Advances in the education of students with special educational needs

Avances en la educación del alumnado con necesidades educativas especiales

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the progress made in the education of students with special educational needs over the past fifty years. This refers to the group of students traditionally served under what is known as special education, whether in special schools or in mainstream schools. Rather than focusing on specific disability conditions and/or developmental problems, this analysis is supported by the systemic ecological approach to development, which considers all manifestations of diversity and the various educational contexts in which students live and grow.

First, the evolution of Spanish society's culture and values regarding individual differences over this period is analysed, along with their impact on legislation and public policy (macrosystem). Then, the contribution of various actors, both internal and external, and the network of community services to the education and development of students with special educational needs is addressed (mesosystem). Finally, changes in educational practices (microsystem) are described, highlighting the shift from exclusion to the recognition of every student's right, regardless of individual conditions, to be welcomed and enrolled in mainstream schools. Attention is given to issues such as access, assessment of special educational needs, educational planning, levels and types of support, transitions, family participation, and the initial and ongoing training of teachers. The article concludes with reflections on the threat posed to the progress of inclusive education by the rise of neoliberal and conservative policies.

Key words: inclusive education, rights, students with special educational needs, special schools, assessment, support levels, family participation, initial training, ongoing training.

Resumen

El objetivo del artículo es dar cuenta de los avances en la atención al alumnado con necesidades educativas especiales a lo largo de los últimos cincuenta años; nos referimos al colectivo de alumnos y alumnas tradicionalmente atendidos en lo que se conoce como educación especial, sea en centros de educación especial sea en centros ordinarios. Para ello, más que centrar el discurso en las distintas condiciones de discapacidad y/o problemas del desarrollo, nos puede ayudar en el análisis servirnos del enfoque ecológico sistémico del desarrollo, que contempla a todas las manifestaciones de diversidad y a los distintos contextos educativos en los que viven y se desarrollan los alumnos y alumnas. En primer lugar, se analiza la evolución de la cultura y de los valores de la sociedad española respecto de las diferencias individuales en estos años y su impacto en la legislación y en las políticas de la administración (macrosistema). A continuación, nos ocuparemos de la contribución de los distintos agentes, internos y externos, y del entramado de servicios de la comunidad, a la educación y desarrollo del alumnado con necesidades educativas especiales (mesosistema). Finalmente, se describen los cambios en las prácticas educativas (microsistema) desde la exclusión hasta el reconocimiento del derecho de todo el alumnado, sin importar sus condiciones particulares, a ser bienvenido y escolarizado en los centros ordinarios; se prestará atención a cuestiones como el acceso, la evaluación de las necesidades educativas especiales, la propuesta educativa, los niveles y medidas de apoyo, las transiciones, la participación de las familias, y la formación inicial y continuada del profesorado. Acabamos con algunas reflexiones sobre la amenaza que supone para el progreso de la educación inclusiva, el avance de las políticas neoliberales y conservadoras.

Palabras clave: educación inclusiva, derechos, alumnos con necesidades educativas especiales, centros de educación especial, evaluación, niveles de apoyo, participación de las familias, formación inicial, formación continuada.

Introduction

In this monograph dedicated to the changes in education over the past five decades, we focus on the progress made in the educational response to students with special educational needs (SEN), traditionally referred to as "special education" students. Undertaking a historical review in just a few pages is no easy task, given the many variables and dimensions involved. Therefore, we are compelled to adopt a synthetic writing style for the different sections, which, in fairness, would each merit a more detailed analysis.

A first issue concerns the methodological approach to be followed. That is, whether the narrative should be limited to disabilities traditionally recognised by the scientific community (intellectual, hearing, motor, etc.) or whether it is more appropriate to focus the analysis on the common aspects

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that, in one way or another, are present across different disabilities and/or developmental problems. A cross-cutting perspective seems more appropriate and more sensitive to the elements shared by all manifestations of human developmental diversity.

The ecological systems approach to development (Bronfenbrenner, 1987), apart from being consistent with the most robust positions in developmental science and, therefore, its possible conditions, offers a framework within which we can pursue our objective and organise the discussion. Thus, we will first analyse the evolution of Spanish society's culture and values concerning people with disabilities and/or developmental problems during this period, and their impact on legislation and public policies (macrosystem). Next, we will address those elements of the mesosystem that influence the education and development of students with SEN, such as the various actors within the education system—both internal and external to schools—and the network of services (social, health, etc.) available in the community. Finally, we will focus on the changes that have taken place in educational practices (microsystem), from exclusion from the education system in the mid-twentieth century to the recognition of the right of all students, regardless of their individual conditions, to be welcomed into mainstream schools and to achieve the general curriculum objectives with the necessary support. Attention will be paid to issues such as access, the assessment of SEN, educational planning, levels and measures of support, transitions, family participation, and the initial and ongoing training of teachers.

