fact that there is a tension between the provision of quality education and the realization of principles of equity for all, while also pointing out that educational prescriptions such as SDG 4 are part of an international agenda to solve economic problems (Ar-

mstrong & Rodrigues, 2014; Ainscow, 2009: 2020). It therefore appears from the views of these authors, and from the perception of the teachers interviewed, that the combination of concern for educational equity and the pursuit of excellence, although it has become a political priority in different parts of the world, is an ideal that has not yet been realized.

Other interviewees expressed a more optimistic understanding of the compatibility between quality education and equity in its provision, but emphasized the need for more resources:

> I believe it's possible... but it depends on resources (...) ... excellent education, in my opinion, also requires more training... on the part of the teachers" (Violeta, 2024).

> It depends on the resources and the number of students per classroom, for each teacher: Because it is possible... It's possible and you don't lose quality in any way, but it's all a question of numbers... and resources..." (Tulipa, 2024)

> I think it's possible to offer excellent education to everyone. That... I don't think there are any obstacles here... There may be other kinds of obstacles, but... they're more technical... in my opinion... Now, I don't think education has any crossroads. It can and should be offered par excellence to everyone..." (Lírio, 2024)

The statements made by these interviewees show that they tend to agree with the idea that it is possible to achieve education for all, based on standards of excellence, as long as the necessary resources are made available to schools and teachers. The focus on working conditions and greater involvement among teachers seems to point to factors that legitimize the achievement of excellence rather than educational equity. The following testimonies support this inference

> I think excellence is a priority... Whether we achieve it or not... Then it's not... it's another matter... but we should always work towards it, we should..." (Cravo, 2024).

> I'm not saying it would be impossible (...), but there would have to be a lot more involvement from all the professionals... It's not easy, but in order to really move towards excellence... In other words, equity with excellence... which I find difficult! Maybe it's difficult... We're still a long way from that, in my view, but I think we can get there. But it's very difficult, given the... in quotes [gesturing with his fingers], the 'mentalities', isn't it?" (Orchid, 2024).

From the analysis of this subcategory, three summary ideas about equity and excellence in the educational offer stand out: i) the idea that the pursuit of excellence should be adopted as a priority in inclusive education; ii) the importance of mobilizing efforts and resources to harmonize these principles in educational practice; iii) the need to tackle educational reforms, namely through training, which leads attitudinal and *mentality* changes among teachers and in the school community

CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOLS AND

In order to understand the teachers' perceptions of the challenges facing schools and teachers in achieving *inclusive education as a right*, the data was analyzed in two categories: *a) challenges of inclusive education and b) teacher training for inclusive education.*

Challenges of Inclusive Education

One of the central ideas emerges from the analysis is that the challenges of inclusive education begin in the conditions in which schools, students and education professionals find themselves.

> It's very difficult! Very difficult! Especially in the system we're in at the moment... Because we can't offer quality education for all when we lack almost everything... In other words: we lack human resources; we lack material resources, ... Basically, we often make omelettes without eggs, don't we?!! (Rosa, 2024).

Another core idea is that the challenges and possibilities facing schools are intertwined with the challenges and possibilities facing teachers. In other words, some challenges, such as the shortage of time teachers have carry out multiple tasks, impact on the effectiveness of school education and demand both pedagogical and school management measures.

> To have more time... to be able to include... Because on paper it's one thing, in reality it's another... Having more time with the students, getting more involved with the students... We have a very heavy bureaucratic burden...... That takes up a lot of time... time that could be used to spend with the student, getting to know them... really getting to know them so that we can meet their needs... So often it's not a lack of desire, but rather we're bogged down, drowning in papers and work... So, yes (...) I think that's the biggest difficulty (Tulipa, 2024).

Related to this aspect is another idea related to overcoming the challenge of the overload of duties and demands on teachers and the time this takes away from practicing inclusive education, as Orchid mentioned:

> All the bureaucratic stuff robs me of time and doesn't allow me to invest more in the students... In other words, the bureaucratic stuff robs me of time which is extremely important for working with the students to help them make more progress (Orchid, 2024).

The lack of time brings with it other challenges related to the importance of monitoring students early, diversifying strategies and working with classes with a high number of students who need curricular adaptations, as the following speeches show:

> Often students, for example, with selective measures... maybe if there had been a greater response, that student with selective measures wouldn't have needed to move on to additional measures... In other words, it wouldn't have been necessary to apply additional measures if the intervention had been carried out earlier... (Orchid, 2024);

> For teachers to be able to help students feel truly included and develop specific tasks for these students, the classes would have to be much smaller (...) Just to give you an example, my class has 23 students... in which I have 2 boys with additional measures, 4 with selective measures and the rest with universal measures... Now, with a class of this size, how can I speed things up so that I can do inclusion work properly? It's completely impossible (Margarida, 2024).

