



SCHOOLS
2030

Understanding Learning Differences Across Schools2030 Contexts

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COUNTRY PROFILES

Brazil¹



Overview: Defining the concept and terminology of inclusive education

The concept of inclusive education in Brazil has historically been associated with special education, having been restricted to students with disabilities, those with general developmental disorders and gifted or high ability students. This concept was revisited with the [National Education Plan](#) of 2014 which aimed to ensure an inclusive educational system as relevant to various education modalities, including special education, rural education, quilombola education (aimed at descendants of enslaved Africans brought to Brazil), indigenous education, youth and adult education, and professional education. The term ‘special educational needs’ was adopted following the Salamanca Declaration into the legal organisational framework of Brazilian education, however it has now fallen out of use, having been removed from laws in 2013 and

replaced by the expression ‘students with disabilities, general developmental disorders and high abilities or giftedness’.

An alignment of Brazilian legislation with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has shifted the focus from solutions exclusively targeting impairments of students with disabilities to the overall barriers to learning. Inclusive education is now understood as an expansion of the quality of education for all, and no longer as education aimed at the educational needs of a specific group. Brazil uses the following definition of learning disabilities, ‘Significant limitations of intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour as expressed in practical, social, and conceptual skills originating before the age of 18’², as influenced by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

Views from teachers and programme staff

Teachers and Ashoka staff concurred that inclusive education has become part of discourse on equitable education in Brazil. They felt that there is now much more open

discussion about indigenous rights and indigenous culture, and about recognising the diversity of Brazil within the education system. Because of this, new laws and policies have been put into place, including a law that requires schools to teach about other histories and cultures of Brazil.

One teacher explained that working at an ‘escola pluricultural’, or multicultural school, meant that they had a particular focus on celebrating the diversity that is represented in the school, to emphasise that students from all backgrounds are welcome. Another teacher who is indigenous and teaches at an indigenous school, explained that these had been known as rural schools prior to 1997.

Recognising them as indigenous, rather than rural schools was felt to give a sense of identity to the communities, students and teachers attending and working in these schools.

‘Now children are learning about indigenous culture within an indigenous context. Using the word ‘indigenous’ first of all is important to reclaim our identity – the word indigenous should come first rather than second, as a noun not an adjective.’

Primary school teacher, Amazonas

Beyond being conceived of a way of celebrating the ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of the country, the concept of inclusive education also encompasses the inclusion of children with disabilities. One of the teachers explained that the term ‘special’ is used to refer to students with disabilities, but that she doesn’t like to use it because of the way it can make children feel stigmatised. She prefers to use **‘children with special needs’**.



‘The term ‘special’ is used in schools, however I don’t like to use it because it makes these children feel stigmatised.’

Primary school teacher, Goiás

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Quantifying learners with learning disabilities

Data from the 2010 census suggests that approximately 1.4% of the 45.6 million people with a disability have a declared learning or mental disability. However, this figure has been disputed amid criticism of the assessment instrument used.³ Results from the 2018 school census report that the number of enrolments in special education either in regular or exclusive

classes saw an increase of 33.32% compared to 2014.⁴ This is likely as a result of the mandate from the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education which encouraged schools to adopt measures to ensure access to special education in regular education classes.



Policy and legislative commitments

Key legislation includes the [National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education](#) (2008), which encouraged state and municipal education systems to take concrete actions, especially in terms of funding and continuing education, to ensure access and improve retention and achievement of students who qualify for the special education modality in regular education classes. Brazil ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008, and developed the [Brazilian Law of Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities](#) (2015), which contextualised the requirements

of the convention to the Brazilian context. This law states that public authorities are responsible for ensuring, implementing and monitoring inclusive education at all levels and modalities by offering accessibility services and resources that eliminate barriers and promote full inclusion. This is consistent with goal 4 of the National Education Plan of 2014, whose aim is to universalise access to education for those with disabilities, developmental disorders and giftedness, preferably within multifunctional regular classes.⁵ Until its closure in 2019, the Secretariat of Continuing Education, Literacy,

Diversity and Inclusion (SECADI) was the body responsible for establishing policies and programmes aimed at illiterate youth and adults

with little schooling as well as for students with disabilities, general developmental disorders and high abilities/giftedness.



Teacher training on inclusive education

From 2007, teacher training programmes in special education were developed at the national level.⁶ Further to this, goal 15 of the 2014 National Education Plan speaks of aims to introduce specific training programmes for rural schools, indigenous and quilombola communities and for special education.⁷ Since the introduction of Brazil's National Common Curricular Base from 2017-8, guidelines for teacher professional education have emphasised a need for practical experience, innovation and evidence-based practice.⁸ However, teachers and Ashoka staff consulted for this study stated they had little or no instruction on inclusive education or strategies to support learners with disabilities as part of their pre-service teacher training. Indeed, the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report also found that teachers feel a need for better training provision, with over 50% of teachers in Brazil reporting a high need for professional development on teaching students with special needs.⁹

'I had no training in this when I was training to be a teacher - I didn't know what to do with these children in my classroom or how to include children with disabilities and special needs.'