The article concludes with a reflection on the threat posed to the progress of inclusive education by the advance of neoliberal and conservative policies, which occupy significant positions of power around the world.

Disability in Society and Legislation

Exclusion, Institutionalisation, and Ableism

The way society perceives people with disabilities today—and the treatment they receive—is the result of a slow and gradual evolution shaped by various interrelated factors of different natures. Indeed, advances in research (in the

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fields of education, psychology, various fields of medicine, law, and sociology), increased awareness of human rights, greater recognition of the abilities of people with disabilities, the efforts of advocacy organisations, and the stance taken by international bodies, governments, and educational authorities have all positively influenced how disability is currently understood (Giné et al., 2021).

However, the situation of people with disabilities (PWD) since the mid-20th century has been marked by exclusion, institutionalisation, and ableism. PWD were segregated from society and confined to large residential institutions or hospitals. The care they received was primarily custodial in nature and stemmed from a charitable approach to public intervention, in which welfare considerations took precedence over any social or educational goals which, in many cases, were not even contemplated. Starting in the 1960s, as concern grew over the detrimental effects of institutionalisation, some professionals, mainly from the medical field, began to recognise the need to move beyond assistance and medicalisation to provide some form of education or training. This support was organised around the medical-rehabilitative model and based on principles of specialisation. Disability was understood as an individual "problem," an illness requiring some form of rehabilitative therapy provided by a specialist.

This initial interest in the education and training of people with disabilities, both in concept and in practice, aligned with a therapeutic and rehabilitative model. It gave rise to what became known as "therapeutic pedagogy," which shaped the educational response provided in institutions that gradually, mainly during the 1970s and 1980s, began to adopt the structure of schools, thus initiating greater sensitivity to the educational needs of these individuals.

Within the logic of the clinical model, the prevailing belief was that the best way to support people with "impairments" was through specialised centres (known as "special education schools"), separate from mainstream schools and often physically distant from the wider community. The consequences of using the medical model (Giné et al., 1989) and its emphasis on specialisation are evident and continue to this day. This model influenced both the assessment (diagnosis) of developmental problems and the subsequent guidance and "treatment." From the standpoint of assessment, it was believed that the most effective way to determine educational support was to measure the severity of the condition (deficit) using intelligence quotient tests. These tests, however, bore little or no relation to the actual context in which the individual lived and

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was educated, and typically led to categorisation into diagnostic labels created for this purpose. The classification of people based on deficits (borderline, mild, moderate, severe, and profound), and the associated labelling aimed at identifying the causes of presumed disorders, has had and continues to have profound effects on the organisation of what is known as "special education" and on societal expectations. Indeed, deficit-based categorisation and labelling act as a major burden on the education of these individuals, as they inevitably shape the expectations of all those who interact with them. This emphasis on limitations reinforces negative perceptions, promotes their devaluation, and significantly restricts their development. This is what is referred to as *ableism*, a social prejudice against people with disabilities that inevitably leads to discrimination.

Commitment to the Right to Education and Inclusion

When discussing the evolution of how disability is understood, it is important to remember that change takes time, is rarely linear, and often retains traces of past conceptions and practices that seemed to have been overcome. In Spain, the commitment to inclusive education for people with disabilities began in the 1980s with policies promoting integration and has continued to the present day. This shift has been guided by the principle of normalisation and marked by the predominance of the educational model over the clinical one. In fact, the most advanced countries moved away from policies offering "special" and segregated treatment for this group and instead embraced the principle of normalisation in the design and provision of services, including education, for people with developmental problems. A key turning point was the Danish Mental Retardation Act of 1959, which set out the goal of "creating for people with mental retardation a life as close to normal living conditions as possible."

In this process of progressively recognising the rights of people with disabilities, a major milestone was the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly, in 1971, of the "Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons." Its first article states that "the mentally retarded person has, to the maximum degree of feasibility, the same rights as other human beings". This declaration had previously been signed in 1968 by the International League of Societies for the Mentally Handicapped (Giné et al., 2021).

