

# School Inclusion: Analyzing the Establishment and Organization of a Special Needs Education Service in a Brazilian Municipality

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## Abstract

The present research integrates a network of studies called National Monitoring Center for Special Education (NMCSE) which studies the Multi-purpose Feature Rooms (MFRs) in regular schools. We aim to investigate whether the service offered by such rooms, maintained by the Department of Education of the Municipality of Araraquara, in São Paulo State, Brazil, is being successful at supporting the education of children and youth with special needs, pervasive developmental disorders and high skilled/gifted individuals. We have also investigated the limits and possibilities of such rooms concerning the set of services offered to their participants. In order to conduct the present research, we have performed: an interview with the Special Education Program manager from the abovementioned Department of Education; and the analysis of a Training Program that MFRs teachers must take. The training program consists of ten morning and afternoon shift meetings. The analyzed data leads us to conclude that the policy of implementation of MFRs, even in this relatively restricted universe is seen from different perspectives. Some interpretations are still permeated by the clinical model, considering individual action. The challenges observed in the classrooms show that the cooperation among teachers still occur randomly and, among other difficulties raised by them, is the selection of the right placement methods to identify eligible students who will benefit from the Specialized Educational Service (SES). In addition, teaching evaluation was considered fragile, as well as the training and the general requirements demanded in order to achieve the expected results.

## Keywords

Specialized Education Services, Inclusion, Public Policies

## 1. Introduction

In a scenario historically marked by processes of educational exclusion, where only a minority of students was enrolled and an even smaller number would remain in school, even in the basic levels, the emblematic gap in Brazilian Education started to change in the late twentieth century towards a universal schooling, at least with regard to the number of enrollments. Once guaranteed, the expansion in access to education as an expression of a universal set of policies, among which is the consolidation of a “social protection network established by the Constituição Federal de 1988, the proposed Inclusive School Education started to be spread.” (Kassar, 2012: p. 97).

Historically, the services to students with disabilities in Brazil were offered in special schools and classes instead of within the regular educational system. That has contributed to a segregation process, since students with the same disabilities were grouped together and would receive a more clinical than pedagogical approach.

Recently, the special education system began to be influenced by an inclusivity trend, in which the former model was gradually replaced by a new paradigm. This new paradigm introduced a new concept of educational inclusion, in which the quality in education as a whole has become a goal to be achieved.

By observing important changes worldwide and ratifying international agreements, two milestones in the recent history of Brazil, the above mentioned [Constituição Federal de 1988 \(1988\)](#) and the [Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação<sup>1</sup>, 1996—LDBEN No. 9.394/96 \(1996\)](#), have reinforced the assumptions of inclusive school. Regarding children and youth, the target for Special Education, their enrollment in regular public schools has become a legal right. This has caused the expansion of educational opportunities and universal access to education for this segment of the population. However, their permanence in school, their right to education and academic success, on the other hand, will only be possible when the regular school comes to meet the special educational needs of such students. Formerly, if the reasons to justify the gaps were based on the coexistence argument, as policies and actions strengthen in support of inclusion, the compliance with constitutional rights demands more.

The LDBEN No. 9.394/96 points out under its Article 58 that the public education of students targeted by the Special Education should preferably be provided in the regular school system and that the Federal, State and Municipal governments might adopt public policies in order to ensure the right to education also for students with disabilities, pervasive developmental disorders and high skilled/gifted individuals. This requires reorganization in the educational systems in order to ensure curricula, methods, techniques, educational resources, specific organization, specialists and trained teachers to ensure the actual educational development to such students.

According to Kassar, the option for inclusive policies shows that, once presented as a national priority, education must promote equity, value diversity as well as social inclusion (Kassar, 2012: p. 100).

However, the document entitled “Política Nacional de Educação Especial na Perspectiva da Educação Inclusiva”—PNEEEI—Ministry of Education-MEC (2007) recommends the implementation of public policies for students with special needs emphasizing their actual participation and learning in public schools. The referenced document also reinforces the principles and foundations for inclusive schools: all students must be enrolled in regular schools; and with regard to special education, this should be complemented or supplemented by the SES, which we are describing in detail below.

The [Decree No. 6.571/08 \(2008\)](#) provides guidelines on SES, defining this supporting educational system for students with Special Educational Needs as: “... the set of activities, accessibility and pedagogic features institutionally organized, provided in order to complement or supplement the education of students in regular education” (Decree n.6.571, 2008).

