

Inclusion in Two Languages: A Cross-cultural comparison of special education  
practice in Portugal and the United States

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A major goal of education in any society is the transmission of cultural values from one generation to the next (Gardner 1999). Classroom practices reflect each society's values – the importance of discipline, achievement and cooperation, for example – to shape a child's ways of thinking and behaving throughout their lifetimes (Tudge 2008). A significant part of a child's view of themselves and how they relate to others is formed in the context of schooling, a reality as true for children with special needs as for non-disabled children. In an ideal educational setting, diversity in all of its forms is valued. Here, disability would be viewed as a difference to be appreciated, not disparaged. Yet schools are defined by a society's wider cultural context, and a shared understanding of fundamental values such as the benefits of inclusion of individuals with disabilities cannot be assumed.

There is no reason to believe that each society's goals for inclusion will be the same. For example, in the United States today, current special education legislation is influenced by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, itself an outgrowth of our society's belief that the majority of children, regardless of ability, can achieve on a level commensurate with their non-disabled peers and should do so within the general education system (Sailor and Roger 2005). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) students with special needs can be removed from the general

education setting only if they fail to achieve, as measured by formal assessments, despite documented supports, aids and services. The message is clear, academic achievement is the primary goal of inclusion for students with special needs in the U.S.

In contrast to the U.S., in several European countries where inclusion is considered a basic right as well, the right to be accepted as a valued member of society, not just to achieve, appears to be a primary goal. In cross-cultural comparisons, though stated inclusionary policies may look similar, the implementation of those policies will be defined by the intrinsic values of each country towards individuals with disabilities and their place in society.

As a former teacher and now professor of special education in the United States, I have seen special education evolve from securing a place for the student with special needs in the public education *system* in the mid-1970's to today where making a place for these students in the general education *classroom* is now standard. As a recent Fulbright Visiting Professor of Special Education at the *Escola Superior do Educacao, Instituto Politecnico do Porto* in Portugal, I observed a similar emphasis for including students with special needs in the general education classroom. At first glance, it would appear the two systems of service delivery are similar in intent, if not always in practice.

Portugal, like most other European countries, has a national policy mandating full inclusion for all students with disabilities. With rare exceptions, such as children with visual impairments or profound retardation accompanied by the need for medical attention, *all* children with disabilities are educated alongside their typically functioning peers. Even minimal segregation is viewed as ethically wrong. My students at the *Instituto Politecnico do Porto* were shocked when I told them that in the U.S., although

inclusion was one service delivery option in the special education system, schools were mandated by law to provide placement options ranging from the most restrictive self-contained schools for students with special needs to full inclusion with minimal support. In the United States, this cascade of services, as it is known in the special education literature, reflects the American value of choice.

To answer the question “What does inclusion mean to teachers, students and to parents?” one must first understand the values of the society. Portugal is an interdependent society; I was told “The Portuguese like to talk, to socialize and to eat.” Indeed, I observed this with my own university students – they would enter an empty classroom and sit right next to one another. (This is in contrast to my U.S. students who establish a broad personal space, often taking 2 desks to themselves.) When asked about this behavior, the Portuguese students responded “We like each other. We like to be together.” This emphasis on community is reflected in the larger society, as well – rarely did I see the Portuguese dining, shopping or attending cultural events alone. Likewise, babies and the elderly are embedded into the daily life of the family and are a common sight in the family-owned *minimercado* or *restaurante*, or on typical Sunday family outings.

It follows that this societal importance of relationships and interdependent behaviors would carry over into the daily life of individuals with disabilities. For example, rather than using guide dogs to facilitate independence, as is common in the U.S., visually impaired individuals in Portugal are almost always accompanied by another adult. No one in my class at the *Escola Superior do Educacao* questioned the

student who told us that her family was considering buying a small business so that her brother who was disabled would always have a place to work.

