

## MORAL IMAGINATION OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN BRAZIL: REFLECTING ON THE ROLE OF CONTINUING TEACHER EDUCATION

LA IMAGINACIÓN MORAL EN PROFESORES DE EDUCACIÓN  
ESPECIAL EN BRASIL: REFLEJANDO EL ROL DE LA EDUCACIÓN  
CONTINUA DE PROFESORES

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### Abstract

The educational reforms in the 1990s in Brazil were devised to address the challenge of constructing an educational system sensitive to diversity at schools, turning them inclusive. In parallel, national policies enacted various strategies that reshaped the identities of school educators, particularly special education teachers. Continuing teacher education became a cornerstone of such strategies. However, as the existing studies point out, the public programs of continuing teacher education were unable to prepare special education teachers to address the complex challenges in their teaching practice. Moreover, of particular concern is the lack of attention to the moral foundations of teaching in continuing teacher education. The paper is structured as follows: first, I will provide an overview of how special education evolved in Brazil over the past two decades. Second, I will briefly discuss national policies concerning continuing teacher education with an emphasis on special education. Many of the challenges that special education teachers face in schools stem from fragmented national policies concerning continuing teacher education and inclusive education. Third, I will discuss the importance of cultivating moral imagination in special education teachers as the agents of school inclusion.

**Keywords:** Special education, continuing teacher education, moral imagination, Brazil.

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## Resumen

Las reformas educativas de los años 90 en Brasil se orientaron a abordar el desafío de construir un sistema educativo sensible a la diversidad de los colegios, llevándolos a ser inclusivos. En paralelo, las políticas nacionales realizaron diversas estrategias que dieron nuevas formas a las identidades de los educadores escolares, particularmente a los profesores de educación especial. La educación continua se convirtió en una piedra angular de dichas estrategias. Sin embargo, como lo muestran los estudios disponibles, los programas públicos de educación continua para profesores fueron incapaces de preparar a profesores de educación especial para abordar los complejos desafíos en su práctica educativa. Más aún, de particular cuidado es la falta de atención a los fundamentos morales de la enseñanza en la educación continua para profesores. El presente artículo está estructurado de la siguiente manera: primero, propondré una panorámica de cómo la educación especial evolucionó en Brasil durante las pasadas dos décadas. Segundo, discutiré brevemente las políticas nacionales referidas a educación continua de profesores con un énfasis en la educación especial. Muchos de los desafíos que los profesores de educación especial enfrentan en los colegios surgen de políticas nacionales fragmentadas relativas a la educación continua de profesores y a la educación inclusiva. Tercero, discutiré la importancia de cultivar la imaginación moral en profesores de educación especial como los agentes de la inclusión escolar.

**Palabras clave:** Educación especial, educación continua de profesores, imaginación moral, Brasil.

THE DISABILITY SCENARIO in Brazil is a typical situation of many developing countries: almost 24% of Brazil's population, or 45 million people, live with disabilities, according to 2010 Census. The education-related disadvantage of Brazilians with impairments is visible in the following statistics: while 61% of the population with impairments, who are 15 and older, had no education at all or had an incomplete elementary education; this percentage was 38% among the population without impairments. In 2010, on average, only 8% of Brazilians had completed high school education, according to the recent Census: 6.7% of those had impairments while 10.4% did not have impairments. This suggests that only a small minority of youths with impairments get an opportunity to complete high school, and even fewer will access higher education (Kirakosyan, 2013).

Inclusive education in Brazil has been greatly impacted by the global movement for human rights of the population with disabilities. From the late 1980s, the rights of persons with disabilities in Brazil were secured first in the 1988 Constitution, then through a series of legal instruments and national policies that aimed at guaranteeing everyone's right to education as a condition crucial to the full development of a person and a citizen. Several federal laws enacted from 1996 to 2008 molded the national policy for special education and the training of special education teachers. However, these policies have been inconsistent in addressing the challenges of inclusion of children with disabilities in schools and failed to prepare the special education teachers to approach their work in a critical and reflective manner.

