

Initial teacher education for inclusion, equity, and equality: An analysis of practicum reports

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ABSTRACT. The text analyses the extent to which teacher practicum reports in Portugal attend to issues of inclusion, equity, and equality that ensure the fulfillment of the right to education. We look at the titles, keywords, and abstracts in order to select the practicum reports presented for preschool and primary education teacher preparation in all public higher education institutions in Portugal between 2020 and 2023. Then we read the whole texts. Through quantitative and qualitative content analysis of student teachers' reports, within an interpretive framework, we evidence the extent to which their practicum experience promotes inclusive, egalitarian and equitable educational practice, as evidenced in the texts. We conclude that only 11,5% of the analysed reports take these issues as drivers for pedagogical practice. Those that do explore gender issues, intercultural education, special needs education, and inclusiveness in general the classroom, in a way that can be transformative for children's lives. However, the persistence of the invariants of educational action, like textbooks, teacher isolation, the compartmentalization of the subjects, the emphasis on academic literacy development, or summative assessment, acts as structural obstacles to sustainable impact and to inclusive, equal, and equitable educational practice.

Keywords: initial teacher education, equality, equity, inclusion, invariants.

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Formação inicial docente para a inclusão, equidade e igualdade: uma análise de relatórios de estágio

RESUMO. O texto analisa em que medida os relatórios de estágio docente em Portugal abordam questões de inclusão, equidade e igualdade que asseguram o cumprimento do direito à educação. Analisamos os títulos, palavras-chave e resumos para seleccionar os relatórios de estágio da formação de professores da educação pré-escolar e ensino do 1.º ciclo do ensino básico em todas as instituições de ensino superior públicas em Portugal entre 2020 e 2023. Em seguida, lemos todo o texto. Por meio da análise quantitativa e de conteúdo dos relatórios, dentro de um referencial interpretativo, evidenciamos em que medida a sua experiência de estágio promove uma prática educativa inclusiva, igualitária e equitativa, conforme evidenciado nos textos. Concluímos que apenas 11,5% dos relatórios analisados tomam essas questões como orientadores da sua prática pedagógica. Aqueles que exploram questões de género, educação intercultural, educação especial e inclusão em geral na sala de aula, fazem-no de uma forma que pode ser transformadora para a vida das crianças. No entanto, a persistência dos invariantes da ação educacional, como os manuais didáticos, o isolamento profissional, a compartimentalização das disciplinas, a ênfase no desenvolvimento da literacia académica ou da avaliação somativa, atuam como obstáculos estruturais ao impacto sustentável e a uma prática educacional inclusiva, igualitária e equitativa.

Palavras-chave: formação inicial docente, igualdade, equidade, inclusão, invariantes.

Formación inicial del profesorado para la inclusión, la equidad y la igualdad: un análisis de los informes de prácticas

RESUMEN. El texto analiza en qué medida los informes de prácticas docentes en Portugal abordan cuestiones de inclusión, equidad e igualdad que garantizan el cumplimiento del derecho a la educación. Se analizaron los títulos, palabras clave y resúmenes para seleccionar los informes de prácticas presentados para la preparación de docentes de educación preescolar y primaria en todas las instituciones públicas de educación superior de Portugal entre 2020 y 2023. Luego leemos los textos completos. A través del análisis cuantitativo y de contenido cualitativo de los relatos de docentes en formación, dentro de un marco interpretativo, mostramos en qué medida su experiencia promueve una práctica educativa inclusiva, igualitaria y equitativa, tal como se evidencia en los textos. Se concluye que solo 11,5% de los informes analizados toman estas cuestiones como motores de la práctica pedagógica. Aquellos que lo hacen exploran las cuestiones de género, la educación intercultural, las necesidades especiales y la inclusión en general en el aula, de una manera que puede ser transformadora para la vida de los niños. Sin embargo, la persistencia de las invariantes de la acción educativa, como los libros de texto, el aislamiento de los docentes, la compartimentación de las materias, el énfasis en el desarrollo de la alfabetización académica o la evaluación sumativa, actúan como obstáculos estructurales para el impacto sostenible y para la práctica educativa inclusiva, igualitaria y equitativa.

