

**Essay on access to higher education:
the long battle for educational inclusion in Portugal**

*Ensaio sobre o acesso ao ensino superior:
a longa batalha pela inclusão educativa em Portugal*

*Ensayo sobre el acceso a la educación superior:
la larga batalla por la inclusión educativa en Portugal*

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Abstract: A battle for inclusive education has been going on for decades and is far from over. Now, the main, but not exclusive, focus of this battle in Portugal is higher education. Disabled students encounter major barriers both in terms of access and success in Portuguese Universities and Polytechnics. The development of the Welfare State and society has generated, in the last five decades, profound changes in the living conditions of people with disabilities and in the public policies that respond to their rights in Portugal. Despite these advances, problems persist, and new ones appear. The focus of this essay focuses on the bottleneck at the end of secondary education and entry into higher education, despite the fact that all students have completed basic education and almost all of them attended secondary education. In fact, the number of students with special needs has grown, but it is far from desirable. This does not result from the (in)capabilities of the students, but from the lack of preparation in the university structures and professional practices at higher education institutions. The development of measures similar to those that make up the Independent Life Support Model, whose evaluation highlighted not only its effectiveness, but also its dissemination potential, could be the way forward to overcome a substantial part of the barriers that currently exist to the participation in this level of education to which everyone is entitled.

Keywords: Disabled Students. Special Needs Education. University Education.

Resumo: Trava-se há décadas uma batalha pela educação inclusiva que está longe do fim. Neste momento, o foco principal, mas não exclusivo, dessa batalha em Portugal é o ensino superior. Os estudantes com deficiência encontram grandes barreiras quer no acesso, quer no sucesso nas Universidades e Politécnicos portugueses. O desenvolvimento do Estado Providência e da sociedade gerou, nas últimas cinco décadas, profundas mudanças nas condições de vida das pessoas com deficiência e nas políticas públicas que respondem aos seus direitos em Portugal. Apesar desses avanços, subsistem problemas e outros novos vão aparecendo. O foco do presente ensaio incide no funil apertado que se forma na conclusão do ensino secundário e à entrada no ensino superior, apesar de se ter conseguido a conclusão do ensino básico por todos os alunos e a frequência do ensino secundário por quase todos. De facto, o número de estudantes com necessidades educativas especiais tem crescido, mas está muito longe do desejável. Isso não resulta das (in)capacidades dos

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estudantes, mas da falta de preparação das estruturas e das práticas profissionais nas universidades e nos politécnicos. O desenvolvimento de medidas semelhantes às que consubstanciam o Modelo de Apoio à Vida Independente, cuja avaliação destacou não apenas a sua eficácia, mas também o seu potencial de disseminação, poderia ser o caminho a seguir para ultrapassar parte substancial das barreiras que atualmente se colocam à participação neste nível de educação, a que todos têm direito.

Palavras-chave: Estudantes com Deficiência. Ensino Especial. Ensino Superior.

Resumen: La batalla por la educación inclusiva está ocurriendo hay décadas y está lejos de terminar. Por el momento, el foco principal, pero no exclusivo, de esta batalla en Portugal es la educación superior. Los estudiantes con discapacidad encuentran importantes barreras tanto en términos de acceso como de éxito en las universidades y escuelas politécnicas portuguesas. El desarrollo del Estado del Bienestar y de la sociedad ha generado, en las últimas cinco décadas, profundos cambios en las condiciones de vida de las personas con discapacidad y en las políticas públicas que responden a sus derechos en Portugal. A pesar de estos avances, los problemas persisten y aparecen otros nuevos. El enfoque de este ensayo se centra en el estrecho embudo que se forma al finalizar la educación secundaria y el ingreso a la educación superior, a pesar de que todos los estudiantes han completado la educación básica y en casi su totalidad asistieron a la educación secundaria. De hecho, el número de alumnos con necesidades educativas especiales en el nivel de enseñanza superior ha crecido, pero dista mucho de ser el número deseable. Esto no resulta de las (in)capacidades de los estudiantes, sino de la falta de preparación en las estructuras y prácticas profesionales en universidades y escuelas politécnicas. El desarrollo de medidas similares a las que componen el Modelo de Apoyo a la Vida Independiente, cuya evaluación destacó no solo su eficacia, sino también su potencial de difusión, podría ser el camino a seguir para superar una parte sustancial de las barreras que existen actualmente para la participación en este nivel de educación al que todos tienen derecho.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes Discapacitados. Educación Especial. Educación Universitária.