In summary, the data in this category highlights aspects related to: teachers' and students' working conditions; the overload of duties for teachers; the lack of time and the increase in bureaucracy; the need for early monitoring of students; the diversification of strategies; the difficulty of working with classes with a large number of students who need curricular adaptations. These aspects are seen as challenges to overcome in order to achieve an inclusive educational practice. In addition to these aspects, the analysis allowed us to identify as a major challenge that of training teachers to work in inclusive educational contexts, a topic we will highlight in the next section of this article

Teacher Training for Inclusive Education

One of the biggest challenges facing the school is to respond to the social diversity of the students who "inhabit" it. As Colaço et al (2022) point out

> Responding to diversity is both a challenge and an opportunity, but diversity is often perceived as an added "difficulty" to the work that is done, and is supposed to be done, at school. All the more so when the notion of diversity understood in policies and normative guidelines has been unequivocally broadened, considering that when we talk about inclusion, we are covering all categories of difference that potentially translate into inequalities in access and success at school (Colaço et al, 2022, p. 25).

Associated with this challenge is the need for adequate teacher training**.** The teachers interviewed (d)enunciate both the current reality and the need for teacher training to respond to the specific needs of the students. As they point out:

> For the teacher who works in the classroom, even if they have students with functional diversity, the basic training required is a degree or, for example, a bachelor's degree; but that's not enough. But our reality today is this: all you need is a degree and there are students in the classroom, right? The teacher has to manage... if you're a teacher, for example, of Mathematics, Portuguese, there's no requirement for inclusive education; not even 30 or 40 hours of training, there's no requirement for that... just the training for the subject you teach... (Rosa, 2024)

> We need to update ourselves, to know how to make curricular changes, ... The different possibilities we can have so that students can be more involved and can, for example, be assessed in ways other than, for example, tests... I think the basis of everything is for teachers to have training so that they know how to act. Perhaps, if many universal measures were applied, it wouldn't be necessary to apply selective measures (Orchid, 2024);

> The problem is that in the middle of a class where most of the children are on universal measures, the boy who stands out, not because of special measures, because he has social education, but because he has (...) more developed skills, above average...... we can't do anything for him... Because we can't pay attention to all the children. It's very complicated!" (Margarida, 2024)

These statements, while highlighting the importance of schools and teachers assuming that they are inclusive, place the onus on issues of a political nature related both to the training of teachers to work in contexts marked by the heterogeneity and diversity of students, in all their multiple faces, and to the curriculum and the processes of adapting it, namely the application of selective and/or universal measures. In this regard, Ainscow (2020) and Haug (2020) underline the inevitability of national policy in achieving inclusive education. This inevitability is present in the various areas mentioned, of which teacher training stands out. Indeed, training teachers to deal with diversity, ensuring the principles of a truly inclusive school, has been considered a major challenge of this 21st century (UNESCO, 2015; UN, 2017) that education systems, training institutions, schools and teachers need to face (Prychodco; Fernandes; Bittencourt, 2019; Rodrigues, 2018). This challenge involves recovering the idea of training in context (Nóvoa, 2007; 2017) and bringing teachers to the center of reflecting on their practices, creating conditions for them to share experiences and collectively define pedagogical strategies that foster meaningful learning for all students, allowing them to progress successfully in their educational trajectories. However, at a time marked by *curricular binomial* policies (Roldão, 2010), schools and teachers have been experiencing pressures, either to contextualize and differentiate curricula, or to reinforce a common curricular core (national curriculum), leading to tensions in everyday school life, and the confrontation with complex educational challenges, as witnessed by the teachers interviewed, as shown in the previous category. It is perhaps for this reason that it has been argued that "national policy should legitimize and support schools' struggles for inclusive action (Haug, 2022, p. 18).

When asked if they considered teacher training to be compatible with the demands of public policies and the day-to-day running of schools, some believed that the measures to make up for insufficient training could be simple and continuous, as one of the interviewees said:

> There should be more training for teachers ...teachers have many doubts about certain aspects related to inclusive education

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I'm referring to "small trainings", let's say, to clarify... (...) things they may have doubts about... this type of reflection should be more continuous in schools... (Cravo, 2024)

Other teachers, understanding that the problem of teacher training for inclusive education goes beyond short courses, suggest measures to transform initial training, pointing out that they didn't receive this basic training, which they now miss:

> I have no idea, in terms of teacher training, if this is actually a subject that appears in the training curriculum, even if it's optional... I don't think so, and they're just finishing their teacher training course... and if all goes well, they're going to be accredited teachers, „„but I don't think they even have a subject in the area of inclusion... but it would be very important for them to have training in this area..., if there was such an offer at the college there would already be an internalization in the future teacher... about these situations... I never had it and I really miss it (Lírio, 2024);

> Whether you're prepared or not, I don't know! In my day, when I got my degree, there was no subject, no course at university that prepared me for this... There wasn't. I was on a course with an educational branch, so I knew that was the way out... that's also why... that's also why I was curious about specializing in Special Education, but I don't think it's changed much... which always makes me wonder if current teachers are trained for a multicultural school, for an education that is supposed to be inclusive and which, by law, is inclusive (Tulipa, 2024).