Palabras clave: formación inicial del profesorado, igualdad, equidad, inclusión, invariantes.

Introduction

Notwithstanding the huge progress in fighting poverty and improvement of the living conditions of Portuguese population, the economic crisis of 2008 and the austerity measures that followed the country's bailout by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Commission and Central European Bank resulted in aggravated poverty (Rodrigues, Figueiras, & Junqueira, 2016). Recently, the pandemic situation and, in Europe, the war caused by the Russian federation's invasion of Ukraine have contributed to a widespread increase in poverty and inequality. In 2021, 22.4% of the population was at the risk of poverty or social exclusion (Observatório Nacional da Luta contra a Pobreza, 2022). Among the most affected groups, are those with low schooling levels (30.4% with only basic education, compared with 8.7% with higher education studies) (Observatório Nacional da Luta contra a Pobreza, 2022).

However, poverty alone does not account for exclusion and inequality at Portuguese schools. As in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, having a migration background, speaking other language than the language of instruction, or belonging to an ethnic minority also play their role, as high-risk factors (OECD, 2015; Madeira et al., 2014; Oliveira, 2021). Particularly worrisome is the situation of Roma communities that present the highest levels of dropout and retention (DGEEC, 2023a), too often made invisible in the curricula and school practices (Casa-Nova & Tagliaventi, 2020; FRA, 2018).

Even though inequalities and exclusions have social and economic roots, society at large and teacher education in particular have a responsibility of preparing teachers to go beyond being 'good enough' for underserved school populations (Santomé, 2021; Zeichner, 2018). The need for teacher education (including teacher preparation) models that are socially more just, more democratic, and more inclusive is now more evident than ever.

In this paper, we analyse the extent to which student teachers' practicum experience promotes inclusive, egalitarian, and equitable educational practices, by looking at practicum reports presented for preschool and primary teacher preparation in public higher education institutions in Portugal. We start by framing the role of schooling in facilitating more inclusive, equal, and equitable learning opportunities. Then we move into an analysis of the rationale that sustains modern schooling, looking at its invariants that act as structural obstacles. A description of the policies on curriculum development and initial teacher

education follows, before moving into the document analysis and its results. We end with a short discussion of the results and conclusions.

The inability of schooling to act as a social lift

The school we have been able to construct in the modern times, also known as modern school, may be characterized as a largely meritocratic, selective, and legitimizing social inequalities. In spite of the reform movements, these characteristics have lingered and even been reinforced. Since its inception, the mission of the modern school as an institution that would emancipate the general population was never inscribed in its DNA. The critique to its role in the cultural and social reproduction and legitimizing of social inequalities emerged in the 1960s in central countries like the USA, United Kingdom, and France. Multiple reforms of educational systems worldwide followed, in order to restore its role on integrating and socializing the new generations. At their core, the idea of a democratic school that would promote quality education for all, as a reaction to the meritocratic school (Young, 1961).

However, schooling is persistently unable to counteract the increase in social inequalities. The rise in schooling years (in Portugal, 12 years of compulsory education since 2009) and the resulting increase in the number of years of exposure of the younger generations to schooling has not, in itself, resulted in mitigating inequality. Baudelot and Establet's analysis (1994) still stands today, as the educational level of the world population has been rising at the same pace as inequalities, in spite of the significant access to "the schooling game by the social categories that were excluded until then" (Bourdieu & Champagne, 2003, p. 481, our translation). The power of schooling as social lift is strongly limited by external powers, as schools are as conservative or as progressive as society is (Enguita, 2007).

From mid-20th century onwards, schools kept selecting students, marginalizing subordinate groups, as they had always done, but without taking the responsibility for it. In this context, the concept of 'compensatory education' started to emerge. In his famous text 'Education cannot compensate for society', Bernstein (1971) critiques a form of state bureaucracy concerned with the situation of social and culturally subordinated children:

The concept, 'compensatory education', serves to direct attention away from the internal organization and educational context of the school, and focus our attention on the families

and children. ‘Compensatory education’ implies that something is lacking in the family, and so in the child. As a result, the children are unable to benefit from schools. (p. 65).