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Introduction

This paper is fundamentally an essay presenting some ideas to be tested latter. These address two questions: considering that the numbers of students flagged as eligible for special education measures in Portugal are so high in basic and secondary education, and that all of them complete the basic level of education (9 years), what is the reason why them being so few who complete secondary education (which virtually everyone attends) and even fewer those who complete it successfully? And why do those students not enrol in universities?

Based on a very summarized analysis of the construction of the Welfare State in Portugal, which is taken as the best expression of the development of Portuguese society and economy and simultaneously the main lever of that same development, an attempt is made to situate the results achieved in the school inclusion of disabled children. The building of social, educational and inclusion policies is not linear, it is sown with crossroads and different rhythms in the evolution of policies, institutions, and sectors. It resulted from a process of rupture with the corporatist past, from which it inherited some structures, but it was oriented towards European standards, with which it rapidly converged for almost 30 years after the April Revolution, slowing down the pace of this evolution in recent decades. The setting of well-being policies aimed at people with disabilities was innovative and early in some areas, such as education, but lagged behind in some others, such as employment and housing. Another example of the complexity of this kind of historical processes: the most recent social policy was the launch of Independent Life Support Model, a measure with a relevant impact on beneficiaries and with the potential to spread to other areas, such as old age, thus bringing again inclusion policies to the centre of welfare reforms.

In the field of education, on the initiative of families, a network of special schools was created after the Revolution that welcomed all children, namely those with mental disabilities, while other schools, public ones, specialized in blind and deaf students. In the 90's families began to send their children to regular schools and, more recently, these already accommodated practically all young people with disabilities, leaving only a small group of parents fearful of the impact of participation in an open environment. Schools were endowing themselves with resources and responding to the challenges, although with several gaps in terms of inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular classes and activities.

Thus, when, in the second decade of the 21st century, the Assembly of the Republic decreed compulsory schooling until completion of secondary schooling or at 18 years of age, the education system did not have many difficulties in ensuring that students with disabilities were covered. However, when it comes to students with more complex needs, it is often the case that they turn 18 without completing secondary school, or that, after completing it, they are not in a position to continue their studies.

Thus, the proportion of students with special educational needs who are at university is a very small part of those who were in secondary and basic education. It is also true that the number of students with disabilities in higher education has been increasing, which shows that the problem is not located in students, but in the higher

education institutions themselves, which are as incapable as lack of resources, capabilities and will to receive them and provide them with the support they need. Perhaps the application of the principle of the Support Model to Independent Living in higher education, based on providing a person with a disability with a personal helper, could be used to attack the problems where they are now more urgent: higher education and completion from the secondary.

Development and (in)equality of access to higher education

When, after joining the EEC in 1986, issues of development and modernization occupied a very central place in the country's political and scientific agenda, the current President of the Portuguese Assembly of the Republic and then Professor at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Porto, Augusto Santos Silva (1988), proposed the idea of a “Living Domestic Product” as a determining criterion not only for the objectives, but also for the means to fulfil the Portuguese aspirations for progress, as opposed to the exclusive concern with the Gross Domestic Product. The living domestic product is people, with their cultures and institutions, their belongings and positions, their solidarity and conflicts, their desires and ambitions. Development had, and still has, a precondition, a “culture for development”, that is, a set of values, ways of being and doing, collective choices, including the choice of development itself. Such development required democracy and freedom as conditions, indispensable requirements for well-being and social protection that, as well as the growth and modernization of the economy, simultaneously constitute the objective and main quality of a developed society.

This vision of development, which few people dispute in words, although it is always denied in practice, implies the acceptance that economic growth without equity in the distribution of the results of that growth is not development, that a society with high levels of inequality and discrimination cannot be a quality or well-developed society, that the competitiveness of companies and the economy cannot be achieved at the expense of solidarity and the degradation of people's living conditions (BECK, VAN DER MAESEN; WALKER, 1997).

