

Training Trends in Special Education in Ibero-America

Tendências formativas em Educação Especial na
Ibero-América

Tendencias formativas en Educación Especial en
Iberoamérica

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Abstract

This article comprises the text of the inaugural conference of the II Meeting on Education and Disability. Research Perspectives and Teacher Training, which took place from 6th to 9th November 2018, at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional in Bogotá, Colombia. It corresponds to a reflection based on a bibliographical and experiential analysis, which attends the purpose of asking about the present and future of training in Special Education, as it constitutes a field of knowledge and teaching action in actual Transition for Ibero-America. Historically, Special Education has been defined in terms of targeted educational attention -specifically- to people with disabilities and special educational needs. That, from the approach of inclusive education, now demand their right to be present, participate and learn with equity and quality, with their peers and in the context of ordinary education. This deserves teachers capable of designing and applying specific educational supports, in attention to a critical, propositive and flexible reading of the context, their demands and relationships. Among the main conclusions of this reflection, it is possible to say that, in Ibero-America, depending on its antecedents, Special Education can be understood as a driving force or obstacle for inclusive education, that each country lives its own level of inclusive education, reflected in the training processes of the teacher of support, which do not necessarily comply with professional profiles unified, neat or duly validated.

Keywords

special education; knowledge base for teaching; resource room programs; inclusion; teacher qualifications

Palavras-chave

educação especial; formação de professores; apoio educacional específico; educação inclusiva; perfil profissional

Resumo

Este artigo inclui o texto da conferência de abertura da II Reunião sobre Educação e Deficiência. Perspectivas de pesquisa e formação de professores, que ocorreram de 6 a 9 de novembro de 2018, na Universidade Pedagógica Nacional em Bogotá, Colômbia. Corresponde a uma reflexão baseada em uma análise bibliográfica e experiential, que serve para perguntar sobre o presente e o futuro da formação em Educação Especial, pois constitui um campo de conhecimento e ação de ensino em franca transição para a Ibero-América. Historicamente, a Educação Especial foi definida em termos de atendimento educacional direcionado especificamente a pessoas com deficiência e com necessidades educacionais especiais que, do ponto de vista da educação inclusiva, reivindicam seu direito de estar presente, participar e aprender com equidade e qualidade, com seus pares e no contexto da educação comum. Isso merece professores capazes de projetar e aplicar suportes educacionais específicos, atentos a uma leitura crítica, proposicional e flexível do contexto, suas demandas e relacionamentos. Dentre as principais conclusões dessa reflexão, é possível afirmar que, na América Latina, dependendo de sua formação, a Educação Especial pode ser entendida como um condutor ou obstáculo à educação inclusiva, que cada país vive seu próprio nível de inclusão educacional, refletido nos processos de apoiar a formação de professores, que não segue necessariamente perfis profissionais unificados, detalhados ou devidamente validados.

Resumen

El presente artículo comprende el texto de la conferencia inaugural del II Encuentro Educación y Discapacidad. Perspectivas Investigativas y Formación Docente, que se llevó a cabo del 6 al 9 de noviembre del 2018, en la Universidad Pedagógica Nacional en Bogotá, Colombia. Corresponde a una reflexión fundamentada en un análisis bibliográfico y vivencial, que asiste al propósito de preguntarse acerca del presente y futuro de la formación en Educación Especial, en tanto constituye un campo de conocimiento y acción docente en franca transición para Iberoamérica. Históricamente, la Educación Especial ha sido definida en función de la atención educativa dirigida —específicamente— a personas con discapacidad y con necesidades educativas especiales; que, desde el enfoque de la educación inclusiva, ahora reclaman su derecho a estar presentes, participar y aprender con equidad y calidad, con sus pares y en el contexto mismo de la educación ordinaria. Esto amerita docentes capaces de diseñar y aplicar apoyos educativos específicos en atención a una lectura crítica, propositiva y flexible del contexto, sus demandas y relaciones. Entre las principales conclusiones de esta reflexión es posible decir que, en Iberoamérica, dependiendo de sus antecedentes, la Educación Especial puede entenderse como impulsora u obstáculo para la educación inclusiva, que cada país vive su propio nivel de inclusión educativa, reflejado en los procesos de formación del docente de apoyo, los que no necesariamente obedecen a perfiles profesionales unificados, prolijos ni debidamente validados.