Ashoka staff member

One teacher expressed that from her experience of her pre-service training between 2002-06, it was as if training was designed to prepare teachers for an "ideal school" where there are no learners with any sort of difficulties. Although inclusive education may now be included as a subject in training curricula and is raising awareness, respondents felt that this isn't equipping teachers with practical know-how on how to implement this in daily practice in the classroom.

¹ In Brazil Schools2030 is implemented by partner organisation Ashoka Brazil and therefore Ashoka staff participated in the focus group discussion with teachers. | ² Carvalho & Forrester-Jones, in press | ³ Carvalho & Forrester-Jones, in press | ⁴ Brazil - Inclusion chapter, Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER), <https://www.education-profiles.org>, Retrieved May 2022 (hereafter Brazil - Inclusion chapter, PEER, May 2022)

⁵ Ministry of Education, 2014 | ⁶ Garcia & Michels, 2021 | ⁷ Ministry of Education, 2014 | ⁸ OECD, 2021 | ⁹ UNESCO, 2020 | ¹⁰ Carvalho & Forrester-Jones, in press

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Diagnosis of learning disabilities

A search of the literature revealed that most of the special education services and support available for students with learning disabilities originated in social movements which are mostly dependent on public fundraising, such as the Sociedade Pestalozzi and Associação dos Pais e Amigos dos Excepcionais (APAE). These services are mostly offered by private providers, with governmental support varying across states and administrations. The low security in funding sources and differing levels of provision often result in an inconsistent assessment process whereby many people with learning disabilities never receive a diagnosis.¹⁰

Focus group respondents perceived diagnosis as an important procedure for the purpose of allowing people to exercise their right to access public facilities. Teachers felt that a diagnosis should be a driving force to understand what happens in the classroom, rather than solely a defining characteristic, especially as the role of the school is often to encourage families to act on their rights to access public services. Within school, teachers can make a referral to other professionals if they notice a learner may be struggling due to a learning disability. In the case of the indigenous school, this teacher mentioned that there is no qualified professional to assess and diagnose disabilities at his school, but culturally there are local experts with traditional expertise who know how to identify people with disabilities.



The majority of the population are indigenous and there are four co-official languages, however Portuguese is used amongst technical education staff under the Municipal Secretary of Education.



Current attitudes and awareness of inclusive practice and disability

Focus group respondents perceived there to have been a slow advance in levels of understanding of inclusive education, but to a lesser degree on individual learning differences because education remains very standardised.

‘The education that we live, that we breathe, is still very standardised. It wants everyone to learn at the same time, but our reality in classrooms and schools is a very diverse context.’

Primary school teacher, Goiás

It was felt that inadvertently, bias against those with disabilities persisted, especially given the way some teachers referred to children with disabilities as ‘special’, which can be stigmatising.

On top of this, the group discussed that persistent racist attitudes in Brazil hamper genuine efforts to increase inclusion and representation of indigenous people within education.



Education provision, services and support for learners with disabilities

Available evidence suggests that there are no specific governmental programmes or services dedicated to those with learning disabilities developed or led at the federal level, with much of the work reliant on private organisations and NGOs.¹¹ However, there are some initiatives at the state and municipal government level led in collaboration with organisations such as

Ashoka, including the [Movement for Innovation in Education](#).¹² This was also apparent from the focus group discussion where no mention was made of government provided services in place except those of the innovative movement. It was noted that public schools often lack the physical and human resources necessary to be able to accommodate learners with disabilities.