The participation of all citizens in the benefits of economic growth and development determines the levels of inequality and, therefore, the quality of society. The transformation of growth into solidarity and social cohesion is not a natural, self-contained process. On the contrary, the driving force of growth, the market, in the absence of external regulation, acts towards deepening inequalities, given the enormous

power asymmetry of the agents that operate in it. The correction of this imbalance of forces is, therefore, a task of the collective of workers and citizens mobilized around the Welfare State, the only institutional device available, as far as history teaches us, to operate a minimally fair redistribution of wealth socially created. Only the Welfare State can effectively correct inequalities and provide well-being to all citizens. In this sense, the performance of the Welfare State is the best indicator of a society's level of development (CAPUCHA, 2005).

When we look at the world and observe that democracy, freedom, the quality of society and economic development tend to go together, we are often tempted to think that the good performance, modernity, and productivity of the economy are the foundations of the Welfare State and of the institutions that guaranty freedom and democracy. In the world there are indeed many agents with important leadership roles (political, academic, economic, media) who classify democracy, freedom, and well-being as “luxuries” that people who live and work in the most prosperous economies can afford.

We like to think, however, that this deterministic relationship is far from self-evident. It is possible that the relationship is inverse (social well-being as a factor of economic growth and productivity). But it is most likely that all factors interact and influence each other mutually, creating the combination of dynamics that Augusto Santos Silva spoke about. It is also not unreasonable to think that the quality of society and the Welfare State is, in fact, a fundamental economic asset, since there are no economic oases in social deserts. In social deserts, there can be, at most, “resource suckers”, companies that feed on the best that societies have, including natural and human resources, but this, being able to generate growth at a given moment, is not economic development and is not sustainable (MARSHALL, 1964; STIGLITZ; CHARLTON, 2005).

Let's keep this idea in mind: societies with more equality and equity tend to be socially and economically more developed societies. And let us add another: development implies policies for equality, equity and social justice, which thus take the form of tools that promote rights enshrined in national and international constitutional documents and also implemented in the daily practice of States and their institutions. To this we add a third idea, quite consensual: in modernity, education occupies a central place in the production and reproduction of the main productive factor in economies, the qualifications of work, at the same time that it is called upon to play an important role in the formation of participant citizens, guided by values of solidarity, with critical capacity and committed to the collective good and the reduction of inequalities (SEN, 2006).

Therefore, let's look at education a little closer. One of the main touchstones for assessing the capacity of education to adequately fulfil its role is equity, without which there is no educational quality. Can an education that reproduces inequalities contribute to a better society and a more competitive economy? The answer is negative. Education has, or can have, the dual role of capital invested in society and the economy and of a factor for reducing inequalities, without which investment does not produce a worthwhile return (GUILÉ, 2006).

In Portugal, the trajectory of the educational system has been positive in responding to this dual function. The main indicators of educational performance show that early school leaving dropped to values around 6% and retention became residual, except when students reach the transition from secondary to higher education. In this particular respect, we still live (almost) in the past.

In the 2020/2021 school year there were 1,176,553 students in basic and secondary education and those who benefited from “selective and additional” support measures on special, or inclusive, education, was 78,268. The proportion was 6.7%. This number deserves a first reflection: if the number of children with special educational needs is so much higher than what would be expected given the usual prevalence of disabilities among students, never greater than 3%, is because there is excessive signalling. What are the reasons? They range from the advantages that parents and teachers find in some of the rules (smaller classes where these children are enrolled, rules relating to assessments, among others) to the process of collocation of students with learning difficulties resulting from socioeconomic factors (children of immigrants, members of ethnic minorities, children with weak family support) under the special education label, in order to leave them out of regular activities in classes, under supervision of special education teachers (CAPUCHA, 2010).

