

THE PARADOX OF INCLUSION: HOW CAN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION BE PROMOTED WITHOUT COMPROMISING TEACHERS' MENTAL HEALTH?

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Abstract

The development of inclusive education represents one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary education policies, particularly given the need to guarantee every student's right to learning without disregarding teachers' working conditions. This chapter aims to analyze the paradox between the expansion of inclusive practices and the preservation of teachers' mental health by examining the factors that influence this process and the strategies capable of promoting a better balance among inclusion, teaching quality, and professional well-being. The methodology adopted consists of a narrative literature review based on Brazilian and international scientific publications issued in recent years, as well as an analysis of legal documents and public policies related to inclusive education and the recognition of the teaching profession. The results show that the lack of specific continuing professional development, excessive workloads, a shortage of pedagogical resources, increasing bureaucratic demands, and insufficient institutional support contribute to occupational stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among teachers. It is concluded that effective school inclusion depends on integrated policies that combine investments in infrastructure, multidisciplinary teams, ongoing professional development, participatory school management, and initiatives aimed at promoting teachers' mental health, thereby making sustainable and socially committed inclusive education possible.

Keywords: Continuing professional development, Education policies, Inclusive education, Teachers' mental health.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, inclusive education has become one of the foremost commitments of contemporary education policies. It is grounded in the principle that all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, sensory, social, or cultural circumstances, have the right to learn in mainstream school environments, with equity, respect for diversity, and opportunities for participation. In Brazil, this paradigm gained greater prominence following the enactment of the 1988 Federal Constitution, the

National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (Law No. 9,394/1996), the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (BRASIL, 2008), and the Brazilian Inclusion Law (Law No. 13,146/2015), all of which reinforce the responsibility of the state and educational institutions to guarantee education for all.

Although legislative advances have significantly expanded access to mainstream education for students who are the target population of special education, their effective implementation continues to face numerous challenges related to teachers' working conditions. School inclusion requires curricular, methodological, and assessment adaptations, as well as the development of collaborative pedagogical practices capable of meeting students' specific needs without compromising the quality of education. In this context, teachers have assumed new responsibilities, often without the institutional support, continuing professional development, or resources required to fulfill them satisfactorily.

According to Maria Teresa Eglér Mantoan (2015), school inclusion does not merely consist of enrolling students with disabilities in mainstream schools; rather, it entails transforming school culture, pedagogical practices, and institutional organization so that everyone can learn with equal opportunities. For the author, inclusion requires structural changes that extend beyond the actions of individual teachers and demand consistent public policies and sustained investment.

From this perspective, an important paradox emerges: while society calls for increasingly inclusive schools, many teachers experience work intensification, greater responsibilities, emotional overload, and feelings of insecurity in the face of the demands imposed by everyday school life. This situation contributes to the development of occupational stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and other forms of psychological distress, compromising both professionals' health and the quality of the educational process.

According to Michael Fullan (2007), education reforms achieve lasting results only when they take teachers' actual working conditions into account by providing institutional support, collaborative leadership, and continuing professional development. Similarly, Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan

(2012) argue that recognition of the teaching profession is indispensable to improving education quality and ensuring the sustainability of education policies.

In the field of occupational health, Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter (2016) demonstrate that professions characterized by intensive human interaction, such as teaching, are more vulnerable to the development of burnout syndrome when professionals are exposed to high levels of demand and low levels of organizational support. The authors emphasize that professional burnout reduces motivation, compromises pedagogical performance, and directly affects the quality of relationships established within the school environment.

In the Brazilian context, studies by José Carlos Libâneo (2013) show that the democratization of access to education must be accompanied by recognition of teachers' work, improvements in institutional conditions, and the implementation of policies that enable professionals to perform their work effectively. Likewise, Dermeval Saviani (2019) stresses that fulfillment of the right to education depends not only on expanding enrollment but also on guaranteeing tangible conditions under which socially relevant, high-quality teaching can take place.

In light of this reality, the following research question was formulated: How can effective inclusive education be promoted without compromising the mental health of the teachers responsible for implementing inclusive practices?