The principle of normalisation, first laid out in the Danish legislation, served as a driving force for the profound transformation of beliefs, policies, and practices concerning people with developmental problems in

Western societies. Wolfensberger (1986, p.15) defined this principle as "the use of culturally valued means to enable people to lead culturally valued lives". In other words, these individuals should be seen and treated based on what society values and aspires to for all, whether in education, health, employment, culture, or community life. What society sees as desirable for its citizens should also be seen as desirable for people with disabilities and/or developmental problems. The deinstitutionalisation movement, promoted in the United States by family associations in the 1960s and in Italy through Law 118 of 1971, played a crucial role in the gradual transformation of policies and services for people with disabilities.

In the field of education, the principle of normalisation had two main effects: on the environment in which educational activity takes place, and on the process and content of education. Ultimately, it introduced what came to be known in Spain in the 1980s as *school integration* and laid the groundwork for a new concept of special education based on support rather than deficit. Developmental problems began to be understood as indicators of the type of support individuals need to progress. As a result, schools were expected to adapt their educational responses to the individual, and therefore diverse, characteristics of all students, including those with developmental challenges. In short, these students would share the educational process with their peers from their local neighbourhood, town, or city in the common school.

The principles of normalisation and integration informed legislation and policy in many countries and international organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In Spain, a milestone in special education was the enactment of Law 14/1970, of August 4, the General Law on Education and Financing of the Educational Reform. Although it preceded the profound changes of the following decade, it was the first time the right of students with disabilities to be educated in special education schools and special classrooms within mainstream schools was recognised (Articles 49-53). The full adoption of the principles of normalisation, integration, sectorisation, and individualisation came with Law 13/1982, of April 7, on the Social Integration of the Disabled (LISMI, 1982) in terms of general policies; and in education, first with Royal Decree 334/1985, of March 6, regulating Special Education, along with regulations issued by Spain's autonomous communities; and later, with Organic Law 1/1990, of October 3, on the General Organisation of the Educational System (LOGSE, 1990).

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The Salamanca Statement and UNESCO's Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994 and signed by 92 governments and 25 international organisations, represents one of the most important landmarks in the transformation of education for people with disabilities in many countries at the end of the 20th century. It introduced the bet in favor of *inclusive schooling*, a more decisive and coherent commitment to the educational model and the recognition of the rights of people with disabilities, and conceptually distinct from school integration. Whereas integration focuses on the individual who must adapt to the system, inclusion shifts the emphasis to the school context, which must welcome all students, regardless of their characteristics or conditions, and tailor its educational approach and resources to their particular needs. Ultimately, the Salamanca Statement was pioneering in affirming that inclusive schools are the most effective way to combat discriminatory attitudes and foster cohesive societies.

Since the Salamanca Statement, many initiatives have been undertaken by countries and international organisations to promote quality education for all students. Progress has been evident (ALANA, 2016), although uneven both between and within countries. Similarly, the gap between legal frameworks and the reality of schools remains significant. For an overview of the state of inclusive education, the reports of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2013; 2015) are useful references.

The education laws that followed LOGSE (Organic Law 2/2006, of May 3, on Education (LOE); Organic Law 8/2013, of December 9, for the improvement of educational quality (LOMCE); and Organic Law 3/2020, of December 29, amending the LOE (LOMLOE) reaffirm the principle of equity as a fundamental pillar of Spain's education system. This principle is embodied in a vision of inclusive education aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination, including those based on disabilities or behavioral challenges. In particular, the current LOMLOE mandates the inclusion of students with SEN in the mainstream education system, promoting the active participation of all students without distinction. The LOMLOE places special emphasis on addressing diversity at all educational levels as a core principle, which involves ensuring the personal, material, and technological supports necessary for the participation and academic success of all students, especially those with special needs, through individualised support plans.

Finally, Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), ratified by the Spanish government in

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2008 and cited in the preamble to the LOMLOE, recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education. To fulfil this right, states must ensure an inclusive education system at all levels.

Nonetheless, as Ainscow and Miles (2008) argue, achieving inclusive education requires that policy be accompanied by effective classroom practices. These authors analysed progress since the Salamanca Statement and found that, while the idea of inclusion has gained widespread acceptance, its practical implementation remains complex and highly context-dependent. Moving toward inclusive education requires, among other things, policies (including resource allocation and teacher training) that align with inclusive principles; community involvement in creating welcoming schools; streamlined support services; and the development of learning environments where every student feels valued and supported in achieving shared educational goals.