But the most interesting, albeit worrying, thing is that when we get to Higher Education, according to data from 2022/2023, the percentage drops to just 0.9%. There is certainly the result of a strong barrier to the entry of children with disabilities into the University. The problem comes from behind: only 44.8% of students with special educational needs move from basic education to secondary education, while those who move to Higher Education are only 33.3%. 78.1% of these students never reach higher education. In this last school year, there were 24,971 students with special educational needs in the 3rd Cycle of Basic Education, 11,162 in Secondary Education and only 3,753 in Higher Education (DGEEC, 2023). It is true that this number represents an important increase, for example, compared to

2017/2018, when there were only 1,644. It is also true that progress has been steady. But this does not mean that we do not have to recognize a serious problem of social exclusion.

We speak of social exclusion because, effectively, young people with disabilities have the right to attend and complete this level of education. If we speak of a right, we are speaking, indeed, of a purpose that cannot depend on the market or on the family or civil society (ESPING-ANDERSEN, 2005), nor on the goodwill of the State. Nor can it depend, if not marginally, on the unique and individual abilities of students. It does depend, mainly, on how Higher Education institutions prepare themselves, or not, to receive, integrate and work with them. The increase in the attendance of higher education by students with disabilities ends up demonstrating this: the more than two thousand who were in universities in 22/23 and were not in 17/18 are not more qualified, nor more capable, than those that were previously left out. What changed was the willingness to receive them. It has changed, but little.

A long process of change

The processes of construction of the Welfare States and, therefore, of fairer and more equitable societies, are not linear, nor homogeneous, nor regular. This means that they involve advances and retreats, that they advance or recede, more in some areas than in others; that sometimes they evolve more quickly and others more slowly; that establish certain patterns in periods of change and then stabilize for more or less long periods (MOZZICAFREDDO, 1997). The Portuguese case and the protection of people with disabilities, which we will now refer to (albeit in a very summarized way) is a good example of this.

All authors dedicated to studying the construction of the Welfare State in Portugal (for example, MOZZICAFREDDO, 1997; CAPUCHA, 2020, BRANCO, 2022) agree that it was born after the April 1974 Revolution. Not because it could not have been born during the dictatorship, as sometimes believe, since this happened in many cases, right from the beginning in Bismark's "founding" Prussia. This happened because the dictatorship adopted a policy of negating the class struggle and reconciling interests according to the corporatist model imported from Italian fascism, thus annulling the attempt of the 1st Republic, in 1919, to establish a social insurance system in all identical to those established throughout Europe. What remained as a legacy left to the democratic regime established in 1974 were just a few district-based pension institutions (Caixas de Previdencia) that paid old-age and disability pensions, granted sickness benefits, and provided health care to State workers and certain structured sectors of

industry and services and their families. Agricultural wage earners and fishermen had access only to the Casas do Povo and Casas dos Pescadores, which in most cases only paid funeral subsidies. A once flourishing network of mutualist institutions survived the attacks of the fascist regime, but the risks covered, the generosity of the support provided, and the scope were very limited. Those schemes left out peasants, small traders, small artisans and other categories that made up the vast majority of the population. Only about 800,000 workers and their families benefited from them. Added to this panorama is the suppression of industrial relations, the generalized disinvestment in education and the narrowness of health services. It is not surprising, therefore, that the desire for a fundamental change in this scenario on the part of a population that, through emigration, knew that other, much more beneficial models existed, popular adherence to the objectives of the Revolution was generalized (CALADO, CAPUCHA; ESTEVÃO, 2019; BRANCO, 2022).

In spite of small differences in details about the periodization of later evolution, all authors, or most of them, such as the aforementioned Juan Mozzicafreddo, Luís Capucha, or Rui Branco (Boaventura Sousa Santos (1990), who is an exception, chose to maintain an ideological vision closed on their thesis of Portugal as part of the European semi periphery), refer to the social pension, the national minimum wage and freedom of unionism, created right at the twilight of the revolution, as the founding marks of universal social policies, based on social rights and oriented towards social justice, which marked the beginning of the construction of the Welfare State.