The PNEEEI document establishes as an SES role: “... identify, develop and organize educational and accessibility features in order to eliminate barriers to the full participation of students, considering their specific needs” (Política de Educação Especial, 2007: p. 10).

Concerning the levels of education, the PNEEEI provides that the SES must be offered:

- 1) In Childhood Education, including early stimulation actions;
- 2) Along the Compulsory Education stage in Elementary School, made regarding that it must “be done in the reverse shift of the regular class, at the school or specialized center assigned to conduct the referred educational service” (Política de Educação Especial, 2007: p. 1);
- 3) In Youth and Adult Education and Vocational Learning;

<sup>1</sup>TN: Law of Directives and Bases of National Education.

- 4) In Indigenous, Rural and Run-away-Slave-Descendants (Quilombola) Education;
- 5) In Higher Education.

In addition, the [Decree No. 6.571/08 \(2008\)](#) specifies that the SES may be offered by the Public Education System and the specialized institutions, and it defines the MFRs as environments equipped with special furniture and learning and teaching resources to provide specialized educational services.

Thus, the Educational Legislation prescribes that the SES should be organized, preferably, by focusing on the offering of such MFRs so that the eligible students of special education do not interrupt their scholarly trajectories within the regular classes and have their learning difficulties supported by such complementary services.

The National Department of Special Education in Brazil/MEC<sup>2</sup> deployed the MFRs program in 2005. This program supports the implementation of MFRs within the regular scholar system. The MFRs must be equipped with pedagogical and accessibility resources in order to achieve the objectives of the SES. According to data provided by the MEC, between 2005 and 2012, 52,801 MFRs were offered in 5021 Brazilian municipalities, spread in all States and the Federal District (Painel de controle, 2012).

The referred program is directed to students with Special Educational Needs, identified by the Education Census MEC/INEP, within the State Educational System. However, in practice, not-always-legal provisions are effectively implemented due to the complex and dynamic reality that involves school systems.

Studies on Educational Inclusion Policies, which have been carried out in various municipalities in the State of Espírito Santo ([Gonçalves & Jesus, 2009](#); [Jesus, Milanese, & Vieira, 2009](#); [Gonçalves, 2010](#)), have indicated that, although belonging to the same state and submitted to the same national and state policies, municipalities have introduced different organizational models in order to offer services to support the education of students with Special Educational Needs. There have been observed models based upon support/tutoring rooms; upon collaboration between teachers and specialists in the regular school; upon student interns support. Just recently, the models of support based upon MFRs have been offered, as recommended by the MEC.

Thus, given the plurality of aspects and factors that represent the core of the current proposed policy, and in order to subsidize an increasing improvement in special education and inclusive education in the country, the objectives of the present study towards the implementation of MFRs are described below.

## 2. Objectives

The present article derives from a research which is part of a larger project conducted by the NMCSE<sup>3</sup>. NMCSE has as specific goals: to assess the limits and possibilities of MFRs while supporting the education of students with disabilities, pervasive developmental disorders and high skilled/gifted individuals; and to identify aspects that can enhance the SES offered by the MFRs.

Historical local issues have been analyzed in order to have a better picture of the reality within the MFRs in the Municipality of Araraquara, a medium-sized town in the State of São Paulo, Brazil. A semi-structured interview with the manager of Special Education of the City Department of Education was conducted. Secondly, an Extension Course, consisting of ten meetings with the educators from MFRs and their respective Special Education Managers was performed. Also, a questionnaire was answered by them.

## 3. Methods

We adopted a collaborative methodology, based on the technique of Focus Groups in order to perform this project. Such technique consists in “[...] providing conditions for teachers to reflect about their activity and make up situations that lead them to analyze the aspects of their professional practice by focusing on what worries them” ([Ibiapina, 2008: p. 20](#)). Apart from the training, reflection and professional development, performed on an interactive basis by researchers and teachers, the co-production of knowledge was also sought. In order to have the meetings conducted with the teachers, the Focus Group technique was used, which, according to Powell and Single, (apud [GATTI, 2005](#)), is constituted by a team of selected people brought together with the objective to discuss and comment on a topic about their professional experience, which is the object of the research.