It is, therefore, a situation of ‘guilty conscience’ about a circumstance that was regarded as ‘natural’ as a result of the individual’s characteristics. This may explain why the continuing programs and strategies of compensatory education have failed in the UK, as it is not clear what has been compensated for (Power, 2008). The ‘hypocrisies of positive discrimination’ as Piketty (2023) calls compensatory policies, result in the opposite of what their rhetoric claims; that is, they benefit first and foremost the socially most advantaged, keeping the disadvantaged in their traditional place in the social ladder. This vision is hegemonic in educational systems and curricular reforms, and it keeps directing our attention away from the schools’ internal structures and practices, as well the conditions and contexts of the educational environment (Bernstein, 2003; Clark et al., 1999).

Curriculum, equity, and inclusion: invariants of the educational action

The shifts in the world educational systems have been mainly located more at the discourse level on the required changes than on actual institutional practices. The socio-economic background of 15-year-olds still accounts for more than a 10% difference in participation in early childhood education and care and grade repetition is still high (27%) (Eurydice, 2020). The school rankings created from the results of national exams strengthen admissions to private schools, driving middle class families away from public schools. The dissemination by the Ministry of Education of other educational indicators, highlighting “positive educational results in schools with a large disadvantaged population” (Eurydice, 2020, p. 177) appears to have no impact on these families’ choices, as the choice for the private offer is on the rise, especially in secondary education – from 21,8% in 2016 to 24,9% in 2022 (DGEEC, 2017, 2023b). In addition, in a time of teacher shortage, there are no incentives for teachers to work in high needs schools. This reinforces the evidence that structural changes in (educational) institutions and in societies are deeply connected and inseparable (Ardoino, 1979; Enguita, 2007). It also explains why all attempts at reforming educational systems, including Portugal, to implement formative assessment or consolidate inclusive education, for example, are no more than ‘compensatory educational measures’.

As the dominant way of thinking in societies and in schools is meritocratic, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to attain a truly democratic school. The combination of

meritocracy with a grammar of schooling and an official curriculum language works as a pipeline for inequalities (Paraskeva, 2017). There are invariants of the educational action (Silva, 2023) that stand in the way as obstacles for changing the modern school towards a more democratic institution. Among several, we highlight some that help understand why it is so difficult to make schools places of real equitable, equal, and inclusive practices in the Portuguese context:

- a centralized, single curriculum, designed by specialists external to schools that perceive teachers and schools as politically disempowered, in spite of the discourses on ‘alternative curricula’, ‘curriculum projects’, and ‘curriculum flexibility’, among other;

- the concept of school class and its relationship with the school model – a teacher for a given number of students, a classical model of one-way communication supported by the existence of textbooks;

- textbooks as the de facto curriculum, too often single mediators of the pedagogical action that make evident the power of the teaching industry in conditioning the teaching profession;

- the teacher regarded as an individual, single entity, not perceived as a collective that has political agency in locally deciding on curriculum development - collective autonomy and equality of opportunities of schools and teachers as a ‘needful fiction’ (Barroso, 2004), very much needed but highly unlikely to be fully realized;

- summative assessment as dominant, placing formative (democratic) assessment in a subordinate role, in spite of the fact that the legislation points in a different direction, albeit in an ambiguous and contradictory manner, as there are national exams at the end of two cycles of basic education.

Not without deep contradictions and paradoxes, the Portuguese educational system has recently established a law for inclusive education (Decree-Law 54/2018), following the publication of the Students’ Profile by the End of Compulsory Schooling (Martins, 2017) that includes a democratic and humanistic citizenship endeavor. Inclusive education is regarded as a process that aims to respond to the diversity of needs and potential of all students, through increasing their participation in the learning processes and in the life of the educational community (Decree-Law 54/2018, Article 1). Equity and inclusion are two of the eight guiding principles, along with self-determination and respect for personal autonomy, including, not only special needs, but also one’s cultural and linguistic identity. All students,

regardless of their physical or mental ability, migration background, or ethnic belonging, attend mainstream classes (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Citizenship Education is integrated in the mainstream curriculum, in all levels of basic education. In the particular case of 1st cycle of basic education, it is cross curricular; and encompasses themes like Human Rights, Interculturality, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development, Environmental Education, or Health.