Palabras clave

educación especial; formación docente; apoyos educativos específicos; educación inclusiva; perfil profesional

Introduction

The demands for inclusive education in recent times and its encounter with the movement for educational attention to diversity have disrupted the history of Special Education worldwide, especially in its traditional version. This is the set of services and educational support resources for people with disabilities and various special educational needs. However, it includes individuals with outstanding or exceptional abilities in some countries.

These arguments urgently require a deep and comprehensive reflection from all sectors of this discipline. Therefore, both its ontological conception, epistemological and ethical principles, to the way Special Education services are arranged in each country, and, of course, the training offerings of those who assume these educational services, deserve to be reconsidered and reasonably transformed in light of the historical and cultural demands of our time.

Such reflection seems to surpass that exercised in other moments to address the currents of paradigmatic movements, such as educational integration, as the scope of inclusive education and educational attention to diversity goes beyond the boundaries that have so far contained Special Education, its object of study, and its professional and work focus. These have now shifted to give way to something more complex and elusive, which has not yet managed to be delimited in the geography of disciplines or the offerings for teacher training with relevance and quality.

However, it must be said that the training plans proposing more progressive recent offerings, unable to embrace everything reflected in such complexity, have chosen to narrow their own scope of action, trying to implement a curriculum consistent with their principles and approaches, their alignment with inclusive education and educational attention to diversity to train future special education teachers. This has generated a collaborative effort, perhaps unprecedented, in the curriculum design for professional training.

Therefore, this document, rather than a statement of knowledge, aims to be a provocation for collaborative work in unveiling a professional profile of Special Education more in line with the demands of the socio-cultural context in which we find ourselves. This profile compels us to begin by questioning the essence of our foundational reference: What is Special Education today?

Special Education and its Episteme

When Special Education is understood as a field of study, from which it is possible to derive scholars of the subject or disciplinary epigones as experts in a precise and particular episteme or object of knowledge, we encounter the first epistemological problems.

In this regard, we rarely find a definition of Special Education that begins by stating that it is the branch of knowledge dedicated to... as expected in the case of any discipline. In that sense, at least currently, it is not easy to grasp its object of knowledge. There is currently no specific something for Special Education, for example, what matter is to Physics, living beings to Biology, or culture to Anthropology. This situation makes it difficult to determine what Special Education should be dedicated to, what defines it as a discipline, what its professionals should focus on, and what the training plans for future special educators should contain. Alternatively, some suggest that special education is declining (Florin, 2014).

In any part of the world, special education is usually defined as different from regular education, the education created for those who, for various reasons, need to be separated from regular education. Thus, more or less, it is expected to identify Special Education as the “set of supports and services available to students with special educational needs, whether they require them temporarily or permanently” (MEP, 2005). This suggests a reference more to a practice or technology than a discipline.

This definition implies that the special educator is merely an expert in those supports and services. This is a simplistic conclusion with which many may disagree, as professionals in this field are also expected to carry out evaluations, diagnoses, and personal, educational, family, community, and work interactions. They are also involved in ongoing professional development, research on various topics, advocacy for the rights of people with disabilities, and participation in transdisciplinary teams, among many other tasks. Collectively, these responsibilities go beyond the idea of someone handling specific supports and involve competencies that are challenging to find, even in related professions. However, this seems to matter little to those who, in light of recent events promoting inclusion, question whether Special Education should evolve or disappear. Why?