For data collection, meetings were set in the morning and afternoon shifts, with the permission of all participants for having such gatherings filmed and audio recorded. This method was used to characterize teachers and

<sup>2</sup>Presently, Secretaria de Educação Continuada, Alfabetização, Diversidade e Inclusão (SECADI).

<sup>3</sup>This is a national project coordinated by PHD Enicéia Gonçalves Mendes, Universidade Federal de São Carlos (UFS Car) Professor, which integrates 25 researchers from 16 different Brazilian States, representing 16 post-graduation programs from 22 universities.

MFRs, as well as to understand their operational dynamic in order to seek educational responses to the challenges of schooling students with special education needs. The following issues were discussed: teachers profile, students evaluation, students profile, organization of the pedagogic work, operation of classes, demands for specialist teachers and other themes of interest that might arise from this action, which are listed, below:

- Presentation of the project NMCSE;
- The vision of teachers on the subject;
- Legal aspects of the proposed policy on the subject;
- Confrontation between the policy and the reality of school units where the participating teachers worked;
- Evaluation of diagnosis of MFR students;
- Assessment of planning the teaching of MFR students;
- Evaluation of Learning by MFR students;
- SES: possibilities of MFRs;
- SES: limitations of MFRs;
- The SES and the role of the MFRs are under the perspective of inclusive education.

In continuity with the above actions, other data were collected through a semi-structured interview with the Manager of Special Education in order to gather information about the history of the Special Education Department of the Municipality, as well as its current configuration.

The first results are presented below.

#### 4. Results

The transcript of the interview with the Manager of Special Education and its subsequent analysis allowed us to make up the profile of the service in the Municipality of Araraquara. This profile has been gradually drawn over the last decades and it presents very specific characteristics. The special attention services to students with disabilities by the municipality started to be tailored on the second half of the twentieth century.

Special Education in the Municipality of Araraquara began in 1965 with the purpose of integrating intellectually disabled children with the children regarded as “normal”. The main characteristic of this service was to aid the most compromised students, who were not eligible to attend the Special Classes provided by the regular public school system. The public system, at that time, used to serve students with Learning Disabilities diagnosed as “educable”. The pioneering experience in Araraquara was spread, and after three years of the operation of this class, two others were implemented. After that, the service was steadily growing.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a considerable number of classes were opened in order to meet the demand. In 1990, the first Public Tender for specialized teachers was held at a Higher Degree level. With the arrival of the new group of teachers, there was a clear need for recasting the organization of classes and the preparation of a specific Curricular Framework, since up to that date, Special Education used an adapted preschool Curriculum. The introduction of the new Curriculum and the reorganization of classes led to the expansion and diversification of the service, which, up to that time, would prioritize the area of Mental Disability, but now would embrace Hearing Impairment, Multiple Disabilities, Physical Disabilities and Typical Conduct.

In 1993, the local Special Education System gained a Coordinator to manage specific issues relevant to the area. A program for Teacher Qualification was started, and a partnership for scientific and technical cooperation between the Municipality and the Faculty of Science and Languages of the Universidade Estadual Paulista—UNESP/FCL was set. Through this agreement, the Special Education area of the Department of Education in the Municipality could count on academic advice. Classrooms were refurbished and specific equipment was purchased.

In 1996, a new Curriculum Proposal updated the previous one to meet the needs of special education facing new paradigms. In this year, the position of the Itinerant Teacher was implemented as an alternative for students unable to attend schools, or students with adaptation difficulties within regular education classes. In 1998, the program, which up to that point would only serve Kindergarten, expanded its scope by opening a special class in Elementary School. After the Law 9394, special education started to be defined as a transversal mode of education spanning all levels of education, from Kindergarten to Higher Education. This milestone in the local history of Special Education started to set the gradual fulfillment of an important gap. Now, the actions were legally backed and based on documents that could subsidize the Educational System towards Special Students’ needs. The result is the approach to the assumptions and practice of the Inclusive Education.

In 2009, the local Department of Education reorganized its organizational structure establishing a Special Education Manager position within its organizational chart, which represented a breakthrough in the implementation and guarantee of the new guidelines, based on the National Policy on Special Education under the perspective of Inclusive Education. In order to meet the assumptions of these new policies of inclusion, a SES was opened in 2010, aiming to consolidate the implementation of MFRs for Kindergarten, redefining the role of Special Education professionals who started to serve the target public of Special Education in special classrooms, adequately equipped to respond to all the disabilities and pervasive disorders, in accordance to the new legislation. Within the same premises, the Room for Students with Hearing Impairment, now duly equipped, comes to serve this public within a proposal for Bilingual Education. MFRs are also installed and equipped in all local Public Elementary Schools and two Public Day Care Units—DCU which besides the multifunctional resources, were also equipped to meet the specific needs of blind students.