The political and social turmoil and conflict that was experienced, the lack of economic support capable of sustaining wage increases, the rapid increase in State expenditure, generated a context of crisis that determined the intervention of the IMF and the consequent first era of austerity, in a moment when the political system stabilized around a model of European-type democracy. It was in this context that in 1976 Portugal applied to join the European Economic Community. An intention to guarantee the maintenance of democracy and an aspiration for a general increase in well-being fuelled an almost absolute convergence between political agents and the population, from which only the Marxist-Leninist and Trotskyist parties were different, in the objectives of joining the EEC. Until 1986, the year in which it took place, the requirements for adherence to the “acquis-communautaire” were met, in a vast process of “Europeanisation” of institutional and political aspects of Portuguese society, and of the main social and economic structures (namely the end of the State owned companies nationalizes during the revolutionary period of 1974-75, and definitive affirmation of

the market as the basis of the economic system). It is from this time, a few years apart, that the approval of the basic law on health, the basic law on social protection, the basic law on education and the creation of the Economic and Social Council and the system of industrial relations, which would define the pathway of all the future evolution of the Welfare State in Portugal.

With a strong presence of the family (namely through the double activity practiced as a strategy for adapting to the new conditions of the partial peasantry) and of civil society in the provision of well-being, when compared to Western European or Scandinavian standards, with levels of provision more modest, but with universal coverage of the main risks, social policies were an important tool for the overall development of Portuguese society, which entered the new century at an accelerated pace of convergence with Europe. The education sector had lagged a little behind, with poor performance of the school system (which became universal, but experienced very high levels of early school leaving and rigidity in the educational offer), health was modernized and social protection, whether in the domain of contributory social protection policies, whether in social action and solidarity policies (in the field not only of income, but also of training and employment) grew, consolidated, stabilized and diversified. The diagnosis at the time was that the development of society and the Portuguese economy had been substantial, but uneven and inconsistent (VIEGAS; COSTA, 1998).

The diversification and complexification of the design of policies and institutions of the Welfare State occurred both in terms of the policy measures included in the agenda for building the well-being model, and in terms of the target population segments, including the case of people with disabilities.

From 2000 onwards, the year in which Portugal joined the single currency and became subject to the financial criteria for participation and (without wishing to suggest a simple cause-and-effect relationship here) convergence stopped, both in terms of economic product and in terms of household disposable income and inequality and poverty indicators, the pace of reform has slowed or, in many respects, stagnated. The beginning of the new century brought about a serious systemic crisis that started in the first decade, which led to a new financial bailout by the IMF a few years later, this time in partnership with the European Central Bank and the European Commission, with hard consequences and a very penalizing austerity program, with a strong negative impact on social policies and income distribution and with a significant increase in poverty and unemployment (CALADO, CAPUCHA; ESTEVÃO, 2019).

When, from 2015, the recovery from this crisis was taking place (the so-called reversal phase of some cuts in the social policies of the austerity period and the replacement of some of the values of social benefits), the COVID-19 pandemic came and soon afterwards the inflationary crisis, which practically left the main social indicators at a standstill, if not in slight regression. Innovations and developments in social policies were, in this period, very scarce, basically summing up to the Complementary Solidarity for the Elderly established by Decree-Law n.º 232/2005, of 29 de December, and for the Model of Support for Independent Life (MAVI-Decree-Law No. 129/2017 of October 9), in the field of disability (BRANCO, 2022). Everything else was minor tweaks and a few divestments, such as those in the areas of employment and the social economy, special professional training, or territorial policies to fight against poverty.

The area of integration of people with disabilities is the expression of the arrhythmias we mentioned above. MAVI is at the forefront of solidarity policies in many aspects: it promotes independence and self-determination instead of dependence and institutionalization, an intervention centred on the concrete needs of each person instead of intervention centred on the standard responses of services. It promotes an active life rather than a passive one, it values the opinion of the people supported instead of seeing them as the object of interventions determined by others, it sees the services accessed as rights that make it possible to realize other rights and fulfil citizenship duties, instead of taking citizens for granted as mere recipients of more or less charitable and discretionary benefits (CAPUCHA et al, 2021).