The existing national policies assigned the responsibility for the outcome of inclusion of students with disabilities in schools to the special education teachers. The responsibilities include not only teaching students with disabilities but also promoting education about disability and diversity in the larger school community, advising families of students with disabilities on their learning progress, as well as forming partnerships across departments to guarantee a better quality of school inclusion. In all of these activities, special education teachers exercise their moral authority by transmitting values, being a public servant and a caregiver to the children and youth with disabilities at schools. Thus, their moral agency plays a vital role in creating conditions for positive outcomes in the educational inclusion of students with disabilities. As Joseph (2003) has argued, teachers' work is moral in nature, and thus moral dimensions of teaching are a crucial element of teacher education. She draws on moral imagination to conceptualize and integrate the moral dimensions of teaching within teacher education.

The article's argument is organized into three parts: first, I provide an overview of how special education evolved in Brazil over the past two decades, driven by the neoliberal agenda and international agencies with which Brazil signed agreements. Second, I briefly discuss recent national policies concerning continuing teacher education with an emphasis on special education. Third, I discuss the importance of cultivating moral imagination in special education teachers as the

agents of school inclusion, and broad implications for the inclusion of children and youth with disabilities in Brazil's schools.

### **An overview of recent developments in special education**

The educational reforms that started in the 1990s in Brazil were thought to address a major challenge of constructing an inclusive and diverse educational system. The internationally-recognized catalyst of educational standards and procedures for the disabled people was the Salamanca Declaration of 1994, which addressed the principles, policy and practice of special education, presenting the UN standard procedures for equalizing opportunities for people with disabilities. The adopted new *Framework for Action* stated that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions (UNESCO, 1994). The Declaration established that all children should learn together, where possible, and that ordinary schools must identify and respond to the diverse needs of their students, providing a continuum of support and services to match these needs (UNESCO, 1994).

It is also crucial to highlight the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which was ratified in Brazil with the status of a constitutional amendment. The UNCRPD identified the rights of disabled persons as well as the obligations of state parties to promote, protect and ensure those claims, while through its Optional Protocol it also allows for inquiry into grave or systematic violations of its provisions in specific states (United Nations, 2006). Article 24 of the Convention protects the right to education of persons with disabilities, proclaiming the right to inclusive education. It provides not only that children with disabilities should not be discriminated against but also that they should be able to participate in the general education system (Ibid).

The UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (2009) outlined several justifications for responding to the diversity of needs of all children and working towards inclusive practices and educating all together. First, the educational justification contends

that inclusive schools need to develop teaching methods that respond to individual differences and benefit all children (UNESCO, 2009, p.9). Second, the social justification sets forth that inclusive schools are able to change attitudes towards diversity and form the basis for a just, non-discriminatory society (UNESCO, 2009). Finally, the economic justification states that it is less costly to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a complex system of schools each 'specializing' in different groups of children (UNESCO, 2009).

Since 2003, Brazil's Ministry of Education has made a formal commitment to support states and municipalities in the transformation of Brazilian public schools into inclusive and diverse. Between 2003 and 2007, the Ministry through its Secretary of Special Education developed the Program of Inclusive Education Right to Diversity, aimed at training and monitoring over 94,000 educational professionals from 162 designated municipalities to develop inclusive educational practices in classrooms (Ministério de Educação, n.d.).

Subsequently, the 2008 National Policy on Special Education in an Inclusive Perspective (Política Nacional da Educação Especial na Perspectiva da Educação Inclusiva) and the 2010 National education Plan (Plano Nacional de Educação) significantly reshaped the identities of school teachers, particularly of the special education teachers, and continuing teacher education became a cornerstone of such strategies. There are significant conceptual differences between the current National Education Plan 2011-2020 (Plano Nacional de Educação 2011-2020) and the UNCRPD.

As the studies available on the inclusive education and continuing teacher education in Brazil reveal (see Bridi, 2011; Queiroz, 2010; Mendez, 2011; Preti & Dias, 2013; Silva, 2014), special education teachers' training has been inconsistent in its content and are not rooted in the experiences of frontline teachers and broader challenges in Brazilian education and society. The state programs of continuing teacher education were unable to prepare special education teachers to address complex challenges in their teaching practice due to mainly technical focus.