The implicit goal of inclusion in societies such as Portugal with its strong commitment to the value of *interdependence* is social integration. In contrast, in societies such as the United States that value *independence*, the unstated goal of inclusion is working, functioning and ideally living on one's own. In Portugal, teachers of children with moderate disabilities emphasize the social gains made by these children through inclusion and, just as importantly, the gains in understanding of the special needs student by typical classmates. Developing a sense of belonging, of being accepted as part of the group, is very important for the student with disabilities, just as developing a sense of responsibility toward others is important for the typically developing students. In discussing the progress of Mafalda, a Portuguese 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student with mental retardation, her teachers commented, "Now she knows how to sit with the others," and "She has learned to be quiet". And they are quick to add "The other children are very kind; Malfada doesn't do anything herself. The others help her by doing things like taking her to the bathroom and to lunch." Parents who were upset with this practice in the beginning of the school year were told to wait a month. At the end of the month everyone agreed that Mafalda's presence in the classroom was a positive experience for all.

Lessons in belonging do not end in elementary school in Portugal. During a university class early in the semester I spent 25 minutes giving a detailed explanation of the differences between mental retardation and learning disabilities. The following week my host and translator asked to me to repeat the entire explanation for the students who

had missed this information when it was initially presented. From my U.S. teaching experience I expected some grumbling from those students who had heard this information already; however, the entire class sat and listened attentively. In fact, students who were present during the initial lecture added examples to help the students who were hearing the material for the first time. This experience makes sense from the interdependent perspective -- no one student was ready to move on until everyone was ready. How can one belong if they feel they are left behind?

Finally, as further evidence as to the relative importance of community over individual achievement, assessments for students with special needs are not integral to the system of special education in Portugal. All students, including those with special needs, are evaluated at the end of every educational cycle – primary, middle school, secondary school. Once they reach the age of 15, general education students sit for exams in Portuguese and mathematics every year. Students with special needs are evaluated only when it is deemed necessary. While students have an individual educational plan, it is neither legally binding nor implemented consistently across settings.

These practices are in sharp contrast to our assessment intensive approach to students with special needs in the United States. In the U.S., the Individualized Education Program (IEP) dictates each year's program for the student with special needs. Goals for inclusion must be written in terms of the general education curriculum, with an emphasis on academics. Social integration is generally secondary to academic achievement. The overarching goal, to eventually achieve on a level commensurate with one's peers, is considered the benchmark of a successful inclusion program. And teachers are held

accountable for each student's yearly progress towards those goals. Progress is measured through an individualized comprehensive evaluation of strengths and weaknesses administered at least every three years. These evaluations are in addition to yearly testing (grades 3-8) alongside their typically developing same age peers with the NCLB mandated examinations. (It must be noted, however, that students with severe disabilities, not to exceed 1 percent of all students, are permitted to have an alternative assessment.)

One of the current methods used to facilitate inclusion in U.S. special education classrooms is the use of a paraprofessional assigned to an individual child, sometimes for the entire day. Under the direction of the special education teacher, the paraprofessional may deliver lessons, adapt materials and, if necessary, act as a social intermediary between the child with special needs and the typically developing children in the class. Unfortunately, however, rather than encouraging interaction with others, the paraprofessional often acts as a barrier to the interactions that occur naturally between children during recess, at lunch and those other non-structured times when children learn crucial social skills. Oftentimes, the presence of the paraprofessional exonerates the typically developing children (and sadly, at times, the general education teacher) from the classroom's shared responsibility for the child with special needs, so evident in the Portuguese classroom. Though inclusion is often promoted as helping the typically developing students gain compassion for individuals with disabilities and a general appreciation for human diversity, as implemented, however, quite the opposite may occur. The focus on achievement and the extensive use of paraprofessionals often creates additional adult barriers between the students with and without disabilities. In the U.S.,

social learning is not to occur at the expense of the academic achievement of students without disabilities (Giangreco 1997).