Based on this problem, the general objective of this chapter is to analyze the challenges teachers face in implementing inclusive education and to discuss strategies that help reconcile the guarantee of the right to education with the preservation of education professionals' mental health.

The specific objectives are to understand the foundations of inclusive education within Brazilian public policies; identify the primary factors associated with mental health problems among teachers working in inclusive settings; analyze the relationship among working conditions, teacher education, and mental health; and discuss institutional strategies and public policies aimed at promoting teachers' well-being and strengthening sustainable inclusive practices.

The relevance of this study is justified by the continuing expansion of school inclusion policies and the increasing attention given to mental health problems among education professionals. Although the literature recognizes inclusion as a fundamental human right, further studies are needed to address the effects of these policies on teachers' working conditions in an integrated manner. Understanding this paradox therefore contributes to strengthening more sustainable educational practices, benefiting both student learning and the recognition of teachers.

From a theoretical perspective, this chapter is primarily based on the contributions of Mantoan (2015), Libâneo (2013), Saviani (2019), Fullan (2007), Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), and Maslach and Leiter (2016), as well as Brazilian legal documents governing inclusive education. These theoretical frameworks make it possible to understand that school inclusion becomes effective only when it is accompanied by investments in teacher education, multidisciplinary support, democratic school management, public policies that recognize the teaching profession, and systematic initiatives aimed at promoting educators' mental health. This ensures that the right to education is guaranteed without compromising the well-being of those responsible for making it a reality.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter is characterized as qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory research conducted through a narrative literature review. This approach was selected because it enables a broad and critical understanding of scientific research on the relationship between inclusive education and teachers' mental health, allowing different theoretical perspectives and evidence from the fields of Education, Psychology, and Public Health to be integrated.

According to Antônio Carlos Gil (2022), descriptive research seeks to identify and analyze the characteristics, relationships, and phenomena present within a given reality, whereas exploratory research promotes greater familiarity with the issue under investigation and contributes to advancing scientific

discussion. In this regard, combining these research approaches was considered suitable for understanding the challenges teachers face in implementing inclusive education policies.

With respect to technical procedures, a narrative literature review was adopted. This type of review enables critical analysis of different studies on a particular topic without requiring rigid selection protocols, thereby facilitating a contextualized and interdisciplinary discussion. As Marina de Andrade Marconi and Eva Maria Lakatos (2021) emphasize, bibliographic research is an important strategy for bringing together previously produced knowledge, identifying gaps in scientific research, and supporting new interpretations of the phenomenon under study.

INFORMATION-COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The theoretical framework was developed through a bibliographic search of Brazilian and international scientific databases recognized by the academic community, including the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Virtual Health Library (Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde—BVS), Google Scholar, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and the CAPES Journal Portal. Official documents issued by the Ministry of Education, Brazilian legislation related to inclusive education, and publications by international organizations were also consulted.

Descriptors in Portuguese and English were combined using Boolean operators. These included “inclusive education,” “teachers’ mental health,” “teacher burnout,” “teacher mental health,” “teacher well-being,” and “inclusive policies.”

The inclusion criteria covered scientific articles, books, book chapters, master’s dissertations, doctoral theses, and official documents published primarily between 2015 and 2025, available in full, and related to the research objective. Duplicate studies, works lacking a consistent scientific basis, publications that addressed school inclusion exclusively from a clinical perspective, and works that did not discuss issues related to teachers’ work and mental health were excluded.

DATA-ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

The information obtained was examined through thematic analysis of the literature, identifying convergences, divergences, and the principal categories found in the selected studies. The material was organized in successive stages: exploratory reading, analytical reading, categorization of information, and interpretive synthesis of the results.

Data interpretation was grounded in theoretical frameworks concerning inclusive education, education policies, and teachers' occupational health, making it possible to establish relationships among the challenges associated with school inclusion, teachers' working conditions, and the effects on their mental health.