## **Brazil's policies concerning teacher education**

This section surveys the recent policy developments in the teacher education, with a specific emphasis on the special education teacher training. Subsequently, I synthesize main arguments that criticize the special education teacher training programs by Brazilian scholars. Special education teachers are considered the agents of school inclusion of children with impairments, but their initial college training and continuous teacher education programs do not equip them to singlehandedly carry out the mission in a complex and contested school environment.

**Overview.** Brazil's educational reforms of the 1990s devised a national policy that made continuing teacher education the key strategy for shaping a new professional profile of a school educator. Some scholars link the reform to the neoliberal model and distinguish two trends in training: liberal-conservative and critical-reflective (Araújo & Silva, 2009). The first entails the acquisition of information and skills through training courses, lectures, seminars, meetings, workshops and conferences. The teacher plays a secondary role in the training process, absorbing the educational content and practices that were designed, planned and coordinated by outside experts who are superior to the teachers in a created hierarchical relationship. The second trend centers on research as an educational principle for continued teacher training, giving the teachers an autonomy to intervene in the school and classroom dynamics. Here theoretical research is re-signified through the lens of different situations encountered in everyday school life, enabling teachers to reflect on their practice and plan educational interventions that are more relevant to the specific demands of their students. These scholars defend the critical-reflective approach to the continued teacher education in Brazil, but recognize that there are larger structural issues that need to be addressed in order to improve the quality of teachers' practice.

The various actions and programs aiming at school inclusion in Brazil became consolidated in 2008 when the government designed and implemented the National Policy for Special Education in the

Inclusive Perspective (Política Nacional de Educação Especial na Perspectiva da Educação Inclusiva, PNEE-EI) (Ministério da Educação, 2008). The Policy intended to secure the school inclusion of children with impairments, through guaranteeing their access to schools and their participation and learning. Moreover, the Policy emphasized the special education teacher training, encouraged the participation of the families and community in the school inclusion education and promoted articulation between different actors in the implementation of educational policies.

The continuing teacher education for special education has been considered the centerpiece of this Policy and the inclusive discourse in the nation. The training focused on the special education teachers and the techniques and resources that should be helpful in their work. However, as Michels (2011) has pointed out, even the articulation between the regular classroom and the special education services is casted in technical terms instead of framing it within a broader pedagogical discussion. This may be the reason why scholars consider the training programs offered by the Ministry of Education merely palliative and incapable of addressing the root problem of poor pedagogical education at the colleges (Silva, 2014). I will come back to this point below when I discuss the criticism of the content of the continuing teacher education program.

To carry out the continuing teacher education for the special education teachers, the government launched a specific distance learning program, offering distance training courses in partnership with the higher education institutions across the nation and the Open University of Brazil (Silva, 2014). Also, the government chose a multiplier training strategy to disseminate the policy of inclusive education, which entailed a 40 hour training of the multipliers, who in turn will reproduce the trainings locally to the school administrators and special education teachers. However, the recent program evaluations show that the program had little impact on improving the educational attainment of children with disabilities (Silva, 2014). Moreover, scholars noted how the prevailing neoliberal norms and values shape this distance learning program in the technical and professionalized form, favoring low-cost offering a short and flexible training focused

on the productivity and efficiency demands. Scholars suggest that these initiatives show that the state has no interest in investing in a solid initial training of the special education teachers in the public school system (Silva, 2014).

**Criticism.** The recent government policies on the continued teacher education for the special education services raised a series of scholarly criticisms. These critical arguments I synthesize below can be grouped in two categories: the criticism regarding the content of the continuing teacher education efforts and the structural aspects of the policy.

First, the content of the continuing teacher education programs for the special education teachers has been inconsistent and insufficient to equip the special education teachers with knowledge and skills necessary to address the challenges of inclusion at schools. Following the medical-pedagogical framework, the training content has been organized according to the impairment types. The 1994 Declaration of Salamanca that triggered the inclusive educational policies in Brazil, recommended that the special education teacher training should prioritize the general knowledge about different impairments, establishing first a common core across impairments and only then offering a specialized training in one or more areas related to specific impairments (Silva, 2014). Following this recommendation, the Ministry of Education suggested the inclusion of a course on the ethical-political-educational aspects of the integration of the person with special needs in the degree programs in Pedagogy, Psychology, Health Sciences, Social Work and other higher education courses. However, ten years after the decree, no such curricular changes have been implemented in the sampled degree programs in the public and private universities in the states of Mato Grosso and São Paulo (Silva, 2014). As Silva (2014) explains referring to Chacon's study in 2014, it occurred due to weak enforcement mechanism and misunderstanding of the legal requirements of the decree.