Inclusive education requires flexibility in curriculum development and the adoption of academic accommodations and (general) pedagogical differentiation measures, but also selective and additional educational measures if needed be. Even though there are special education teachers who integrate specific recruitment groups, “there is no specific training or recruitment rules for staff members to teach students from an immigrant background and Roma students in schools and classrooms” (Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 63), as well as mentoring programs to build competences for dealing with diversity and inclusion.

Notwithstanding, all schools and school clusters must have a multidisciplinary team to support and monitor inclusive education. Curriculum development and pedagogical practice is expected to be flexible and adjusted to the specificities of schools and students, informed by both disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborative work, diversified in evaluation and assessment procedures, and promoting research and inquiry abilities, analysis and problematization, as well as autonomy (Decree-Law 55/2018). At this discourse level, all seems defensible within a vision for a democratic school. However, as we argued before, the persistence of the invariants of educational action still stands in the way of this desideratum, as well as teacher education.

The curriculum of initial teacher education

In Portugal, initial teacher education (ITE) requires a Master’s degree (ISCED 7), regardless of the schooling level (from preschool to secondary). There are different entry and study requirements, depending on the schooling level and subjects to which ITE programs qualify. For example, to become a preschool educator or primary teacher (ISCED 0 and 1), a 3-year degree (*Licenciatura*) in Basic Education is required, followed by a Master’s in Teaching. All candidates have to complete a year-long teaching practicum, or supervised teaching practice.

ITE programs are designed according to national regulations issued by the Ministry of Education. They have to include training on content knowledge of the teaching area, pedagogical content (or didactic) knowledge, and general pedagogical knowledge. Furthermore, there is a component of initiation to professional practice (teaching practicum) that requires the production of a practicum report that is presented and discussed in a public exam.

The teaching profiles, the length of the programs, the curriculum components and the corresponding number of credits, the resources, the conditions for teaching practice, among others are stipulated by law as well. Thus, the ITE programs in all higher education institutions are very similar, as the national legal framework details all areas and content that should be included in ITE curricula, as well as their weighing in all the programs (Table 1).

Table 1 - Component design of initial teacher education curricula (Decree Law n. 79/2014, May 14).

Subject teaching (≥15%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content area knowledge
General Education (≥6%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental psychology • Cognitive psychology, namely elementary mathematics and reading; • Curriculum and assessment • School as an educational organization • Special educational needs • Classroom management and organization
Didactics (≥23%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didactic content knowledge
Cultural, social and ethical competences (to be developed across the curriculum)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of the main problems of contemporary world, including fundamental values of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, freedom of religion and of speech, respect for ethnic minorities, and for the values of gender equality • Scientific culture, arts, and humanities • Research methods • Awareness of the ethical and civic dimensions of the teaching profession
Initiation to professional practice (≥35%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom observation • Supervised teaching practice: planning, teaching, assessing

Source: in Flores & Moreira, 2023, p. 305, reduced and adapted.

The most valued component is initiation to professional practice, followed by didactics. Foundational subjects like Philosophy of Education, History of Education, Sociology of Education, or Pedagogy are being gradually wiped out of the field of ITE (Flores & Moreira, 2023), strengthening the ‘practical’ component and a perception of teacher education as mostly technical and instrumental (Moreira, 2020). Even though there is a cultural, social, and

ethical component that includes inclusion, acceptance, respect for diversity, and equality, the absence of weighting in the ITE curricula throws it into a no man's land.

The legal framework states all the profiles for teaching (from preschool to secondary education in all the subjects in the national curriculum), but it does not address the content for these programs, or any specific methodological orientation. There is a recognition that teaching is a demanding endeavor; therefore, teacher preparation should be rigorous. There is also an assumption that these programs should take into account the relevant educational policies. The teaching practicum takes place in cooperating teachers' classes and is supervised by them and higher education staff. It should include the observation of educational situations, as well as planning, developing, and evaluating teaching, in the schooling levels to which the program prepares. The resulting final report is assessed in a public exam.