According to Laurence Bardin (2016), content analysis makes it possible to organize and interpret information systematically, facilitating the development of consistent inferences about the phenomena under investigation. Although this study does not conduct a conventional content analysis, the principles proposed by the author guided the systematization and interpretation of the evidence identified.

METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The choice of a qualitative approach is justified by the complexity of the phenomenon under study, since the effects of inclusive education on teachers' mental health involve pedagogical, social, emotional, and institutional dimensions that cannot be understood exclusively through quantitative indicators.

Authors such as José Carlos Libâneo (2013) emphasize that education quality depends directly on the concrete working conditions provided to teachers, while Maria Teresa Eglér Mantoan (2015) stresses that school inclusion requires structural changes in school organization that extend beyond merely placing students in mainstream classrooms. At the same time, studies by Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter (2016) show that work environments characterized by high demands and limited institutional support contribute to occupational stress and burnout syndrome among teachers.

Thus, the methodology adopted makes it possible to integrate different scientific perspectives and provide a well-founded discussion of the paradox of school inclusion: the need to guarantee genuinely inclusive education without neglecting the working conditions and mental health of the professionals responsible for making this right a reality. Integrating theoretical frameworks from Education, Psychology, and Public Health broadens the understanding of the topic and provides a foundation for developing public policies and institutional practices that promote both student inclusion and teachers' recognition and well-being.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The literature analysis demonstrates that the consolidation of inclusive education represents an important advance in guaranteeing the right to education by promoting access to, continued attendance in, and participation in mainstream education among students with disabilities, neurodevelopmental disorders, and high abilities/giftedness. However, the studies show that the expansion of inclusive policies has not been accompanied, to the same extent, by investments in school infrastructure, continuing professional development, multidisciplinary teams, and initiatives aimed at promoting teachers' mental health. As a result, professional demands and teachers' workloads have increased significantly.

According to Maria Teresa Eglér Mantoan (2015), school inclusion cannot be understood solely as providing students with access to mainstream schools. Instead, it must be recognized as a process that transforms pedagogical practices, school culture, and institutional relationships. The success of inclusion therefore depends on reorganizing the school environment and recognizing the professionals involved in the educational process.

The studies reviewed reveal that the principal challenges teachers face are related to insufficient specialized training for work in inclusive settings, shortages of teaching resources, large class sizes, the absence of support professionals, and increasing administrative demands. These factors increase the complexity of teaching and contribute to occupational stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion.

Table 1

Primary factors associated with compromised teacher mental health

Factors identified	Effects on teachers' work
Excessive workload	Physical and emotional exhaustion
Insufficient continuing professional development	Pedagogical insecurity
Shortage of pedagogical resources	Difficulties in adapting the curriculum
Absence of multidisciplinary teams	Greater responsibility placed on the teacher
Excessive bureaucratic demands	Less time available for planning
Limited institutional support	Occupational stress and lack of motivation

Source: Prepared by the author based on Mantoan (2015), Libâneo (2013), and Maslach and Leiter (2016).

The results presented in Table 1 demonstrate that excessive workload is the factor most frequently associated with teachers' psychological distress. In addition to traditional pedagogical activities, many teachers assume responsibility for individualized planning, preparing curricular adaptations, completing administrative records, meeting with families, and supporting students with different educational needs, without a proportionate reduction in working hours or specialized technical support.

These findings corroborate the research conducted by Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter (2016), which demonstrates that work environments characterized by high demands and limited organizational support contribute to the development of burnout syndrome. The authors emphasize that emotional exhaustion reduces professional motivation, compromises teaching quality, and negatively affects relationships between teachers and students.

Another issue widely identified in the literature is the importance of continuing professional development as a key element in strengthening inclusive practices. Studies indicate that teachers who receive ongoing professional development feel more confident in preparing curricular adaptations, using active methodologies, and developing pedagogical strategies capable of addressing the diversity present in classrooms.

Table 2*Benefits of continuing professional development for inclusive education*

Areas strengthened	Contributions to teaching practice
Updated pedagogical knowledge	Expanded knowledge of inclusion
Collaborative planning	Improved teaching strategies
Curriculum adaptation	Responsiveness to different educational needs
Professional development	Greater confidence in teaching practice
Interdisciplinary work	Integration among different professionals
Teacher well-being	Reduced professional insecurity

Source: Prepared by the author based on Saviani (2019), Libâneo (2013), and Mantoan (2015).

