



Teacher education for inclusion: Can a virtual learning object help?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 October 2014

Received in revised form

24 February 2015

Accepted 26 February 2015

Available online 11 March 2015

Keywords:

Applications in subject areas

Improving classroom teaching

Interactive learning environments

Pedagogical issues

Inclusive education

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has occupied a central role in educational planning especially over the last two decades of the 20th century. This article presents an evaluation of the virtual learning object (LO) *Incluir*—a digital resource designed to support learning. It was created to work as a complementary tool for teacher education that aimed at promoting reflection on inclusion and resignification of teachers' practice. We present some aspects of inclusive education in Brazil and our perspective on teacher education for inclusion. Then we explore the learning object, the pedagogical framework that guided its conception, and the survey that we conducted designed to evaluate the object in its technical and pedagogical aspects. A total of 163 participants answered a questionnaire comprised of 20 closed questions and 3 open-ended questions. Simple descriptive statistics allowed us to determine that participants rated the object very positively. Thematic content analysis was used to organize the qualitative data of the two open-ended questions in three analytical categories. Simple quantification and description was used to analyze the third open-ended question. We concluded that the LO is a valuable complementary resource that contributes to teacher education for inclusion.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has occupied a central role in educational planning especially over the last two decades of the 20th century. When understood broadly, the inclusive education debate concerns people who have been historically excluded from the cultural, social, and economic benefits of formal education or of formal quality education. Brazil is a country of enormous sources of wealth as well as immense contrasts between the rich and the poor. Discrimination and inequality have been part of the daily lives of indigenous groups, migrants, the poor, afro-descendants, and people with disabilities and special needs (Cury, 2005). However, as stated by Artiles and Kozleski (2007), in most countries we find a tendency to concentrate the narrative of inclusive education on students with disabilities and special needs, establishing a strong link with the area of special education.

In our work, the term inclusive education, or simply inclusion, refers to the provisions created for people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). However, it is imperative to keep in mind that this focus refers exclusively to the operational aspects of our work. The discussion about inclusion/exclusion must not fall into reification of false or crystallized identity categories; in the real world, a student with a disability who is poor will face greater obstacles than a student with a disability that can count on the support of a wealthy family. Inclusive education is about reducing barriers to learning and participation for all. Another common misconception is viewing the origins of educational difficulties as arising within the learners themselves, instead of considering discriminatory practices, curricula, teaching approaches, school organization, and culture, as well as national and local policies (Booth, Nes, & Strømstad, 2003).

We wanted to help teachers and schools create the necessary conditions for students with SEND to experience a rich, gratifying, and successful learning process. This purpose guided the development of the virtual learning object *Incluir* (the Portuguese word for the verb to include). In this paper we present the pedagogical framework that guided its conception, the learning object in its final version, and its evaluation. Since this project is deeply rooted in years of practice in the field of special education (mainly but not exclusively with deaf and

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hard of hearing children, adolescents, and adults) and in the field of teacher education in Brazil, it is necessary to discuss some aspects regarding inclusive education in this country and our perspective on teacher education for inclusion.

1.1. Inclusive education in Brazil

Current educational policies in Brazil are guided by the concept of inclusive education. Regulatory and legal frameworks explicitly require educational authorities to aim at breaking with a history of exclusion and segregation of people with disabilities, ensuring equality of access through mainstreaming and the provision of specialized educational services (Brasil, 2010). The factors that led the country to take this approach are, among others, the influence of social movements for human rights, the elevated costs of maintaining two educational systems, and international developments in the early 1990s on perspectives on inclusive education (Mendes, 2006; Michels, 2006; Rahme, 2013).

In light of its understanding of Inclusive Education (Brasil, 2008), the National Policy on Special Education aims at ensuring mainstreaming from early childhood to higher education for students with disabilities, global developmental disorders, and gifted students. The government affirms the need of forming a political framework based on the conception of inclusive education for providing resources and services to remove the barriers in schooling and creating specific guidelines for the development of inclusive teaching practices (Brasil, 2010).

