



Understanding Learning Differences Across Schools 2030 Contexts

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Portugal



Overview: Defining the concept and terminology of inclusive education

Portugal has often been lauded for its progressive stance toward inclusive education that accommodates students of all learning abilities into mainstream schools.¹

With a relatively centralised government for a European country, most educational practices occur in a top-down fashion.² Like many school systems across the world, the Portuguese education system had previously relied on segregated 'special education' schools to educate students with disabilities, including dyslexia. As early as the 1980s, the national education strategy made explicit its commitment to integrate children with special educational needs into mainstream schools.

Two departments within the Ministry of Education are dedicated to disability and learning difficulties: the Department for Special Education covers compulsory education (basic education) and the Department of Special and Vocational Education covers upper-secondary education.

Unlike many other countries, Portugal has laid out specific definitions within its disability legislation that define inclusive education terms.

The 1986 Education Act defined special education as a specific type of education that facilitates the socio-educational recuperation and integration of individuals with SEN caused by physical or intellectual disability.³

The [2018 Education Act](#) defined inclusion as 'the right of all children and pupils to access and participate, fully and effectively, in the same educational contexts' and learning difficulties as 'a condition which requires specialised resources of support to learning and inclusion'. Significantly, the act drops the term and categorisation of 'special educational needs', speaking of schools adapting 'to the needs and potential of each pupil'.

Views from teachers and programme staff

In practice, it was noted by focus group respondents that teachers are very conscious of the focus on inclusive education and reforms to move away from segregated education for learners with disabilities, to including all learners in regular classrooms.

The term 'special needs' was used until 2018, however since then language speaks more about **children with additional learning support needs**, regardless of the causes.

Those consulted explained that the common perception among educators is that all children have individualised learning needs.



'We shouldn't have labels – they are children in school.'

Teacher, Lisbon area



Quantifying learners with learning disabilities

The most recent data on learners with disabilities was collected by the Portuguese General Directorate of Statistics of Education and Science (DGEEC) in 2017/2018. The data shared that 98.9% of students with special educational needs in Portugal were enrolled in mainstream schools (public and private).⁴

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Policy and legislative commitments

Compared to other countries in western Europe, Portugal has more detailed legislation that supports the implementation of inclusive education. The 1991 Education Act called for mainstream schools to take greater responsibility for learning disabilities by opening schools up to pupils with special educational needs and include involvement from parents in guiding their child's educational frameworks. The 2008 Education Act called for tailoring the education experience to each student, and for disability to be conceptualised according to functional limitations by a team of multi-disciplinary professionals as early as possible, with mainstream teachers responsible for

coordinating Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for those students who require additional learning support. Rather than focus on the needs of students with disabilities, the [2018 Education Act](#) proposed the notion of inclusion, with an emphasis on support for all students. It further proposed Universal Design for Learning with flexible curricular models and systematic monitoring, stating that all students may need universal, selective and/or additional support needs. A 2019 amendment to this Act states that the government is required to ensure the necessary means so that education staff in public schools can access free specific training to support inclusion and learning.⁵

The teacher consulted explained that in Portugal normally teachers require a master's degree to become specialised in supporting those with additional learning support needs, but general teachers sometimes receive some training on this also. Since 2015, the government must offer training to teachers in topics such as pedagogical differentiation, universal learning, supporting those with

additional learning support needs and supervision. In-service training on assessment and digital skills is paid for by the government, but schools must find funds from their own budgets to pay for trainings in other topics, potentially risking inconsistency in the proportion of teachers trained in inclusive practice.



Teacher training provision on inclusive education

As part of the mainstream teacher training curriculum, initial teacher education includes a generic and introductory approach to issues related to inclusion, as well as how to work with families. It also features content on understanding and supporting learners with diverse characteristics and additional needs.⁶ OECD statistics reveal that 45% of teachers

were trained to teach in mixed-ability settings as part of their formal teacher education or training. Despite these measures in place, teachers report a need for further support, with only 39% of teachers in Portugal stating that they feel prepared to work in an inclusive environment with students with diverse educational needs.⁶



Diagnosis of learning disabilities

Early identification of additional learning support needs in young children up to the age of 6 falls under the responsibility of interdisciplinary Local Early Intervention Teams, under the regulation of the Social Security, Education and Health Ministries. A child may be referred through health centres, creche/pre-school teachers, or

parents, but assessment and diagnosis will mainly be conducted through these local teams. Following a family-centred approach to assessment, the team decides together with the family who will act as the coordinator for the child, whether this be a teacher, psychologist or doctor.

¹ Towards a more inclusive education system in Portugal, OECD Education Today, Retrieved May 2022 | ² OECD, 2020 | ³ Country information for Portugal - Legislation and Policy - European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Retrieved May 2022 | ⁴ Alves et al. 2020 | ⁵ Alves et al. 2020 | ⁶ Country information for Portugal - Teacher education for inclusive education - European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education., Retrieved May 2022 | ⁶ OECD, 2019

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Many schools also implement universal screenings at the end of pre-school (at age 5 years), in line with ambitions outlined in the 2018 Education Act.

The purpose of such assessments is not to screen for disabilities but rather focuses on literacy and language development, seeking to identify children who may need additional support in vocabulary, phonological awareness, print or letter recognition.