The literature also shows that recognition of the teaching profession is an indispensable condition for making school inclusion effective. According to José Carlos Libâneo (2013), education quality is directly related to teachers' actual working conditions, including adequate remuneration, continuing professional development, school infrastructure, and institutional support. From the same perspective, Dermeval Saviani (2019) emphasizes that the democratization of education requires sustained investment in teacher education and the development of public policies capable of guaranteeing socially relevant education.

In addition, the studies demonstrate that the presence of multidisciplinary teams composed of psychologists, educational psychologists, occupational therapists, social workers, and specialized educational services professionals significantly reduces teachers' workloads and contributes to the development of more effective pedagogical strategies.

Table 3

Institutional strategies for promoting school inclusion and teacher mental health

Proposed strategies	Expected effects
Ongoing continuing professional development	Improved pedagogical practice
Multidisciplinary teams	Shared responsibilities
Institutional psychological support	Prevention of mental health problems
Participatory school management	Strengthened collaborative work
Investment in pedagogical resources	Improved quality of inclusion
Professional recognition	Greater job satisfaction and career retention

Source: Prepared by the author based on Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), Fullan (2007), Libâneo (2013), and Mantoan (2015).

The discussion of the results demonstrates that inclusive education and teachers' mental health are not inherently incompatible. What compromises teachers' well-being is the implementation of inclusive policies without adequate institutional support. As Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012) argue, education reforms achieve sustainable results only when they reconcile pedagogical innovation, professional recognition, and strengthened working conditions.

The results of this review therefore show that effective inclusive education depends on coordination among public policies, continuing professional development, school infrastructure, multidisciplinary support, and programs aimed at promoting teachers' mental health. Only through this integrated approach will it be possible to guarantee high-quality inclusive education, safeguarding students' right to learning without compromising the health and well-being of the teachers responsible for making this process a reality.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the paradox between the implementation of inclusive education and the preservation of teachers' mental health by seeking to understand the principal challenges teachers face and identify strategies capable of promoting high-quality school inclusion without compromising the

well-being of education professionals. The literature review showed that inclusion is a fundamental right of students and represents an important advance in Brazilian education policies. Its implementation, however, continues to face obstacles related to teachers' working conditions.

The results showed that excessive workloads, insufficient continuing professional development, a shortage of pedagogical resources, the absence of multidisciplinary teams, and limited institutional support are among the main factors associated with increased occupational stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among teachers. At the same time, the studies analyzed demonstrated that schools that invest in professional recognition, collaborative work, and ongoing professional development have better conditions for developing effective and sustainable inclusive practices.

The study also made it possible to understand that the success of inclusive education does not depend exclusively on teachers' individual commitment. Rather, it depends on developing public policies that guarantee adequate infrastructure, democratic management, specialized support, and decent working conditions. In this regard, the promotion of teachers' mental health must be understood as a strategic component of education quality, given that emotionally healthy teachers are better able to develop innovative pedagogical practices, establish more positive relationships with students, and contribute to building inclusive school environments.

The contributions of this chapter lie in integrating knowledge from the fields of Education, Psychology, and public policy, demonstrating that school inclusion and recognition of the teaching profession are inseparable processes. By bringing together up-to-date scientific evidence, the study provides a foundation for education administrators, public policymakers, researchers, and education professionals to develop strategies that reconcile the right to inclusive education with the protection of teachers' mental health.

Finally, it is recommended that future research include empirical studies involving different education systems and levels of education, investigating teachers' perceptions of their working conditions, the effectiveness of inclusion policies, and the effects of institutional programs aimed at

promoting mental health. Further studies are also needed to evaluate interventions related to continuing professional development, multidisciplinary support, and care practices for educators, thereby contributing to strengthening inclusive education that is simultaneously equitable, sustainable, and socially committed.

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