The criticism of the prevailing medical-pedagogical model is not easily accepted among the educators for different reasons, and the framework itself counters the diversity and inclusion discourse as



it blames the student's failure at school on the individual biological characteristics instead of the social issues (Michels, 2011).

Another related criticism of the continuing education training content refers to the focus on specific resources and techniques related to each impairment type, instead of relating the training to the broader school and education issues. The suggestions made by special education teachers regarding the knowledge and skills they needed in their work were not heard nor incorporated into the training process (Silva, 2014). Moreover, as Michels (2011) has pointed out referring to the study of Borowsky in 2010, the training content mixed and matched diverse theories of educating children with impairments leaving it to the special education teachers to reconcile the conflicts and differences between different theoretical frameworks with their everyday practice.

The second category of criticism reveals a set of structural problems of the special education policy that impact these teachers' practices. First, scholarly analysis identified that the federal government placed the responsibility for inclusion of children with impairments on municipal governments and schools. The funding of the resource classrooms in schools required municipalities to conform to a range of requirements, among them ensuring both a physical space for special education services and trained special education teachers who are qualified to use the available technologies and materials. In turn, when the schools accepted the proposal, the school took on the responsibility for implementing a special education program in the context of serious structural problems and lack of the qualified special education professionals. Silva (2014) argues that by making such a commitment, the schools released the federal government of the responsibility for the failure of inclusion policy. Also, assigning the success of the school inclusion process to the trained special education teachers generated great discomfort among them, as the students with impairments are seen as an obligation of the specific teachers, while the school makes no commitment to provide appropriate mechanisms and structural changes to educate these students (Silva, 2014).

Furthermore, the extensive list of assignments delegated to the spe-

cial education teachers goes beyond the classroom teaching discussed above and is not contemplated in their continuing education and consequently does not equip them with necessary knowledge and skills to address these challenges, as the training content is not contextualized in the school reality (Silva, 2014). Moreover, as mentioned above, the work in the resource classrooms requires a professional with a fairly comprehensive training, with skills and knowledge to work with all disabilities, at all school levels and in all types of education, which is not how the training content is offered.

Another related point of criticism refers to the multiplier-focused training of special education teachers. The implication of this strategy, as Silva (2014) has pointed out, was a lost opportunity to train teachers capable of designing an inclusion process rooted in their experiences. Instead, the training focused on an inclusive practice as an end in itself, without appropriate critical reflection.

In sum, lack of a consistent policy of valuing the special education teachers and their work results in these teachers' quick burnout and high turnover due to poor working conditions and structural problems. Thus, the initial training needs to strengthen the professional identity of special education teachers and to articulate theory with practice and awareness of their social role. As with the overall continued teacher education in Brazil, it is clear that to raise the quality of teachers' work, it is essential to make significant improvements in the teachers' working conditions, salaries, careers and ongoing training systems, based on the critical-reflective trend.

### **The importance of moral imagination for the special education teachers**

Many scholars recognize the importance of moral imagination in social careers, particularly teaching. I agree with Narvaez & Lapsley (2008) who frame the challenge facing teachers and teacher educators as, on the one hand, allowing moral formation of their students to occur opportunistically, or, on the other hand, to foster an intentional, transparent and deliberative approach that seriously considers

the moral dimensions of teaching and schooling. However, as Sand-erse (2013) has argued, colleges for teacher education hardly prepare new teachers to be morally good as effective role models and most moral formation that goes on in schools is unintended and unplanned. Narvaez & Lapsley (2008) recommend adopting a more deliberate approach in teaching, so that students can flourish in school communities.