A first-time U.S. visitor to Portuguese schools will also be struck by the modest resources for special education in a typical Portuguese classroom and by the low number of students officially recognized as having a disability. On these dimensions, the Portuguese classroom of today resembles a U.S. classroom in the mid-1970's. One must be careful not to conclude, however, that Portugal's future will follow the subsequent history of special education in the United States.

Unlike the U.S. today where a general education teacher may have 10 or more students with special needs in their class, teachers in Portugal typically have one or two students with an identified disability, and often class size is controlled for these inclusive classrooms. The key point here is *identified*. This demographic difference between classrooms in the two systems arises from the official designation for students needing special education services. In the U.S., 70 % of the special education population is comprised of students with disabilities considered to be high-incidence (e.g., learning disabilities, ADHD or mild language impairments). In Portugal today, only students with low-incidence disabilities, such as mental retardation, autism, and physical disabilities are recognized as needing special education. Students with high-incidence disabilities are not now identified by the special education system in Portugal. Yet all such students, whether low or high incidence, are included in the general education classroom in Portugal.

Also, I was quick to realize following my first visit to a Portuguese primary school that instruction for the LD students, or any student with a disability identified or

not, must be done with significantly less resources than in U.S. classrooms. Teachers in Portugal receive far less support in terms of specialized instruction or materials for the student with special needs than do teachers in the U.S. That said, several Portuguese teachers showed me with pride their individualized materials for the included student – pictures cut out from magazines and pasted into notebooks with phrases written underneath for students to copy. Services such as speech, physical or psychological therapies that are often part of the U.S. student’s I.E.P. and are provided during the school day, are considered medical services in Portugal and are provided outside of the school system. One child, who had severe Cerebral Palsy, did not have any specialized in-class support other than a large red button on a computer that made it possible for him to respond to simple games and questions. With limited classroom resources, the responsibility for the academic and social education of the child with disabilities necessarily rests on the general education teacher and the other students in the class. This outcome, however, is consistent with the Portuguese emphasis on inclusion. It is not money that is needed for a successful inclusive classroom here; it is a committed teacher and engaged and cooperative students. Everyone, including the teachers, parents and other students, feels that the student with disabilities belongs. As one school administrator put it, “We have less resources here than in the U.S., but we believe that our children are happy”.

This is not to say that the Portuguese educational leadership today does not recognize high-incidence disabilities as a barrier to learning. Special education policymakers understand that the general classroom teacher does need to know how best to meet the needs of these students, but to do so within the context of the Portuguese



commitment to an *interdependent* classroom. It was my responsibility as a Fulbright Professor to teach current and future teachers best practices for instructing students with specific learning disabilities with an emphasis on the role of the general education teacher, and not as might be the case in the United States, with a focus on special services, supports and resources.

A clearer understanding of the values that shape our commitment to educating students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers is necessary in order for inclusion to be embraced by teachers, parents and students. Americans value independence, choice and self-sufficiency, and we view academic achievement as the way to get there. However, having academic achievement as the sole measure of an inclusion program may not be in the best interest of any student. Simi Linton (1998), the disability rights scholar, asserts that America glorifies social and financial independence as the measure of an individual's worth, a goal she describes as unattainable for most disabled people. In contrast, the Portuguese value belonging and having a society that makes a place for everyone despite age or ability. While the Portuguese and U.S. both praise equity for all and promote inclusion of students with special needs as a way of attaining that goal, in reality, each country's values shape the attitudes and beliefs inherent in the daily practice of inclusion.

As culture defines practice, cross-cultural comparisons of inclusionary practices provide a unique opportunity to question our perception of disability generally, and the nature of special education programs that follow from these perceptions. In discussing the inclusion of a child with Down Syndrome with students from a U.S. kindergarten class, I once suggested that they might be able to help this child, to teach him some of what they

know. One five year-old responded, "That's not my job; that's my teacher's job." In Portugal, it is everyone's job, and the lessons begin early.

## References

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