The Contribution of Services to the Education of Students with Special Educational Needs

Over the past fifty years, Spanish society, through initiatives led either by public authorities or by organisations (mostly parent associations), has supported the education of students with SEN through a network of services (educational, social, and healthcare) and supports, that have taken many forms and evolved in line with the prevailing conceptual frameworks of each era.

This section focuses on analysing the most significant advances within the education system, both at the level of schools and among various actors, internal and external, who are organised as support services.

The Progressive Transformation of Special Education Schools into Resource Centres for Inclusion

Undoubtedly, the most important advance concerns the purpose and function of special education schools (SES), in light of the growing adoption of the principles of integration and, later, inclusion.

As noted in a previous study (Giné et al., 2005), the 1970s and 1980s saw a wave of initiatives aimed at establishing SES for children and young people with disabilities and/or developmental disorders. These were launched

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by both public authorities and parent associations, often created to promote the education of their children. With the prevailing clinical model, the administration, families, and society supported a policy of creating schools under the principle of "the more specialised, the better." This gave rise to specific schools for people with intellectual, physical, hearing, and visual disabilities, as well as for those with social adjustment difficulties, among others. Combined with a lack of leadership and planning by the Ministry of Education, this led to a network of schools that was difficult to coordinate and showed clear duplication and gaps across regions and autonomous communities. Moreover, the refusal of mainstream schools (MS) to accept these enrolments, along with other factors, contributed decisively to the formation of a parallel system of SES, which quickly became entrenched.

The LISMI (1982) established normalisation of services for persons with disabilities as a guiding principle. The decrees issued by the Ministry of Education and Science (1985) and by the Autonomous Communities translated this principle into policies promoting the integration of students with disabilities and/or developmental issues into mainstream schools, to the extent possible. This decision caused considerable disruption in the field of special education (institutions, professionals, and families), triggering a crisis of identity and self-esteem among SES professionals and administrators that, in some ways, still persists. These professionals saw the students they were trained to teach redirected to mainstream schools, while SES were left with students with the most significant support needs; students whose care and education, in the view of many teachers, did not align with their expertise or job roles. Furthermore, integration policies gradually led families and society at large to view SES as undesirable, with the risk of becoming isolated enclaves on the path to extinction.

This perceived threat, widely shared among professionals and families, intensified following the Salamanca Statement (1994). The inclusive education policies adopted by over a hundred countries, including Spain, posed a serious risk to the continued existence of SES. Additionally, SES felt abandoned by the authorities, who appeared to prioritise financial, human, and material resources for promoting inclusion. In response, SES gradually recognised the need to "reinvent" themselves and redefine their role within the educational system in light of the "new" inclusive education framework. On one hand, SES sought to retrain and renew their educational offerings to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, students with various disabilities and greater support needs in learning, communication,

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relationships, and daily living (including a significant increase in students with autism spectrum disorder, behavioural disorders, and health problems). On the other hand, both the government and SES themselves acknowledged that these schools could become assets in promoting inclusion, thanks to their expertise, experience, and educational resources. The potential of SES needed to be harnessed to help mainstream schools respond effectively to the SEN of the students they were now enrolling.

This process contributed to a new vision that gave renewed meaning to SES, leading to experiments in various forms of collaboration with local mainstream schools, including "shared schooling." However, shared schooling had its limitations and often generated dissatisfaction on both sides. Generally, these were isolated experiences that revolved around a specific child, classroom, and the teachers involved, but they did not offer a sustainable or comprehensive pathway for the future of SES or for true inclusion. A more systemic transformation was needed, one that would position SES as effective support structures for mainstream schools, helping them welcome students with SEN and promote their participation and academic success, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the fourth additional provision of the LOMLOE.

In summary, some initiatives carried out in Spain (DINCAT, 2020; Manzano-Soto et al., 2021) demonstrate the efforts being made by SES and the changes needed to guide their transformation into resource centres for inclusion:

- Embracing a social and ecological understanding of human development and, therefore, of possible disorders, as well as of educational processes.
- Focusing efforts on creating opportunities in classrooms, schools, and communities to foster the participation of all students in meaningful activities, including educational ones. The aim should not be to "correct" the difficulties of certain individuals, but to empower environments by improving professional practices, classroom and school organisation, and the availability and diversity of learning materials that are sensitive to the range of needs in the classroom.
- Recognising that participation goes beyond mere physical presence in schools; it means ensuring all students feel welcomed and valued, are actively involved in classroom and school activities, and can achieve the expected curriculum outcomes.