At this moment, it is possible to identify four positions regarding Special Education worldwide:

- » *Nothing has changed:* There are countries and localities where educational attention to people with disabilities is still provided from a segregated perspective through specific centers and services identified from a deficiency and clinical model. Special Education remains necessary in these cases, and both the organization of services and the training of professionals in this field are offered from that same model. (Castillo, et al., 2018).
- » *In discussion:* Countries that changed their direction towards integration in the 1980s and, more recently, towards a meticulous inclusive education that has not yet been structurally consolidated widely discuss the role of Special Education. They often justify

specific services for people who require extensive and generalized support, as well as didactic and technological aids offered by special educators in their role as support teachers for the context of regular education and new alternative spaces for the exercise of the profession. They have in common that Special Education has served as the leading guide towards educational inclusion, not only for people with disabilities but also for those who, for personal and cultural reasons, have historically been excluded from the right to education.

This leadership role keeps the countries in constant discussion about whether Special Education should continue guiding the support or if, from an inclusive perspective, the current tasks of special educators can and should be taken on by regular educators. So, what should the role of special services and educators become? What kind of training and preparation should be provided to teachers so that they can provide equitable and quality education in their classrooms? The discussion continues while teacher training programs maintain a conceptualization close to inclusive education and educational support for diversity for future educators who still carry the label of Special Education and will, for now, address educational services that align more with integration than educational inclusion (Castillo et al., 2018).

- » *Anti-Special Education*: Older societies, such as the Iberian case, which traces the origins of Special Education to the early Renaissance, tend to associate it with more drastic forms of segregation. They consider it the antithesis of inclusion, believing that the actual progress of inclusive education depends on its disappearance. This stance argues that regular school is the best place for everyone to learn together. They advocate for strategically collaborative education, offering practical and equitable teaching for all through Universal Design for Learning. As a result, both teacher training and practice, along with school management and organization at all levels, should align with this direction (Echeita, 2016). In this perspective, specific services and special educators have no place.
- » *Finnish Education*: Special mention deserves Special Education in Finland, as explained by Sabel, Saxenian, Miettinen, Hull, and Hautamäki (2010). Finland attributes its quality and success in international assessments, such as PISA, to Special Education. The ability to detect and prevent learning difficulties before they occur, along with providing attention within the school context through the coordination of professional and family resources, has allowed Finland to excel in PISA and many other assessments. It has been revealed that more students achieve good levels of education, and

the most advanced students raise the achievement bar to the highest expected level. For this reason, Finnish education supports Special Education services and teacher training in this discipline from an inclusive approach, as it relies on this to maintain its prominent position worldwide.

Judging by the mentioned positions, we do not have a singular Special Education. Still, instead, it has become relative to the level of development that inclusive education has achieved in each context. However, it is urgent to highlight the main risks this transition brings in some societies, where decisions are not being made harmoniously. The first and most dangerous has to do with individuals who, due to their condition, require extensive and generalized support. For them, dual learning, collaborative learning, or regular teachers' competencies are still insufficient to place them on equal footing in regular educational environments. They feel like they are failing, just like their teachers, and they lack alternative spaces or more specific support that would give them the opportunity for a more gradual and reasonably dosed inclusive process adjusted to the characteristics of each situation. Ironically, inclusive education seems to leave these individuals without the possibility of learning effectively.

The second risk is experienced by a significant group of practicing special educators and those who are being trained in this field. They find themselves without a place in the registry of professions, as is the case in Colombia (Vélez, 2016). This restricts their employment opportunities and disrupts their working conditions, professional associations, and personal lives. In this regard, one must ask whether the advent of inclusive education led to the disappearance of the object of the Special Education profession or if it was assumed by another profession. The most severe problem is that the object of the profession continues to exist without someone taking it up with the efficiency and care it deserves.

A third risk is that if inclusive support and preventive measures against barriers to learning indicate the path to quality and success in mainstream education, those closing down Special Education may deny that opportunity.

Special Education in the Context of Inclusive Education

Current and projected statistics related to educational level and quality of life demonstrate that individual and social human development depends on individuals attaining a higher level of education and receiving relevant and quality education. Moreover, the higher the number of people involved in this type of education, the greater the human development index a country can achieve. Therefore, there is not a single dimension of people's well-being that is not related to better education.