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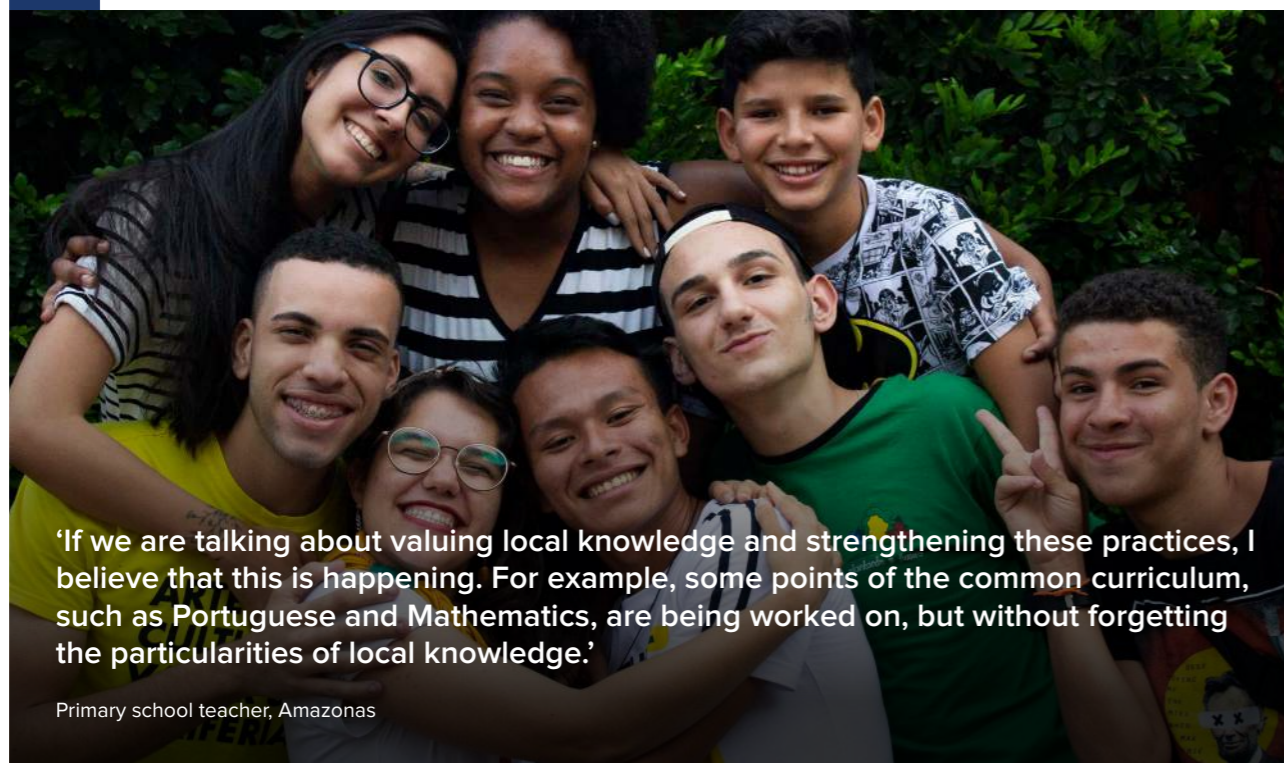
‘Whilst the curriculum may be Eurocentric, in my school on the other hand we draw on Brazil’s diversity to teach students that there are other types of knowledge.’

Primary school teacher, Goiás

For example, the physical infrastructure is not accessible for those in a wheelchair. Schools within the network that make up the Movement for Innovation in Education tend to have more resources and higher quality human resource to be able to include learners with disabilities.

One teacher commented that they don’t have children with disabilities in their school – however it was unclear if she meant that she is unaware of the number because this isn’t monitored or simply that no disabled students attend. It was reported that indigenous schools are considered objects of inclusion, because the learners and teachers come from a minority community. That said, a teacher at an indigenous school also shared that his school did not have students with special needs either.

Teachers commented that despite conversations around increasing the presence of Brazil’s diversity in the national curriculum, it largely remained Eurocentric. However, ‘multicultural schools’ and indigenous schools focus on teaching students that there are other types of knowledge.



‘If we are talking about valuing local knowledge and strengthening these practices, I believe that this is happening. For example, some points of the common curriculum, such as Portuguese and Mathematics, are being worked on, but without forgetting the particularities of local knowledge.’

Primary school teacher, Amazonas

¹¹ Carvalho & Forrester-Jones, in press | ¹² Movimento de Inovação na Educação, a movement made up of a network of schools aiming to transform education through innovative practice: <https://movinovacaonaeducacao.org.br/> | ¹³ Carvalho & Forrester-Jones, in press | ¹⁴ Carvalho & Forrester-Jones, in press



Challenges and priority areas

Despite putting in place legislation that is in line with global recommendations on inclusive education, Brazil faces challenges in realising the promises of its policy goals. Insecure and inconsistent funding, as well as a service provision ecosystem dependent on a mix of mainly private and some public services has resulted in blurred accountability and inconsistent support for those with learning disabilities. In terms of diagnosis and assessment, international diagnostic standards are starting to be used more widely. However, the country has not yet established contextualised standards for individually administered measures for learning disabilities by testing international measures on its own population.¹³ Presently there is limited evaluation of services for students with learning disabilities, however academic research on disability and inclusive education is growing within Brazil.¹⁴

These findings were backed by teachers and Ashoka staff, who acknowledged that public schools face challenges in delivering an education that can be fully inclusive of disabled learners. This was felt to be majorly impacted by a lack of adequate human and physical resources. The group called for more investment in pre-service teacher training, as well as in-service training – from their experience they saw that schools with better human resource were much better prepared to support learners with disabilities. With the growing understanding about inclusion, many teachers are now critiquing “the ideal classroom” training that they receive and recognising learning diversity across their student population. However, more needs to be done at the school level to support the roll out of policy initiatives aiming at advancing inclusive education in Brazil.



‘People deconstructed the ideal classroom and the belief that there are no children with difficulties.’

Primary school teacher, Goiás



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