Wocial (2010) has conceptualized moral imagination in emotional terms, arguing that emotions motivate us to enter into ethical discussions and influence on our personal perceptions of what is good or bad in life situations. Joseph (2003), in turn, has conceptualized moral imagination as a multifaceted concept involving both the cognitive and affective domains that taken together address the complexities and dynamics of the teachers' work. She contended that moral imagination was crucial for conceptualizing the moral dimensions of teaching in teacher education. In a series of graduate seminars on moral classrooms for both experienced and inexperienced educators, Joseph collected class discussions where teachers shared reflections about their dynamic roles, the nature of moral education, criteria for evaluating classrooms and schools, among other themes. In particular, the discussions revealed the importance of teachers' moral presence and ethical leadership, as well as their commitment to the moral empowerment of children in democratic educational communities (Joseph, 2003).

Discussing research on the moral dimensions of teaching, Sanger (2001) has suggested that theories of morality fail to capture the ways that teachers conceptualize morality and their moral agency. Thus, to incorporate the voices of teachers expressing their views on morality and its role in their practice, the author recommends the use of interpretative approaches to research on the complex and contested moral domain of teaching. Indeed, using a variety of interpretive methods may help scholars, policymakers and administrators better understand the moral authority of the teacher and various moral educational possibilities in schools.

Special education teachers work with students who are often stigmatized and disempowered and have a wide range of impairments.

These teachers' work entails not only ensuring that their students reach their learning potential, but also developing their pupils' ability to consider the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of choices and behaviors at hand. As Wocial (2010) has pointed out, positive role models allow students to understand what ethical behavior is, with the hope that learning will ultimately have an impact on behavior. Acquiring everyday ethical conduct demands life-long learning and constant reflection on the ethical nuances of practice, and Wocial (2010) urges educators to engage in an active pedagogy that will transform both how ethics is taught in training and how ethics is lived in practice.

Based on the data from over 1,000 student teachers in two universities, Revell's and Arthur's (2007) study has found that while they are overwhelmingly in favor of developing their moral development skills, their opportunities to do this are uneven and are dependent on their course and their teaching placement school. Moreover, the data collected by the authors showed that character education is not part of the formal curriculum of teacher education. However, if moral dimensions of teaching are not part of teacher education, it is hard to expect the special education teachers to consistently develop, sustain and teach moral competence, or acting as informed moral agents in ethically challenging situations.

Joseph (2003) suggests that the concept of moral imagination can be used as a guide to integrate the moral dimensions of teaching into teacher education. Bringing the moral dimensions of teaching into teacher education will raise questions about the meaning of good teaching in general and good moral education in particular and help the teachers create more equitable learning communities, which is important for achievement and ethical character development. As Carr (2003) has argued, a more complex conception of educational professionalism would need to reconcile different aspects of the teachers' role: the transmitter of established values combined with the emancipator, the master of his or her professional destiny reconciled with the public servant, care for the particular needs of some children integrated with impartial respect for the rights of all and other moral dilemmas.

Michels (2011) has pointed out that a survey conducted with the Brazilian special education professionals considered specific training less important than on-the-job training and open and positive attitudes in working with disabled children. As several studies showed, the special education teacher training in Brazil has been primarily concerned with technical issues, leaving moral standards out of the training scope, which impacts the outcomes of the inclusive educational policies. The discussion as here presented help the analyst realize the centrality of teachers' moral purposes, values and practices in the success of children with impairments at schools.

## Conclusions

Hargreaves (2003) has articulated that, "Those who focus only on teaching techniques and curriculum standards and who do not embrace the greater, social and moral questions of their time, promote an impoverished view of teaching and teacher professionalism" (pp. 160-161). The main premise of this paper has been that because teachers' work is moral in nature, moral dimensions of teaching should be a crucial component of teacher education. Moral perception, values, and actions are woven into the fabric of all that teachers do, and teacher education programs need to support teachers in understanding themselves as ethical thinkers and practitioners. Teacher education programs need to examine and understand teachers' assumptions and beliefs about morality and the moral dimensions of their practice, to include teachers' voices on moral issues related to their teaching and to throw light on how they interpret and discuss their moral practice. In turn, schools need to strengthen the relationships between special and general education faculty by giving them more opportunities to work together and by encouraging them to share responsibility for students. Overall, to strengthen the professional identity of special education teachers, Brazil needs to develop a set of policies that nurture and support special education teachers as agents of inclusion through a critical-reflective approach.

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