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- Ultimately understanding that inclusive education is not just a special education policy or practice, but a commitment to building an education system and schools that, through differentiated levels of support, guarantee effective teaching and high-quality professional practices for all students.

That said, progress in transforming SES into resource centres for inclusion remains limited, uneven across Spain's autonomous communities, and challenging, due to significant resistance from many SES and their families, who have not generally been supportive of the proposal outlined in the LOMLOE's fourth additional provision.

Support and Guidance Services

To promote the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools, the educational authorities established support and guidance services, initially external, which provided assistance to schools in a sectorized manner. Since support and guidance services are the focus of another article in this monograph, it would be redundant to explore this topic in depth here. We will simply acknowledge the crucial role these services have played in advancing inclusive education.

The Role of the Community

One area where progress deserves to be highlighted is in the relationship between services traditionally associated with special education and the broader community.

Due to the exclusion and limited visibility of people with disabilities, already discussed at the beginning of this article, their interaction with the community was rather testimonial and marked by a form of tolerance tinged with compassion. Integration and inclusion policies increased the presence of people with disabilities in educational institutions and, by extension, in community life and recreational spaces. When combined with international policies promoting mainstreaming and growing social acceptance of diversity, particularly in the media, this contributed to a broader "normalisation" of the lives of people with disabilities within Spanish society.

This more favourable social response made it inevitable for special education organisations to open themselves up to the community, establishing

partnerships with various local services and entities (municipal councils, cultural centres such as libraries and theatres, leisure and sports facilities).

Inclusive education cannot be confined to mainstream schools and classrooms alone; its ultimate goal is to promote the presence and participation of students with disabilities in the wider community. In this sense, building "welcoming communities" requires municipalities to create inclusive spaces and networks beyond both special and mainstream schools, enabling students to interact with peers of different backgrounds, needs, abilities, and behavioural patterns. Exposure to human diversity helps all students to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses. Students, and, more importantly, society, come to understand that everyone is valuable, and deserves respect and recognition for their unique qualities (Uthus & Qvortrup, 2024).

The School Context and the Educational Proposal

The education of students with SEN within the school context is primarily shaped by the treatment they receive (their interactions with adults and peers), which is mediated by the values and beliefs conveyed through professional practices. Changes in how students are treated have evolved in line with a better understanding of disability, as discussed in the first section of this paper. We now turn to the advances made in professional practices over recent decades.

Due to the complexity and scope of this topic, a thorough analysis of professional practices goes beyond the limits of this article. We are therefore obliged to prioritise certain areas and provide a concise overview, even at the risk of omitting important issues. The dimensions of professional practice analysed here reflect those commonly addressed in international studies (UNESCO, 2020) and can be summarised as follows: (1) access; (2) assessment; (3) educational planning and support; (4) transitions; (5) family participation; and (6) initial and ongoing teacher training.

Access

Policies and practices related to the access of students with SEN to education, and more specifically, to mainstream schooling, have undergone a radical

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shift in recent years. The core development has been the recognition of these students' right to education and to enrolment at all levels of the education system (LOMLOE; UN, 2006), though full realisation of this right remains a work in progress.

Although the General Education Act (1970) already allowed for the enrolment of students with disabilities in special education units within mainstream schools, in practice these units typically served students from the school itself who had learning and/or behavioural issues. Students with disabilities were denied access and were routinely referred to SES.

It was not until the publication of integration decrees and the Salamanca Statement (1994) that the enrolment of students with SEN in mainstream schools was truly normalised. Gradually, both legal frameworks and school admission practices adapted to the increasing diversity of student needs. From early childhood education to primary school, the percentage of students with SEN has steadily grown, despite resistance and disagreements from some schools and families, and a lack of enthusiasm and commitment from education authorities. Overall, the landscape of access to education for these students has changed dramatically, contributing decisively to their recognition and social inclusion, although a significant number still remain in SES.