Essentially, what MAVI does is providing the person with a disability with a personal assistant, who he/she chooses from a list of assistants previously selected with his/her participation and trained to assist in carrying out a series of activities, previously agreed with an Independent Life Support Centre, ranging from personal hygiene to communication, mobility or access to different kinds of places, goods and services. The person participates, gets involved and radically increases their abilities and freedoms, independently, in the most diverse contexts of personal, social, and professional life. In this sense, the MAVI is a huge step forward in the design of solidarity policies, with great capacity, according to the evaluation carried out, to transform the lives of people with disabilities of all types. In addition, according to the same evaluation, the principles and the design of the MAVI have potential for replication, with minor adjustments, with other audiences, such as, for example, the elderly with conditions to remain in the community of residence. In this case, a measure from the field of inclusion of people with disabilities can be a precursor to innovation in other fields of social action.

Interestingly, the specific needs and the idea of rights for people with disabilities began, in Portugal, long after several other risks, namely those of protection in old age, disability, illness and unemployment (although, as we have seen, the respective coverage had passed through decades of underdevelopment before universalization). As in many other countries, disability issues are brought onto the agenda because of the war (in our case, the colonial war). At that time, in the 1960s, the first services to be created were specialized in the physical rehabilitation and adaptation of former combatants “disabled” by the war, and the first measures were taken to compensate for the damage caused by their involvement in the conflict (NOGUEIRA, 2019).

Before the 1974 Revolution there were experiences in other fields, namely with the integration of blind students in regular classes of what are now the 2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education, at Passos Manuel Gymnasium, one of the main high schools in Lisbon. And parents and families of students with mental disabilities began to organize themselves in the APPACDM (Portuguese Association of Parents and Friends of Children with Mental Disabilities, a national association that brings together structures in all Districts), to ensure special schools and other responses ranging from residency to professional training and employment, including medical care and other basic services. However, at that time, most of the children with mental, cognitive, communication, even very slight impairments, and even so-called sensory and musculoskeletal and locomotion impairments, were completely out of school, even out of special schools. Families who could afford support for school participation, most of the times hid and “protected” their children, while those who could not even afford to keep them at home in conditions that were sometimes of great indignity, including begging, send them to be institutionalized in asylums. However, there was a growing number of those who believed it was possible to make them progress in school, dignify their future and increase their chances of participating in the labour market, beyond the niches which people with certain difficulties occupied, such as the case of the blind men and women custodians and telephone operators (LIMA, 2021).

Also in this field, the April 25th Revolution, as we have been pointing out, was a turning point. The Armed Forces Disabled created a National Association that gave them a voice and drew attention to the rights of people with disabilities in general. Parents of children with mental disabilities involved in a strong movement to create cooperatives across the country (the CERCI), which developed a fine network of special schools and a whole range of other facilities and services. Other sectors of the population with disabilities, such as the blind and partially sighted, the deaf, parents of autistic children, people with reduced mobility, also

organized themselves and created their own structures in the field of education and various other issues. They began to demand and obtained other rights, such as the attribution of lifetime subsidies, initially discouraging the search for autonomy – anyone who obtained a job would lose the right and it would be difficult to recover it after leaving work – among other various protection measures.

The Basic Education Law of 1986 represented an important advance in the process of opening regular schools to children with disabilities, but it would take more than 30 years for all to attend until the age of 18. The work done with children at school, however, served as a beacon for combating dropout and poor school results of students affected by learning difficulties resulting not from disability, but from the socioeconomic conditions of the family, so the scope was much beyond the group of children with special educational needs (CORREIA, 1997).

Something similar happened with professional training and employment. Children from generations who grew up with the network of special schools began to reach adulthood and their parents' concerns moved to issues such as transition to employment, including vocational training. Portugal had entered the EEC and with that step, areas of innovative policy arrived in the country, co-financed by the Structural Funds, with professional training being one of the most emblematic. Professional training courses were very similar to typical practices in education, with the formation of class groups to attend actions with a curriculum (largely practical and in practice) defined in a period – in hours – determined. The curricula were designed according to the technical contents of a profession or a technical-operative task. Reference institutions such as the Center for Employment and Integrated Professional Training and the Gaia Professional Rehabilitation Centre, both in Gaia, in the Porto region, the Professional Center of Alcoitão and Aldeia de Santa Isabel, in Lisbon, specialize in the development of a “special professional training” model, based on two basic principles: the design adapted to each trainee and the integrated approach. Thus, instead of a rigid calendar and duration, training should follow the rhythm of each trainee; the curriculum must comprise a personal training component (including the design of technical aids, when necessary), a technical training component and a component of preparation for the transition to employment and support and permanence in the workplace. Several modalities of access to work were also considered, from adapting jobs to enclaves in companies, support for employment, social employment and insertion companies, work-training contracts, among others (SOUSA, 2002).