The proportion of pupils characterized as having a disability or special educational need in mainstream systems has increased in the last few years. According to the school census of 2012 (Brasil, 2013), the number of “included students” (the term used in the government report) registered in regular schools has more than doubled in a period of five years (from 306,136 students in 2007 to 620,777 in 2012). However, there are significant difficulties in the country when it comes to the implementation of such inclusive policies (Paulon, Freitas, & Pinho, 2005). A literature review of 480 articles published in Brazil between 2005 and 2010 reveals that the main difficulties for inclusion are the lack of curricula adaptations and pedagogical resources, the lack of commitment and support from the school community, difficulties in accepting diversity, the lack of specialized support, and the need of more resources to guarantee accessibility. Structural problems in the educational system as a whole, such as class size, are also cited (Bisol, Stangherlin, & Valentini, 2013).

1.2. Teacher education for inclusion

In Brazil, the degree needed to qualify for primary and secondary teaching is achieved after a four-year program in universities and institutes of higher education with a focus on the development of teachers' personal, social and professional abilities, and an understanding of teaching and learning including the process by which knowledge is constructed. In 1994, courses were recommended to include specific units on students with special educational needs (Brasil, 1994). A unit on Brazilian Sign Language and Deaf Culture has been mandatory since 2005 (Brasil, 2005).

A national teacher training policy organizes pre-service and in-service training for teachers in the public sector. Basically, two “kinds” of teachers are expected to deal with students with disabilities: trained teachers responsible for general education classrooms working alongside specialized teachers responsible for organizing the resources demanded by students with special needs (Michels, 2006).

What are the obstacles and challenges that most impact Brazilian schools? An extensive report by Gatti and Barretto (2011) on teachers in Brazil gives an overview of education in the country which, in turn, allows one to understand the obstacles and challenges for inclusive education. On a broad perspective, the authors emphasize the recent expansion of basic education (real growth in terms of public networks occurring in the late 1970s and early 1980s) which generated a demand for a larger number of teachers at all levels of education. It also expressed concern about enormous regional and local heterogeneity, the urgency imposed by social transformations, and poor school performance. More specifically in terms of teacher education, they call attention to the crystallization of curricula in courses of encyclopedic form, the lack of reliable information that may inform how teacher education is performed, supervised, and monitored, and the generic or descriptive approaches to educational issues such as special needs. As for in-service education, they argue:

The training model often follows the characteristics of a ‘cascade’ model, in which a first group of professionals is trained and these trainees become the trainers of a new group, which, in turn, trains the next one. Through this procedure, which generally passes through the different hierarchical levels of large teaching systems, technical-pedagogical staff, supervisors and specialists, although allowing the involvement of quite high numbers of trainees in numeric terms, has proven to be far from effective when it comes to disseminating the foundations of a reform with all its nuances, depth, and implications. (Gatti & Barretto, 2011, p. 189).

Other initiatives often seen in both the public as well as the private sector are one-shot workshops, conferences, and seminars. Although they provide interesting opportunities for gathering teachers around certain topics, questions may be raised about the duration and degree to which they are content focused and centered on transmission models. Bearing in mind that implementing inclusive education may require shifts in the way teachers perceive diversity, the way teachers think about learners, themselves, their roles, capabilities, challenges, and identities, it may be necessary to adopt different approaches to teacher education.

1.3. Teacher attitudes towards inclusion and the Learning Object Incluir

A systematic review by De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) highlights three components of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion: teachers do not rate themselves as very knowledgeable about educating students with SEND and, in general, they are undecided or negative in their beliefs about inclusive education; they tend not to feel competent and confident in teaching these students; and they hold negative or neutral behavioral intentions towards students with SEND. The same study also reports that teachers with less teaching experience and teachers with previous experience with inclusive education held significantly more positive attitudes towards inclusion. They also found that long-term training in special needs education positively influenced the attitudes of teachers and that teachers' attitudes are related to disability categories. A Brazilian study by Gomes and Barbosa (2006) on inclusion of students with cerebral palsy found similar results: teachers who were knowledgeable about the characteristics of these children and teachers who felt it was their responsibility to educate

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