Trends in enrolment[1] confirm this shift. From 1975 to 1985, there was a notable increase in students enrolled in SES. In the following decade, this number dropped by two-thirds (down to 28,536 students; 0.5% of the school population), while inclusive education grew to 92,100 students (1.6%). Since 1996, the number of students with SEN in mainstream schools has continued to rise, reaching 2.8% of the school population by the 2022-2023 academic year (including students with needs not linked to disability). However, this increase has not resulted from a decline in CEE enrolment, which has remained steady at around 0.5% of the school population, though the number of students has grown (41,521).

Assessment

The most significant advance in assessment lies in a shift of focus, from the individual to the context. For decades, under the clinical model, assessment (diagnosis) relied on psychological testing to identify student deficits, resulting

1 Source: Annual statistics on non-university education in Spain from the Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports.

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in diagnostic labels that were linked to specialist treatment and placement in special schools.

In the past two decades, the social and ecological approach on assessment has gained ground. This approach focuses on the interaction between the student's characteristics (especially competencies) and the demands of their environment, as well as on the supports available to help them function more effectively. Here, support strategies aim to bridge the gap between a person's current abilities and the expectations placed on them in different life settings (school, community, work, etc.). For this reason, identifying the supports a student need for learning and development has become the central goal of what is now known as *inclusive assessment* (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2007).

The primary aim of inclusive assessment is to inform planning and teaching practices that support student learning. It is also used to understand why learning may not be occurring as expected, and to identify, both at the individual and contextual level, the barriers that hinder academic progress. According to Simón et al. (2024), inclusive assessment has three main objectives: (1) to explore the student's characteristics (strengths, interests, motivation, and challenges); (2) to understand the demands and characteristics of the educational context, including curriculum, learning opportunities, school organisation, classroom and school activities, and barriers (whether physical or attitudinal); and (3) to identify available supports. As a result, assessment is oriented towards building environments tailored to the student's learning profile.

That said, the transition from one model to another has been neither easy nor uniform. For instance, the statements required by education authorities often continue to focus solely on diagnosing deficits using IQ scores or developmental indices derived from psychological tests, without meaningful consideration of the school context where the student learns and lives.

The reality is complex and the demands of education authorities do not help because they are often victims of their own bureaucracy and the need to have statistics for classification. In short, the demands of education authorities regarding assessment often do not align with the principles of inclusion and may become yet another barrier. There is still a long way to go, but the direction forward is clear.

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Educational Planning and Support

The shift in perspective, from the individual to the context, has also led to significant improvements in professional practice. We will examine these practices based on whether they take place in a mainstream school or a SES, though there is considerable overlap.

In mainstream schools, support for students with SEN was initially characterized by the leading role of specialist teachers who, based on assessments conducted by external guidance teams, developed individualised learning plans. These plans were usually implemented in one-on-one or small group sessions outside the regular classroom. This approach was marked by low expectations and minimal involvement from the student's main classroom teacher, who often considered the student's education to be the responsibility of the special education teacher and the speech therapist. While students might share playgrounds and dining rooms with peers, they often had little interaction and were left feeling isolated.

It is worth asking whether forty years of individualised attention through individualised learning plans have truly improved inclusion (values and practices) in schools. Unfortunately, we cannot be very optimistic, as many teachers still hold attitudes such as: "This student is not for me; I'm not trained for this."

However, in the past decade, new and promising approaches have emerged; approaches that emphasise the importance of the context and a social model of development. Thinking in terms of student strengths and capabilities, rather than limitations, leads to higher expectations and more personalised, relevant learning goals. These changes affect not just teaching but also curriculum design and the organisation of learning spaces. The focus shifts from one-on-one interventions to establishing tiered levels of support within the classroom through universal measures, while also providing additional and intensive supports as needed. The classroom tutor becomes responsible for all students, while specialists collaborate to implement inclusive strategies (co-teaching, cooperative learning, peer tutoring) and provide targeted support when necessary.

In SES, the dominant approach has traditionally been deficit-based and focused on specialization, assuming that the more individualised and specialised the attention, the better the outcome. Classrooms in SES were usually organised by age or severity of impairment. Advances have been driven by inclusion policies and the growing awareness of the need for

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transformation. As professionals in SES experimented with shared schooling arrangements with mainstream schools, their practices evolved. They began incorporating curriculum content aligned with mainstream standards, diversified their activities, and became more open to community engagement.

Transitions

Transitions are critical moments in every student's education, especially for the most vulnerable students and their families (Simón et al., 2024). Three key transitions occur: from early childhood to primary education; from primary to secondary; and from secondary to adult life or employment. Success or failure depends on the interaction between three factors: student characteristics, family involvement, and professional practices.