An analysis of student teachers' practicum reports

Method

Resorting to quantitative and qualitative content analysis within an interpretive framework, our goal was to analyze the extent to which student teachers' practicum experience promotes egalitarian and equitable educational practices, with a focus on inclusion, by looking at their practicum reports. We selected practicum reports presented for preschool and primary education programs in public higher education institutions between 2020 and 2023 taken from their institutional repositories (<https://www.rcaap.pt/directory.jsp>). We chose this period in order to have a representative and updated map of initial teaching practices that took place after the publication of the Decree-Law on inclusion (Decree-Law 54/2018), as it would take at least two years to implement. This particular Master degree is important for five reasons:

1) the profile of a 'generalist' teacher/ educator (preschool and primary) that is responsible for just one group of students; thus, he/she knows these students in depth and can develop a differentiated, more inclusive approach;

2) he/she has to possess ample knowledge in several fields (Language, Maths, Science, Arts...) and develop an interdisciplinary approach that will integrate all subject areas in his/her professional action;

3) the master degree that has the same undergraduate degree as entry requirement (Bachelor Degree in Basic Education);

4) it was less interrupted since its creation;

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5) it qualifies more educators/teachers per year.

First, we carefully read the titles, abstracts, and keywords to select the reports for analysis. We carried out a quantitative and a qualitative analysis. To perform the quantitative one, we extracted all the words used to conceptualize each of the three themes and their semantic field (inclusion, equity, and equality). We started with the conceptual lexical mapping provided by the ERIC Thesaurus for inclusion, equal education, and diversity and added other words/ phrases pertaining to the same semantic field. We ended with four major themes. We then used the “Mentimeter” tool to produce word clouds. The word cloud is a visual representation of the number of words pertaining to the same semantic field, in which the size of the word indicates its frequency, as well as the semantic mapping around it.

To do the qualitative analysis, we carefully read the selected reports, in order to characterize the research and pedagogical aims, the methodological research and pedagogical approach, and the constraints identified. We decided not to focus on the results, as they are overwhelmingly positive (all state that both the research and pedagogical aims are achieved); focusing on the perceived constraints would provide a more critical view on the results, as well as a more global picture of the structural constraints, or invariants of the educational action.

Results

In total 62 practicum reports were selected for analysis, i.e., 11,5% of the total number of reports (n=539) that were presented between 2020 and 2023 at 15 public higher education institutions in Portugal that offer the selected Master’s program. Table 2 presents the themes within the object of study and the number of reports categorized within each theme.

Table 2 - Foci of the selected reports

Foci	Number of reports (n=62)
Inclusion, equity, and equality (general)	21
Inter/multicultural education	16
Gender equality	13
Special (educational) needs	12

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The majority (n= 21; 33,9%) were on general issues concerning inclusion, equity, and equality, without focusing on any given specific group or issue, taking these themes as

embedded within a social and educational project for a democratic society. Some reports were on multi/intercultural education (n=16; 25,8%), followed by gender equality (n=13; 21%), and Special (Educational) Needs (SEN) (n=12; 19,3%). There is scarce mention to equity/equitable in titles, keywords, or abstracts, despite the inclusion of some keywords from an equity framework (like academic accommodations or pedagogical differentiation).

The reports that generally address the themes of inclusion, equity, and equality view them as social and educational goals for a democratic society and a global citizenship goal, grounded in values such as respect, acceptance of difference, and valuing diversity. However, this is also expected, as curriculum guidelines for preschool and primary education are focused on the development of personal and social skills that enhance citizenship education within a project for an inclusive and democratic society. As these reports address these themes in an identical manner, very close to the normative and legal framework, we decided not to include them in the semantic mapping. However, we included them in the remaining analysis.

Semantic mapping

Multi/intercultural education is conceptualized in very general terms, without clearly connecting it to a project of democracy and social justice (Figure 1). However, there are interventions with a view to enhancing values such as respect and acceptance. This is the case of projects targeted at Roma children and families within an intercultural approach to primary education (e.g., Santos, 2022), as they address discrimination, racism, and prejudice (e.g. Ricardo, 2020; Almeida, 2020; Santos, 2023). They also include an analysis on how children's literature can promote intercultural education and respect for cultural diversity (e.g., Geraldés, 2020), and generally facilitate social and personal development and identity (e.g., Fernandes, 2020). Some reports explicitly connect their focus to national and international guidelines, like the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., Luís, 2023), or the Citizenship and Development Education curriculum that is mandatory for all educational levels in Portugal (e.g., Graça, 2023).