In fact, over time, the measures evolved towards the on-the-job training model, which became dominant, while later, policies such as employment quotas were experimented with poor success. Strategies and funding for professional training and employment support expanded from reference centres to the wide network of institutions that promoted special education, which extended their intervention to the field of training and employment. The methods and principles of special training had an impact on the innovation of social action among other socially disadvantaged groups, such as prisoners and ex-prisoners, drug addicts, the very long-term unemployed, certain ethnic minorities, and young people at risk, in relation to which the field of disability played a leading role.

It should be noted that even with all this progress, the situation of discrimination against people with disabilities in the labour market has not been resolved. In fact, for example, while the employment rate of non-disabled people aged between 20 and 64 in 2018 was 80.5% for men and 74.1% for women, the same indicators for people with some disability was respectively 59.2% and 57.9%, while the unemployment rate was 11.0% for the general population and 18.6% for people with disabilities.

In 1994, the Declaration of Salamanca constitutes an important step towards affirming the right to education for all children with disabilities. In Portugal, Decree-Law 319/91, of 23 August, already pointed to the need for children with disabilities to attend so-called regular schools, providing for a set of resources and measures for special education. Some of these resources, such as special conditions in assessments, and especially the possibility for students with special education needs to be supported by special education teachers, thus helping the main teachers to “clean” the classes of “difficult cases” resulting or not from disabilities, led to an excessive signalling of cases, much higher (2 to 3 times more) than would be expected due to the prevalence of cases in the child population, and to the segregation of children no longer in special schools, but within regular schools. A problem that was tried to be solved with Decree-Law n° 3/2008, of January 7 (CAPUCHA, 2011), but without success, until today. This legislation already reflects the effects in Portugal of the Declaration of Salamanca and also of the CIF. This diploma was not limited to aiming at a better signalling process for students. This signalling was associated with the obligation to define and evaluate a personal plan, to be fulfilled by the school as a whole and by special education teachers in particular. It also reinforced resources, namely by making the former special schools, where most of the specialists and equipment resided, into resource centres to support regular schools (already attended by almost all students), while the so-called disabilities of low prevalence and high intensity (deafness, blindness, multiple disabilities, autism)

began to be supported by a national network of reference schools, in which resources were concentrated to promote an adequate response to students with these major difficulties. A major teacher training operation was set up to train teachers and schools to deal with the new concepts and the respective tools.

Around the same time, the government created the conditions for the approval, in the Assembly of the Republic, of the Law that extended compulsory schooling to the age of 18. By converging a new legal level of schooling, which became secondary, with new resources in schools and a set of tools aimed at promoting inclusive education, as expected, and for a couple of years, there was a focus on main targets and students with disabilities began to be present in the day-to-day of their classes, sharing spaces, learning and experiencing with colleagues, without losing specific support, when required.

It should be noted that, at the same time, various other policies were launched, from the generalization of access to preschool to the reinforcement of the effectiveness of school social action system, passing through the extraordinary expansion of professional education, by a new generation of TEIP schools (Educational Territories of Priority Intervention), for launching an ambitious program of curriculum enrichment and measures to support the family and launching of programs to promote academic success by students with learning difficulties resulting from their socioeconomic condition (RODRIGUES, 2010), which, as a whole, began an accelerated trajectory of reducing early school leaving and retention, while international tests such as PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS revealed that young Portuguese people had left the position in which they found themselves in the rankings, along with developing South American countries, to place itself above some of the European countries that had served as a reference for Portugal, such as France, Sweden or Germany.