The most decisive factor in the transition from early childhood education to primary school is the choice between enrolling in a SES or a mainstream school. Choosing a mainstream school has proven to be a major step forward in recent decades, helping to move beyond a view of early intervention as merely a step toward special education and placement in a SES. Parental involvement in this decision has also increased over the years.

The transition from primary to secondary education, which for many authors is the most challenging (van Rens et al., 2018), has also improved, though many issues remain unresolved. The automatic progression of students from SES into special vocational training and, eventually, sheltered workshops has been largely overcome. In recent decades, the range of educational options in post-secondary education has expanded and become more flexible, especially in vocational training and transition to adulthood programmes. However, a major unresolved issue persists: many students are sent back to SES at the end of primary school due to the lack of secondary level inclusion resources and training. Rather than continuing in mainstream settings with the necessary supports, they are segregated again.

In the transition from secondary education to employment, the most notable progress has been the stronger link between vocational training and the offer of training programs more directly associated with competitive employment.

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Family Participation

Family participation has improved significantly in recent years, although much remains to be done. The shift from a "for parents but without parents" model to one that includes spaces for dialogue and participation—beyond what is mandated in formal school governance structures—has been a noteworthy development.

Although not yet fully embraced, parents—both individually and as part of associations—are increasingly seen as valuable contributors, both in SES and in inclusive education. In particular, the active involvement of parents has helped the other families in mainstream schools become more familiar with and appreciative of diverse abilities among students.

Still, with a strong belief in the importance of all life contexts in a child's education, it is essential to further explore and adopt forms of family collaboration that also improve educational practices at home.

Initial and Ongoing Teacher Training

Professional practices are inevitably shaped by the conceptual frameworks acquired through university training and throughout one's career.

Both initial and ongoing teacher training have seen important changes. However, these changes have not always led to significant or sustained improvements in professional competencies for addressing student diversity. Curriculum reforms in the 1990s and the Bologna Process had a positive impact on initial teacher education in terms of values, content, and sensitivity to diversity and vulnerable students. Additionally, since the LOGSE (1991), education authorities have invested heavily in teacher professional development. More recently, the LOMLOE (2020) has marked another step forward by calling for a review of initial training content, emphasising the need to incorporate competency-based curricula, diversity, sustainability, and practical teaching based in learning by doing.

However, despite the efforts made in the reform of the initial training to promote inclusive education, it does not seem that these efforts have contributed decisively either to definitive changes in believes and attitudes or to the acquisition of context-based knowledge and strategies that allow new teachers to understand the needs of students and to act accordingly. One possible explanation is the overly fragmented treatment of problems that are systemic in teacher training programmes and in some subjects, as well as the

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persistent disconnect between theory and practice.

Moreover, although initial training promotes collaborative and team-based skills, essential for tackling complex educational challenges, these skills are often not applied in practice, likely due to school culture and organisational structures that do not facilitate collaboration.

Finally, the many and varied ongoing training initiatives have not always translated into improved practices or stronger professional teams, perhaps because individual training needs and administrative certification requirements have taken precedence.

A Final Reflection

This article is being written under the shadow of the recent rejection by the United States government of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, and the potential consequences this decision may have on the progress of inclusive education in the Western world, already weakened in countries where far-right parties have come to power. If the path toward inclusive education has been slow and challenging, conservative policies are unlikely to provide support.

One example comes from a recent article by Taneja-Johansson et al. (2024) on the situation in Sweden. Once known for its egalitarian education system and low rates of classification of students with special needs, Sweden is now seeing higher classification rates and a more segregated school system due to policy changes. These shifts in policy and practice have transformed Swedish education, moving it away from the "one school for all" principle that had long characterised the Nordic countries (Taneja-Johansson et al., 2024).

As a conclusion, we echo the words of Uthus and Qvortrup (2024), which also resonate in our own country: despite a long tradition and ambition for inclusive education, inclusion remains more of an ideology than a reality. Students with SEN are still largely excluded from the community—both socially and academically. The shortcomings are attributed to the difficulties and lack of success in creating adapted and differentiated teaching practices in mainstream classrooms (Uthus & Qvortrup, 2024). As we have seen, addressing this requires the commitment of governments, through policies

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aligned with the UN Convention (2006), as well as the engagement of service providers, professionals, and families in schools.

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