In other words, acceptable conditions for social and employment inclusion, health, gender equity, maternal and child mortality, nutrition, immunization, life expectancy at birth, economic development, peaceful conflict resolution, and environmental sustainability are inexorably linked to increased social investment in education. This requires proper management of that investment and understanding of its potential impact on literacy campaigns, subsidy programs, curricular enrichment, and flexibility. Furthermore, it involves the tertiary education and professional development of educators and the outreach of educational institutions to communities.

The early foundations for inclusive education, albeit not explicitly named as such, can be identified in the conceptualization of education as a right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). This is primarily reflected in Article 26, establishing the right to free education, equality in higher education, and promoting human development through education. These principles are reiterated in subsequent declarations such as the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) (CRPD), and more recently, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), in addition to the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Right to Education in Emergency Situations (2010).

With a straightforward statement, fundamental directions are established. In addition to the Education for All Declaration (UNESCO, 1990), various other declarations have elevated the discussion for inclusive education. Initially, there was an advocacy for education for particular vulnerable groups, and currently, the discourse revolves around a complete transformation of educational systems towards inclusive education.

With that purpose, we identify the Muscat Agreement (UNESCO, 2014), which emphasizes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with SDG 4 explicitly demanding “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” It establishes education as an indispensable requirement for achieving the other SDGs by 2030. The requirements and guidelines of this agreement are extended and elaborated in the Incheon Declaration (2015). For Latin America, similar principles had already been contextualized in the Lima Declaration (UNESCO, 2014), reinforcing the need for “inclusive education for all, with equity, relevance, and pertinence, ensuring sustainability from early childhood stimulation and care to tertiary education, as well as lifelong learning.” Additionally, the declaration emphasizes the demand for “continuous professional development, family involvement, the development of skills for decent work, and a dignified life in safe, healthy, and inclusive

environments.” Thus, with the groundwork laid, governments must do everything within their reach to fulfill these commitments, as it is urgent to make up for the 50 years of backlog mentioned in the Declaration to approach the fulfillment of the Incheon objectives by 2030.

In this sense, it is necessary to acknowledge that people with disabilities have been the most excluded, and their condition can only be understood through intersectionality. Their situation is repeatedly intersected with other factors such as gender discrimination, belonging to disadvantaged ethnic groups, and living in economically depressed areas. Unfortunately, the likelihood of these conditions conspiring against the social inclusion of individuals in low and middle-income countries is high.

Out of the population in the region that is out of school (35.5 million), one-third corresponds to individuals with disabilities aged between 3 and 18 years. Additionally, less than 5% of the disabled population entering school manages to complete primary education (Inclusión Internacional/Inico, 2009). This highlights that among the populations excluded from education in Latin America, individuals with disabilities are the most affected. Within this group, those with intellectual disabilities have historically been and continue to be the most excluded from education in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the rest of the world (Inclusión Internacional, 2006) (In Meléndez, 2010, p. 6).

Therefore, the imperative for inclusive education demands that the inclusion of people with disabilities and special educational needs be the main effort to be made. However, it is necessary to make it clear that when we talk about inclusive education, we are not referring to curriculum simplification or compassionate interaction with people with disabilities in regular settings; it is about ensuring that everyone develops under conditions of equity and quality, suitable competencies for social and work inclusion based on their talents and possibilities, in common with their peers, educators, and families, from a sustainable and supportive approach. This must be understood by future special educators.

The role of Special Education then involves

[...] general education should be reorganized. Within it, special education, special educators, and therefore, their training, updating, and professional development needs should be considered. Special education should not be seen as merely fixing the shortcomings of regular education but rather as accompanying a better response from regular education to all students through effective pedagogical interaction programs that reach even those students who require extensive and generalized support. In other words, special education should be one of the driving forces that leads the country to fulfill its ideals and commitments related to inclusion in equal opportunities for the human development of all inhabitants (Castillo et al., 2018, p. 27).