Preschool teachers may introduce literacy interventions for entire classes or certain groups of children in response to results from the screening, and may choose to involve educational psychologists. There are also Information and Communication Technology Resource Centres (ITRC) in place to assess pupils' needs for assistive technology.

AKF staff and teachers consulted spoke favourably of Portugal's early intervention system. Whilst this system was perceived to be very strong, it was felt that even when children are assessed, teachers are not necessarily changing anything in their classroom to accommodate learning differences.

'We are moving in a good direction – children are assessed and then pigeonholed to an extent, but teachers are not necessarily changing anything in the classroom to accommodate the learner.'

Assessment expert, Portugal



Education provision, services and support for learners with disabilities

Portugal has made gradual progress towards designing and delivering an education system that is inclusive of all children with additional learning needs. Before 1991 special education was given separately in special units for children with profound physical or intellectual disabilities. Since 2008, all children have been learning together in mainstream settings, however, the focus remained on providing special education classes to students with profound physical disabilities. Since 2018, there has been a push to move towards a more inclusive model that recognises factors other than physical disability that may exclude learners from fully accessing learning, whilst also ensuring all children can access support and learn together.

All children are now taught together in regular classrooms, including those with physical and learning disabilities, and those who speak Portuguese as an additional language. The teacher expressed how important he felt this was, so that all children can learn together, and especially for the development of socio-emotional skills such as empathy, resilience and critical thinking. All schools are equipped with Learning Support Centres which aim to support teachers in promoting the quality of learner participation in their classes and other learning contexts.⁷

'Learning Support Centres aren't considered as special needs units, because they are for all children.'

Teacher, Lisbon area

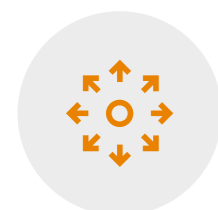
Schools can also draw on expertise provided through Resource Centres for Inclusion, through which they can access professionals such as speech therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists and social workers.

The specialists work with children separately outside of regular classes, or sometimes within regular classes – for example, speech therapists can help or give advice to regular teachers. What's more, in the case of the teacher consulted, as a Priority Intervention Education Territory (TEIP), the school is provided with extra resources which can be used to pay for experts from a university, teacher training or to provide breakfast and snacks.

Students are supported in school by a team coordinator and a reference teacher; the former is responsible for academic performance, and the latter takes charge of contact with the family. The coordinator and reference teacher work together to prepare the strategy of support for learners with disabilities.

'Our school also applies to a lot of projects – we have even had animal therapy with donkeys, dogs, chickens for those with more severe needs. The children really enjoy it. What is important is that every child is happy in the school.'

Teacher, Lisbon area



Current attitudes and awareness of inclusive practice and disability

The country's shift from segregation to inclusion of all learners in the same school suggests a significant attitudinal shift in the perception of learners with disabilities. When asked more about how this shift is happening on the ground, AKF staff made the point that in the Portuguese context the principle was always inclusion, but that the operation aiming to achieve this was previously segregation. This has required a departure from segregation and a journey towards inclusion starting since 2018 when the

design of the education system was modified to allow all students to develop their potential regardless of physical or learning impairments, or social disadvantage. The shift was seen to be about adding more children in the meaning of inclusion.

'The teachers teach everyone – each one and all of the students, to give what each of the children need for success.'

Teacher, Lisbon area

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‘The focus for us as a school is always on learning disabilities – physical disabilities are the responsibility of the Health Ministry.’

Teacher, Lisbon area

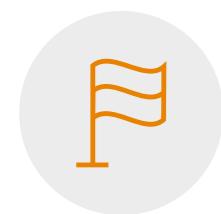
In terms of curriculum and learning materials, Portugal now uses universal design for learning but there is little support for curriculum flexibility. This largely depends on the local authority, resource available and school leadership. There have been some curriculum adaptations, however when it has been determined that a child requires additional support they will have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that tailors their learning according to their needs. The Schools2030 programme in Portugal is developing assessment tools for non-academic learning domains in line with the principles of universal design for learning. In this way, assessment developers are aiming for these

to be more adaptable for those with learning differences. Children can participate in a number of different ways, for example choosing whether they wish to answer scenario-based tasks through drama, written response or other means.

‘This adaptation is implicit not explicit – we use universal design for learning as a key set of principles.’

Assessment expert, Portugal

Schools also focus on supporting students for their transition from school to work or further study by creating a transition plan for each student. In the case of students with additional support needs, in the last two years of schooling, their IEP becomes a Transition Plan which lists the learner’s skills, abilities and desires as well as the parents’ expectations which aims to prepare pupils for adult life.



Challenges and priorities

Portugal has taken many steps towards developing an inclusive school system, yet there remain some challenges to full-scale implementation. Evidence shows that teachers report the greatest need for professional development in teaching learners with special educational needs.⁸ Focus group respondents agreed that there is a need for better teacher training on supporting diverse learners, and for

supporting regular teachers on learning disabilities. Learning disabilities have not been so much of a focus, and as such these students are much more vulnerable than those with severe physical disabilities who have historically had extra resources in place. Recent research also reveals an underdiagnosis of disability in female students, which may be limiting their access to appropriate educational support.⁹



⁸ Country information for Portugal - Teacher education for inclusive education - European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education., Retrieved May 2022 | ⁹ Alves et al. 2020



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