However, the system has again proved to be resilient regarding special education. The excess of signalled cases returned, with families accepting the mark of the student with a disability in exchange for special conditions for assessments and with teachers from special education recruitment groups (in ever-increasing numbers) accepting not only to support, but to replace regular teachers working with children with more complex problems, and with schools distributing students with special needs education across different classes just to reduce the respective size. It is in this context that the government approved a new Decree-Law, 54/2018, of 6 July, on Inclusive Education. This diploma is associated with a period in which the words change (abolishing expressions such as “special education”), but neither means nor support are reinforced for education to become, de facto and not just de jure, inclusive. Worse than that: everything points to the wrong message being given that the educational action with all

children with difficulties should not distinguish, in abstract, the different cases and situations, leading to the system gradually focusing on the “easier” cases, leaving most of the more complex and demanding cases without proper care.

Can the success of all students be achieved through equal measures for all? The uniformity of school fabric and its culture is the old error that Bourdieu and other researchers denounced in the 1960s (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, s/d) and which now appears in new guises, masked as progressivism. We are thus back to an old debate whose terms were blurred, at this stage, by the reification of a good concept, that of inclusion.

And so, the so-called “difficult cases” remain, whether they are children with disabilities, or belonging to ethnic minorities and families that accumulate different types of disadvantages and problems, fuelling the early school leaving rates, meanwhile situated at 6%, and the contingent of those who still do not have access to higher education. Currently, all these students in need of greater support reach secondary school, but few leave to continue their studies in higher education. Thus, some are arriving at the University, more than before, but very few compared to the pattern that is becoming more common among young people in general. And this is a problem, because a right is being denied.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities who reach higher education and complete it are few, but they are enough to question Universities and their selection processes and pedagogical and curricular work. They have overcome countless barriers before, but here, all too often, they face a barrier that proves to be insurmountable. Universities and Polytechnic Institutes remain, in fact, too often, the last stronghold of a certain school elitism that postulates that higher education is not for everyone, that confuses rigour with exclusion and dispenses with the appropriate work for each student and with each student. All the burden and all the demands are placed on the shoulders of the students, and none on the academic structures, their organizations, or their professionals. Besides, neither the structures nor the professionals in academia are prepared.

Libraries are not accessible and access to information is very poor. Teachers are generally not aware of how they can help students find suitable information. Sometimes, although more rarely, campuses and classrooms, laboratories and other equipment are also not prepared to receive students with reduced mobility or blind people. Teachers do not know how to organize their teaching activities with students who require different pedagogies, adaptations in working methods and sometimes in curricula and subject programs.

Sometimes small changes are required. A hard-of-hearing student can overcome the handicap if the teacher speaks facing them and is nearby; a blind student may only need the written test to be replaced by an oral one to show that he is prepared; a student on the autism spectrum often just needs teachers to value what they are excellent at and avoid situations where they might lose some control and feel very uncomfortable; others just require more time and a little more attention, which the academy is not prepared to give.

Of course, resources are needed, not just words. There are still two fronts in the fight for inclusion in the University: the front of access, which is still scarce, and the front of success, as a right claimed in an increasingly insistent and informed way.

The way forward must involve everyone. And setting ambitious goals is needed. When 15 years ago it was said that Portugal could assume the target of 10% of early school leaving in 2020, as it was at that time, and for decades, close to 40%, the majority of decision-makers and academics who studied education judged it could be either a somewhat crazy voluntarist act or mere political propaganda. The target was reached ahead of schedule and exceeded, with the right policies and the necessary resources. When, at the same time, goals were established that implied doubling the numbers of access to higher education, the majority said that these goals were for other countries, not for Portugal. Fortunately, what is being discussed today is something else: how to take advantage of the knowledge and skills incorporated in young Portuguese people, to use them productively in the economy and to fulfil the ambitions of these young people.

But still not the ambitions and rights of all. Of all, it is just the abstract right to benefit from higher education and, before that, to dream of attending and completing it. But we are still far from making it a reality. For this, we will have to develop inclusion and quality policies in higher education, as tools for developing the quality of our society and the level of fulfilment of citizenship rights. Would the figure of the “academic assistant”, along the lines of what MAVI does in other fields, be a useful idea?

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