Thus, when students requiring specific educational support—regardless of the cause—arrive at the educational institution, they should be welcomed by all their teachers, including the special educator, who transformed into an essential support figure to ensure a highly successful educational experience. This entails a collaborative effort between regular and special educators, characterized by respect, solidarity, and mutual professional recognition.

However, even though the mentioned demands are acknowledged, it is impossible to speak of a Latin American inclusive education model. Instead, there are unequal practices and actions across the region, as currently confirmed by several authors in Vargas and Alves, eds. (2016):

[...] While Chile maintains various forms of support and promotes inclusive education, there is an uncomfortable burden on the deficit issue to secure state resource allocation. Mexico talks about incipient inclusion, but its arguments are more anchored in integrationist measures for people with disabilities. On the other hand, Colombia has produced impeccable materials to guide inclusive education in the country. Still, resistance to equitably recognizing the participation of support teachers has significantly hindered the experience of inclusion in schools. Costa Rica breathes inclusive education in all its statutes. Still, immovable structural conditions have led it to settle for good practices of centers that have managed to overcome these barriers not without difficulty and with tenacious perseverance. It should be added that, in the region, there are countries that barely offer the most basic services for children with disabilities, such as Honduras, and others like Guatemala, that provide guidance on how to approach inclusive education from Community-Based Rehabilitation driven by families but with little development in terms of school decisions and actions (Meléndez, 2016, pp. 8-9).

Therefore, if inclusive education opts for those who, due to their differences, have historically been excluded from the right to education, which also speaks of educational attention to diversity, Special Education must be able to assess the level of inclusive education experienced in a specific context and must continually drive it towards the next step regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities and, in general, those who require specific educational support. Consequently, Special Education and inclusive education must work together in perfect harmony. This heuristic must be strictly embraced by teacher training centers to instruct future special educators on how to develop their profession from an inclusive education perspective and for a specific context.

As Meléndez and Hernández (2016) explain, inclusive education is not decreed but lived and coexisted through values, attitudes, and personal decisions. This cannot be mobilized based on mandates but rather on

convictions. With this statement, we mean that while policies for inclusion allow us to dream of an ideal condition of macro social transformation in that direction, since inclusion starts from a conviction and is realized in living practice, policies alone are insufficient if we do not work to make inclusion a reality. However, it is essential to note that the inherent nature of inclusion means that, even in the absence of policies in its favor, the intention of social organizations can make it possible. This characteristic allows us to project that, as we encounter these policies, each organization can build its own to make its culture and service a space of inclusive coexistence.

In that sense, it is necessary to understand who is responsible for developing inclusive education within educational contexts and who and how should be trained to practice inclusive education. This implies that it is also necessary to question the role of Special Education concerning inclusive education or whether it hinders its development, as is believed in Spain and some other countries (Echeita, 2016).

Special Education in the Context of Educational Attention to Diversity

It is necessary to understand educational attention to diversity as the way in which inclusive education is implemented in educational spaces. According to Ciceron (106 B.C.), diversity is congruent with the nature of things; in our case, it is the nature of human beings as natural things. This allows us to learn from other living beings that diversity is “a condition of life in community, whose vital processes are related to each other and develop based on the cultural factors of the same environment. Both relationship and variety ensure and enhance the life of all community inhabitants” (Meléndez, 2004, p. 3).

Therefore, the secret of the survival of our species lies not in the norm but in differences and, thus, in the various ways of creating knowledge, methods, and means of solving humanity's problems. However, we have created forms of teaching and learning, and therefore, ways of living through a forced normalization that tries to eliminate differences. In such a way, the school at the beginning of the 20th century, based on psychometrics, took charge of organizing us under a norm and, subsequently, establishing a curriculum that had to be assimilated by that norm and, through measurements, excluded those who did not have access to that possibility. And this is the model of school that has been followed until today: a school model against nature. At this moment, the movement for educational attention to diversity is a claim for a form of education that fits our own human and cultural condition, where the right to education can be equitably exercised by everyone and not just by those who conform to the norm.