Figure 1 - Semantic map for inter/multicultural education



Source: Prepared by the authors.

The reports directed towards gender equality are mainly focused on deconstructing gender stereotypes through inquiring on educators' and children's perceptions on gender roles and gender equality and developing tasks on promoting awareness of gender roles and gender equality (e.g., Almeida, 2020; Nunes, 2022) in a democratic citizenship framework (Figure 2). The roles of the families are discussed, as well as social perceptions and practices, like social activities, clothes and jobs, or use of toys and house chores. Children's literature is also analyzed, using both traditional fairy tales and modern ones, aiming at the deconstruction of stereotypes associated with the women's role and the feminine (e.g., Fonseca, 2020).

Figure 2 - Semantic map for gender equality



Source: Prepared by the authors.

There are also projects directed towards the inclusion of all children, with regard to catering to a given group’s specific needs, responding with pedagogical differentiation or, using the current legal framework, with selective and additional measures (e.g., Dias, 2021) (Figure 3). They include reflecting on own inclusive teaching practices (e.g., Guedes, 2021) or identifying educators’ needs for implementing inclusive education (e.g., Silva, M. S., 2023). Focusing on children with disabilities, Music is used with the aim of promoting their academic learning and their autonomy, with a focus on their feelings and experiences (e.g., Martins, 2020), or outdoor spaces to foster their self-esteem and social skills (e.g., Carrilho, 2022). Only one report looks at special needs of gifted children (e.g., Frazão, 2020). Identifying families as being ‘at risk’ and how to work with them and their children is also evidenced (e.g., Teodoro, 2021; Terra, 2021). Differently from the others’, these reports look at methodological issues, reflecting on curriculum and pedagogical differentiation in classroom activities.

Figure 3 - Semantic map for Special (Educational) Needs



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Inclusive education is a general educational goal within a social democratic project. There are words and phrases related to socioaffective goals, such as feelings, emotions, and relationships, like empathy, well-being, emotional changes, and social skills. However, when we look at those reports focusing on special needs (cf. Figure 3), those goals disappear, perceiving inclusion as directed towards children in need of inclusion, not as a two-way process where the all children (including the several majorities) would benefit from learning from and with the (different) other.

The didactic proposals and how these themes are dealt with in the classroom is highly undervalued in abstracts and keywords, and how it is aligned with the theoretical framework. As reports that document and ground practice, this situation is worthy noticing. Exception is made for those who focus on children’s literature and thus address inclusion and equity from a methodological standpoint as well, highlighting discussions, debates, and cooperative work (e.g., Braga, 2022; Fernandes, 2020).

Looking at methodology

Upon a closer look at the selected reports, the majority are intervention studies (n=39), largely resorting to action research, thus articulating understanding with intervention, research and pedagogy (Table 3). The descriptive studies inquire mostly about teachers’ perceptions on inclusion issues, but also carry out document analysis and literature reviews. Three reports that clearly focus on equity issues (besides gender equity) are descriptive studies on the influence of socioeconomic factors on school achievement (Alves, 2023), teacher development needs on inclusion (Silva, 2023), but also on the perceptions of teachers on school retention (Rosa, 2022).

Table 3 - Methodology of the selected reports

Research aims	Research strategies	Pedagogical aims	Pedagogical strategies	Constraints
To identify, perceptions, conceptions, representations	Observation Questionnaires Interviews Audio/ video recordings	To (de/re)construct perceptions, conceptions, representations	Children’s work (writings, arts and crafts) Debates/ discussions	Lack of research experience
To infer how those perceptions/conceptions influence educators, children’s and families’ actions and relationships	Photos Field notes and written reflections Children’s productions Document analysis Literature review	To implement and evaluate pedagogical intervention projects	Reflection on visual stimuli Storytelling Watching films Games Role play	More time for research and teaching Extension of the syllabi
To evaluate pedagogical interventions		To promote attitudes that favor inclusion, equity, and equality	Activities with parents	Pandemic context (impossibility of school visits)
To evaluate the impact of the internship on professional development of the student teacher/				Need to include the families Age of the children and the complexity of