These testimonies illustrate the importance that the interviewed teachers give to training, leaving the idea that initial teacher training is still very deficient, acknowledging, namely, the absence of "spaces/disciplines" that refer to reflection and the development of skills for future teachers to intervene in inclusive educational contexts. The data shows that the interviewees experience daily tensions arising from mismatches between what they "receive"

from their initial and continuing training and what they "need to give" in pursuit of inclusive education as a right for all. With regard to what they "need to give" in order to ensure inclusive educational processes, the interviewees, referring specifically to students with specific educational needs, made reference to the ways in which *learning support measures are applied*, an aspect which we will highlight in the next section of the analysis.

Application of Support Measures

Focusing on the difficulties of materializing an inclusive educational practice, the interviewees paid close attention to how the measures support students' learning provided for in Decree-Law 54/2018, which regulates inclusive education in Portugal, are applied. They specifically mention that this is also a major challenge for schools and teachers:

> I think it's essential for schools to start thinking about (...) Sometimes there's a lot of confusion... Decree-Law 54 is considered to be very closely linked to the previous 3/2008, isn't it?... and people forget that 3/2008 was for students with special educational needs and Decree-Law 54 not. This one is for all students... So, I think there's a lot of confusion about associating the 54 with students with educational measures... so people forget that, when planning everything that happens at school, we always have to think about everyone... and sometimes it fails because we don't remember that we have to adapt a worksheet... for someone who doesn't read... You have to adapt the space for those who can't move around (...) And sometimes that's still a bit compartmentalized, isn't it? (Tulipa, 2024)

The measures to support learning and inclusion to which this teacher refers are organized in a multi-level approach, comprising *universal, selective and additional measures*. The application of these measures, as evidenced by some testimonies, does not always seem to be carried out with the required rigor, and may

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thus generate situations of exclusion or impact on students' learning trajectories. As two teachers point out:

> We have specialized services here at school, with students with very specific characteristics (...) and they are part of a class. But often, when planning activities, ... people forget... And why do they forget? Because, perhaps, at their base they haven't been... (...) they're not used to planning for students with other types of needs... And maybe, if there was more rigor in analyzing situations and, on the other hand, if the basic training of teachers included subjects related to inclusive education and (...) they learned how to plan, work, adapt materials, plan specifically for all students... maybe some situations of failure could be avoided (Lirio, 2024);

> I observe the reality and realize that there are still many teachers who have difficulty applying the measures (...) Okay... they have difficulty not just because of a lack of training, but because of a lack of understanding of the situations... and there really should have been much greater investment when the Decree-Law came out. Because a lot of people thought it was for special education and it's not... Decree-Law 54... is for everyone! And since it's for everyone, everyone would have to take ownership and have a different perspective, wouldn't they? A different view of education and everyone's responsibility for implementing the measures laid down... (Violeta, 2024).

It is clear from these statements that there is a certain ambiguity regarding the sense of inclusion advocated by Decree-Law 54/2018, and the assumption of responsibilities in terms of the application of the measures to support students' learning, which it provides for, and that there is also indicating the continued understanding that inclusion is directed only towards students with specific educational needs. For the interviewees, the correct application of these measures will be a condition for ensuring respect for the diversity of students and their learning pace.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As the objectives of this study were: i) to understand elementary school teachers' perceptions of inclusive education as a right and ii) to identify the challenges of inclusive education for schools and teachers, the analysis showed that the teachers understood inclusive education as a right for all students, and not as an educational response exclusively aimed at students with specific educational needs. Even so, some teachers reveal an understanding of inclusion as a reality that is not yet attainable for everyone.

When reflecting on the possibilities of offering education for all, which meets the principle of equity and at the same time guarantees quality education, some testimonies indicate that although these principles "go hand in hand" in political speeches, they are, from the point of view of their implementation, contradictory and irreconcilable. Within the framework of the assumptions of an inclusive education, provided for by Decree Law 54/2018, this situation, which is in line with the perspective of Roldão (2010) when he argues that we are living in times of *binomial curriculum* policies, poses multiple challenges for schools and teachers.

In fact, although inclusive education is recognized as an educational response for all children (Rodrigues, 2014), the results show that its implementation continues to be a major challenge for schools and teachers. On the one hand, constraints are pointed out, namely, related to teachers' working conditions; task overload; lack of time and increased bureaucracy. On the other hand, pedagogical aspects are pointed out, namely: the difficulty of working with classes with a large number of students who need curricular adaptations; the need for early monitoring of students and the diversification of strategies. In this vein, teacher training was highlighted as a challenge that the political system and training ins-

titutions need to address. In this respect, the teachers' position highlights the persistence of a mismatch between the training they receive and what they need to "give" in the pursuit of inclusive education as a right for all.

In this context, they highlight difficulties in "knowing how to act" in the face of the diversity of students, highlighting, as an example, difficulties in applying the measures to support student learning (*universal, selective and additional)*, provided for in Decree-Law 54/2018, which regulates inclusive education in Portugal.

In summary, the analysis allowed us to build the perception of the existence of a certain tension in the teachers' speeches, revealing, on the one hand, feelings of adherence to the principles of inclusive education as a right for all and, on the other, doubts as to whether this would be realized in everyday school life. In other words, the discourses of the teachers interviewed - in their speaking, thinking and acting - show a sense of belief and, at the same time, reticence about possibilities of making school education an increasingly inclusive reality.

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