Attempting to reach everyone through an *egalitarian* (normalized) approach implies offering an exclusive education, as it disregards the differences that humanly define us as individuals and as cultures. Therefore, diversity underlies the legitimization of personal and cultural differences; differences define our identities, and all identities hold equal human value. In that sense, it is not the differences that determine unfair treatment but the unequal value with which they are assumed. And, with a lower attributed value, there is less inclusion in opportunities for human development; with a higher attributed value, there are more possibilities for human development opportunities (Meléndez, 2004).

Regarding this, it should be noted that since UNESCO promoted its slogan of “Education for All” in Thailand in 1990, up to the inclusion of SDG 4 in the UN’s Agenda 2030, it is clear that this “For All” emphatically refers to those who have historically been excluded from opportunities for human development because, for personal and cultural reasons, they have been left out of the possibilities of education.

In other words, “Education for All and Ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, 2015) demands that no one should be excluded from an efficient education to overcome deficiencies towards development. This education must assertively cater to each of the personal and cultural identities that hold a valid place in this “For All.”

In that context, then, what role does Special Education play?

Special Education was born and institutionalized to provide education to those individuals who, due to their disability, were not accepted in regular schools. Thus, an education system was established, initially offered in hospitals or charitable institutions for lifelong residents with disabilities and, in a segregated manner, in specific centers until the first half of the 20th century. Later, with the inclusive education movement, considering the principle of normalization, it was recognized that people with disabilities had the right to be educated in schools within their community alongside their siblings and peers. This led to the creation of special classrooms within regular schools and individualized programs for students with disabilities integrated into regular classrooms. These services are primarily provided by trained or educated special educators using specific methods and techniques (Meléndez, 2016).

Until then, the training processes for special educators adapted to emerging methodologies and various workspaces. However, they always assumed that their object of study and work was the educational attention to people with disabilities, which later expanded to individuals with special educational needs, whether due to disability or not. This also allowed some countries to include those with outstanding and exceptional talents or abilities, as in Mexico and Colombia.

More recently, the inclusive education movement demands that all forms of education should be geared towards avoiding the social and cultural exclusion of all learners, including individuals with disabilities. Disability is thus recognized as another manifestation of diversity, and education for diversity must embrace it like any other expression of difference. This rationale disrupts all forms of school organization but also traditional pedagogy and didactics, and as a consequence, the training of educators who will be responsible for this transformation.

The above raises the question of whether Special Education should continue to exist, as supported by Florin (2014), and, if so, whom the special educator should serve, in what manner, and where to tailor teacher training to those answers. If Special Education disappears, the questions would be: What type of educator can address diversity and design specific educational support for all students? How, then, do we redirect the resources that have been the exclusive property of Special Education in that direction?

International Training Formats in Special Education

Concerning what has been discussed so far, exploring teacher training programs in Special Education that have transformed in recent years is fascinating. This is to understand how they interpret and embrace changes related to inclusive education in different countries. This information can be detected through the content available on various universities' websites.

In the United States, for example, there is no uniformity in approaches or qualifications among the 420 universities offering Special Education programs. While some universities offer undergraduate degrees in the field, others only provide Master's degrees after general teacher training, similar to the current approach in most European Union countries. Additionally, while some sectors of higher education opt for inclusion with a tendency towards self-management for individuals with intellectual disabilities, following the Inclusion International movement, others emphasize other types of disabilities and adopt more conservative approaches to specific care.

In Latin America, on the other hand, some countries have implemented a national policy regarding teacher training in Special Education, intending to align with the state reorganization of educational services, as in Mexico and Chile. Meanwhile, higher education in other countries seems to have more autonomy in decision-making, as seen in the cases of Colombia and Costa Rica.

A comparative table below includes some data on Special Education programs in different countries that have changed their training plans in the last 10 years, following the few criteria that allowed such a comparison.