Concerning structure and organization, the Special Education, the Municipality has a team of 2 Speech Professionals, 2 Psychologists, 1 Pedagogy Professional and 2 Special Education Teachers working in the screening of cases referred to the department.

The Special Education Service also keeps partnerships within the Municipality itself, such as Transportation, Health and Social Work Departments, which offer complementary aid. Also, there is an agreement with the Association for Support and Integration of Visually Impaired, a non-profit organization founded in 1993. This organization supports services offered to blind and low vision students enrolled in public schools. It also performs ophthalmic evaluation and supplies ophthalmic devices when needed.

The Municipality does not rely on local laws or guidelines for Special Education. It follows the regulations from the Federal Government. However, the team has written a document entitled Special Education Program which contains all laws, guidelines and policies (a kind of compilation of official documents), as well as directions for schools on the referral of students for Special Education, enrollment rules, assessment methods, the role of Specialized Education etc.

Presented, below, is the outcome of the meetings with teachers, along the above mentioned Extension Course. Note that the transcripts of all recorded material in audio and video are still in progress; and, for this reason, the information herein shall be expanded at a future opportunity.

At the first meeting, a questionnaire was answered by the teachers in order to characterize the MFRs. The tabulation of the data showed that the age of the participants ranged from 28 to 50 years old, 38.4 years old being the average age. From the total 22 respondents, 50% had the Magistério (a nomenclature of that time, representing a Teaching Degree at High School level), all of them had also attended Higher Education, where 21 were qualified in Intellectual Disabilities and 1 in Multiple Disabilities, 11 had expertise in various areas (Intellectual and Physical Disabilities, Educational Psychology, Specialized Education, Early Stimulation, Cerebral Palsy and Special Education), 3 of them had taken courses in Hearing Impairment, Autism and Alternative Communication, 4 had undergone improvement courses in Educational Psychology, 1 was a Master in Special Education and Doctor in Education, and all of them had participated in various courses offered by the City Department of Education, namely: Brazilian Sign Language, Braille, Neuroscience, Orientation and Mobility for Visually Impaired, High Skilled Individuals, Multiple Intelligences, Teacher Training, Occupational Therapy, Pervasive Developmental Disorders and Autism, Specialized Education and Adapted Sports. Their experience as Special Education Teachers ranged from 2 to 31 years. Regarding the level of education in which they worked, 7 were from Kindergarten, 12 from Elementary Schools, 1 was in service for a high school student, and 12 were from special education (some teachers worked in two different levels). Their workplaces were the ERCs, Municipality Elementary Schools—MESs, SES and Special Institutions. The eligible students presented Intellectual Disabilities, Hearing Impairment, Physical, Visual and Multiple Disorders, Pervasive Developmental Disorder and Autism. The mode of care would vary from individual to small groups, and on average, teachers would meet with 11 students per week. When asked if the MFR occupied a suitable place within the school, 19 answered “yes” and 3 answered “no”. With regard their participation in the regular school activities, 11 respondents participated in classroom councils, 18 attended to administrative meetings, 19 attended parent meetings, 11 attended the Collective Pedagogical Working Time—CPWT, and 9 responded they participated in social and cultural activities. It was also asked if the MFR was equipped with the resources needed in order to have the work carried out, 17 teachers responded “yes”, 4 said “no” and 1 did not respond. The available resources above cited were teaching materials, adapted storybooks and notebooks, pedagogic and/or adapted toys and games, adapted features (jumbo pencil, magnifying glass, furniture, clock and signal language map) and accessible information technology



resources (adaptations, software, internet, screens, special sets of keyboard and mouse, computers, laptops, etc.). The resources considered necessary were adapted learning materials, adapted toys and educational games. All respondents reported receiving support from the local school staff and participating in in-service training such as lectures, courses, meetings, and CPWT debates about various topics related to the specific disabilities.