University	Country	Degree or Qualification	Duration	Focus
Frederick University	Cyprus	Master's in Special Education	3 semesters	Special educational needs (S.E.N.), disability with an inclusive approach (integration)
Universidad del Noreste	Mexico	Bachelor's in Special Education	8 semesters	Intervention for S.E.N. with or without disability. Related to the principles of the integration education movement promoted by the Mexican Educational System
Universidad Católica del Maule	Chile	Bachelor's in Special Education with a mention in Language Disorders and Intellectual Disability / Bachelor's in Special Education with a mention in Language Disorders and Learning Difficulties	9 semesters	Response to S.E.N. and diversity to form inclusive communities through interdisciplinary work
Australian Catholic University	Australia	Bachelor of Inclusive Education and Disability Studies	4 semesters	Rights of individuals with disabilities, social view of disability, self-management, empowerment, learning difficulties, and positive behavioral support
Universidad de Antioquia	Colombia	Bachelor's in Special Education	10 semesters	People with disabilities from various sectors and work contexts. Interdisciplinarity.
Universidad Pedagógica Nacional	Colombia	Bachelor's in Special Education	10 semesters	Otherness, diversity, rights holder, educational proposals to close gaps.
Universidad Nacional	Costa Rica	Bachelor's in Special Education with an emphasis on Integration	10 semesters	Integration and S.E.N.

Source: own elaboration.

It is important to highlight that various universities justify their recent changes based on the need to adapt to the new demands of a special educator immersed in inclusive education contexts and the educational attention to diversity. However, whether due to structural or ideological reasons, most universities find it impossible to stop seeing the education of people with disabilities as the object of the profession. It seems to expand towards diversity in addressing specific educational needs not directly caused by a disability but hesitates to go further into the realm of diversity.

What seems to have expanded in the training programs of Special Education courses are the areas of action. While they used to be limited to specific centers, now there is also talk that special educators can be support teachers in regular educational centers, in community projects, and in family support. However, they are also expected to be permanent researchers and effective collaborators in interdisciplinary teams, thereby expanding their job opportunities.

Professional Profile of Special Educator

The professional profile of a special educator is challenging to find in an official format at the country level, at least explicitly stated as such. In Chile, for example, a national-level process was carried out to construct and validate an extensive profile that now guides the training processes and teachers' selection, hiring, and performance evaluation (Godoy, Otondo, and Rey, 2016). However, a similar exercise has not been identified in any other Latin American country or Spain.

Therefore, the training plans for the Special Education career in different universities reflect internal work within the management of the programs. This reveals the ideological tendency of the study center and its autonomous interpretation of what a special educator should be in light of the context's demands and the ideals of inclusive education. The fusion of both perspectives places emphasis again on providing educational attention to individuals requiring specific educational support, but this time with an aspiration towards inclusive education, interdisciplinary work, and research. This dimension was challenging to find in teaching profiles a decade ago.

On another note, the graduation profiles outlined in public documents regarding Special Education programs are generally presented in broad strokes. This makes it difficult to break down elements that would allow for a curricular analysis and an assessment of whether the achievements of the set of academic activities address all the training needs documented in the profile or if some are being left out.

In this regard, such generality suggests that the profiles have not undergone rigorous processes of contextual validation. Consequently, the dimensions of relevance and quality become challenging to determine within the programs themselves. This applies internally, for the accreditation processes, and externally to ensure that the trained professionals align with the country's goals and needs, assuring the professionals that they have a space or can create a new one in the workforce.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for professional profiles in Special Education that reveal the type of country we aspire to, the role of the special educator in that project, the competencies they must develop to fulfill it, and the critical capacity that will enable them to be a proactive evaluator for the improvement of these processes. This includes the ability to understand the transformations of the context and adapt flexibly to new cultural demands.

Epistemological Analysis of Special Education: The Costa Rican Experience

With a deep concern for the future of Special Education and special educators in the face of the demands of inclusive education, as explained in Castillo et al. (2018), in the years 2015 and 2016, Costa Rica initiated a comprehensive analysis through a call from the Distance State University. Other public universities, the Ministry of Public Education, the professional association that brings together educators (Colypro), the national accreditation agency for higher education (Sinaes), families, users of Special Education services, and educators from across the country, as well as international experts, joined this initiative. Over two major sessions and through presentations, expert panels, and discussions using the meta-action methodology, attempts were made to answer three questions: What is Special Education at this historical moment? Where should Special Education go in the coming years? And what should be the role of the special educator in the near future?

The main findings and conclusions noted that in countries where Special Education had virtually been abolished because it was considered an enemy of inclusion, there have been no better achievements in inclusive education in recent years. It was also highlighted that individuals requiring extensive and generalized support were at risk of being excluded from educational opportunities.

On the other hand, it was agreed that Special Education should continue in Costa Rica, given its leadership in various actions for inclusive education. However,

[...] it is necessary to remove Special Education from that reductionist and instrumental conception that has confined it within a set of supports for a specific population defined by deficits. It is necessary to elevate Special Education to a well-deserved status as a discipline or field of study where the adjective “special” does not refer to what deviates from the norm but rather to what is capable of catapulting the overcoming of barriers to learning and participation, capable of hoisting the right to quality, equitable, and sustainable education for all students through curriculum, management, and educational practice, capable of sustaining updated knowledge through continuous research for improvement (Castillo et al., 2018, p. 16).

Thus, the inferences allowed for the redefinition of Special Education in Costa Rica, stating that it is:

[...] the branch of knowledge responsible for constructing, organizing, leading, proposing, and collaboratively practicing pedagogical strategies capable of addressing diversity and catapulting the overcoming of barriers to learning and participation, even in people who require extensive and generalized support. It is also responsible for maintaining up-to-date knowledge through continuous research and reflection on its practice (Castillo et al., 2018, p. 26).

It defines the special educator as the professional capable of assuming each function and attitude included in the discipline’s definition.

This exercise conducted in Costa Rica demonstrates that the principles of inclusive education are valid for all societies. However, exercising the right to equitable and quality education, addressing educational diversity, and building strategies to overcome barriers to learning and participation must be approached attentively, considering the historical moment and the resources available to each society. In this way, in the past, Special Education might have been seen as the antithesis of inclusive education. Still, currently, at least in Costa Rica, both have developed a symbiotic relationship where one cannot sustain itself separately from the other.

Some conclusions to start with

- » Inclusive education is a living organism, and Special Education is a vibrant resource with great potential to sustain it. Therefore, to develop, they must evolve in unison and harmony.
- » Special Education and its mission should find meaning within the context of a national project that aims for development through equitable opportunities for all inhabitants with their personal and cultural identities.

- » Beyond being a set of supports, Special Education should be defined as a discipline encompassing its object of study, work, and the teaching profession in this field.
- » Special Education has been abolished in some countries, such as Spain, but the benefits of this decision for inclusive education are not yet evident. Instead, individuals requiring extensive and generalized support seem to lack a place in the services available through inclusion.
- » The Finnish education system attributes its high-quality standards to preventing school difficulties before they arise and collaboratively addressing them through center projects and functions led by special educators.
- » Special Education needs to be redefined in each society under the principles of inclusive education before defining the professional teaching profile capable of serving the services and their beneficiaries.
- » Recent offerings in Special Education training programs, faced with the impossibility of assuming everything reflected in inclusive education and attention to diversity, have chosen to narrow their scope of action. They have accommodated themselves to address specific educational needs associated or not with a disability but do not aim to go beyond that.
- » Training programs have diversified the areas of action where future special educators are expected to work. While their work was previously confined to specific centers, there is now talk of ordinary educational centers, community projects, interdisciplinary research teams, and interdisciplinary care.
- » Except for Chile, countries do not have an official professional profile for Special Education to compare the proposed graduation profiles in training programs with a national proposal that guides the approach and fundamental competencies a special educator should possess.
- » The graduation profiles of Special Education programs are broadly outlined and seemingly lack rigorous validation processes. This hinders the program from conducting a curriculum analysis to assess whether it meets all the training requirements.

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