As for the information gathered from the 10-meeting course held with the teachers, it was structured in three thematic areas, namely: Teacher Training, Assessment and Specialized Educational Services. To each one, the NMCSE prepared a triggering questions script. This script was adapted by NMCSE local staff and used along the meetings to stimulate reflections on each area. After a meeting in which all teachers had spoken out on the issues in that particular thematic area, the Research Team presented theoretical and legal aspects about them, as a dialogue. Following the next meeting, there was confrontation, and, last, the gathering of propositions about those topics.

Thus, since the transcripts are still being held, for the purpose of this text, we will be presenting a synthesis of the key aspects highlighted during the meetings. Furthermore, a more comprehensive analysis will be carried out, based on the totality of the transcribed material.

In terms of the issues raised by the teachers, the issue of the existence of MFRs instead of rooms classified by categories of disabilities was quite evident. According to the teachers' thought, it is not feasible for a single teacher to have enough knowledge about all disabilities, global developmental disorders and high skilled/gifted individuals (target audience for the MFRs). According to them, due to their initial training, aptitude and interest, the MFRs should be offered by niches, i.e., they should be categorized according to types of disabilities, an idea that conflicts with the current policy of special education in the perspective of current inclusive education context at the Federal level.

Another recurring and relevant aspect pointed out by the teachers, but, this time, as a positive characteristic of the current policy, refers to the criteria for the referral of students. Nowadays, the eligibility is focused on a specific population. This eliminates the contradictions generated by the use of "Special Educational Needs"; this terminology was abolished and replaced by Disabilities, Pervasive Developmental Disorders and High Skills.

The relationship between the regular teacher and the specialized teacher remains learner-centered, with the student being the target of the intervention, in most cases. The blurred roles and the consequent uncertainty about the responsibilities that falls to each of them emerges as an important issue, as well as that one concerning families and their skills.

## 5. Discussion

Throughout the whole course, many questions arose about the MFRs, their structure, their operation, their objectives and other matters to be exposed, discussed and studied, which have led to moments of reflection and the consequent professional qualification, which were specific objectives of the project.

An issue to be emphasized is that, by sharing perceptions, participants and researchers have pictured the educational context in the present reality of the municipality, having it made more obvious to everyone. By distancing teachers from their teaching practice, and at the same time making them able to look at their work analytically, we have led them to focus their thoughts on the following aspects: Identifying similarities and differences among their routines within different school units. Verifying the challenges they face on a daily basis which must be adequately addressed and overcome. Making them aware of successful actions reported by their colleagues (this may have been motivated by the fact that the group joined professionals with different experiences from various activity fields). Their understanding and even their insights on the issues must be addressed under the legal principles and rules. Their comprehension that the socialization described in the "counter report" (a document that presents the results of the screening and assessments of students referred to the SES, carried out by the multidisciplinary team) does not occur uniformly or in a standardized way in the different schools: being easier for some but not so accessible for others. Last, due to the spontaneous and majoritarian participation of the group of teachers in the project as well as the final evaluation they have reported on, the experience has revealed great satisfaction.

By contrast, some issues were evidenced concerning the actions of all teachers, regardless of their individual roles, especially about: the identification of eligible students by the regular education teachers; the interaction with families; difficulties of some professionals for directing special students to the SESC due to lack of training; the need for expansion of the multidisciplinary team and inclusion of a Specialist Teacher in the evaluation

process of the students; the need for investments in teacher training in order to have them prepared to identify talents, high skilled and gifted students; complaints of excessive number of students within the SESs, with which teachers cannot cope; the fact that some administrative routines interfere and eventually undermine pedagogic referrals; and the lack of timely and operational structure to enable effective Inclusive Education.

## 6. Final Thoughts

The results herein presented show important trends, identified in the statements of both teachers and the manager of special education in the municipality. Their reflections analyzed critically the policies and the current structure within the context of MFRs. In accordance with the guidelines of the NMCSE, at first the study was able to identify the structure in which these rooms are inserted, which shows that the local reality is an important factor, even when considering the impact of national policies. By aiming to produce scientific evidence in order to analyze educational policies, and to reflect on the subject, the involvement of the specialist teacher in the assessment process to identify eligible SES students was considered still unclear and a reason for considerable worries. The observation of the collaboration with teachers in regular classrooms also requires the development of a more cooperative practice. Currently, it has not yet been, in the teaching experience, a more lasting and effective ballast. This represents an important gap to be addressed, both in initial and continuing training, as well as in on-the-job training.

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