educator	the themes
	High number of children per class

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Action research studies clearly articulate the practicum goals with research goals, starting with a characterization of the context in order to adjust intervention for change, highlighting the impact of action research in the promotion of professional competences and children’s learning. Besides working with children (all reports do), families were also involved, for example, by answering questionnaires or participating in some class activities. The pedagogical approach includes a diversity of tasks such as reading, writing, viewing short films and analyzing pictures and images, debates, or storytelling. These activities often took place inside the class, seldom involving the broader school community. They are aligned with transformative goals, including changing views and perceptions, engaging children in analysis and reflection processes, and developing relevant learning outcomes. However, they could have also have gone a step further, becoming more inclusive - for example, photos are taken by the teachers, books are chosen by the teachers, and children learning roles are highly controlled. The children’s and their families’ involvement could be more extended, or the data collected could be used to inform the design approach, discuss the data, identify limitations in the efficacy of the approach, or highlight challenges for future interventions.

Constraints identified in the reports are very much associated with the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic in their teaching and research activity, as many predicted activities could not take place. The perceived lack of time to expand research collection and the pedagogical approach, as well as the need to involve children’s families more. Others associate constraints with a high number of children, along with their diversity and the need to develop more differentiated instruction, and the extension of the curriculum and the syllabi for primary education, that are perceived as not favoring a more inclusive approach. There is a notorious focus on individual factors associated with teaching, as well as a perception of the curriculum still very much associated with teaching academic content like Portuguese language and Maths, despite the conceptual framework in the reports that evidences a more embracing perspective of the prescribed national curriculum.

Discussion and conclusions

We conclude that only 11,5% of the reports completed in the last three years in ITE programs for preschool and primary education in public institutions take inclusion, equity, and equality issues as main drivers for pedagogical practice. This may be a (predicted) outcome of the competences for ITE outlined in the law that takes an ethical, social and cultural component as negligible. However, it is also evidence of the meritocratic culture that prevails, and that favors not only a more instrumental and technical approach in teacher preparation in Portugal (cf. Moreira, 2020; Flores & Moreira, 2023), but also setting up ‘technologies of inclusion’ that often fail in catering for all students’ needs (Clark et al., 1999). The scarce explicit reference to equity or equitable practices in the reports may reflect a de-politization process that has been occurring in ITE and that may be due to the weight that the didactic and methodological component has in the law (cf. Table 1). However, this component has a responsibility of being framed in principles and values that should oppose technocratic views of the profession, for example, in articulation with educational policy and sociological perspectives.

The reports that focus on inclusion, equity, and equality explore gender issues, intercultural education, citizenship education, and inclusiveness in general in the classroom, in a way that can be transformative for children’s lives. They aim at deconstructing stereotypes of the Other, perceived as different on the basis of gender, ethnicity, ability, culture, or language. However, there is the prevalence of a deficit approach to inclusion, on ‘blaming the victim’ (cf. Bernstein 1971, 2003), focusing on individual and family factors and not problematizing the whole school apparatus (cf. Clark et al., 1999) and societal structures of exclusion and discrimination (cf. Piketty, 2023).

Though obvious (and strongly developed) in preschool education, social and personal development loses its strength in primary school. The curriculum for primary education is divided in curricular areas with specific teaching hours allocated what does not favor collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches. In addition, student teachers develop their teaching practice in the cooperating teachers’ classes and cannot be expected to make decisions on their own, including the involvement of families or school communities. Furthermore, the compartmentalization of the subjects, the emphasis on academic literacy development, the central role of the textbook and of summative assessment, do not create

room for a more embracing and informed view of the curriculum, as well as the recognition of equitable and inclusive education as pillars for a democratic society (cf. CNE, 2015).

Educational systems have to change fundamentally, in order to overcome the persistence of the invariants of educational action that stand in the way of an inclusive, equitable and equal school. Only then can schools be(come) loci of political production. Notwithstanding, teachers, schools, and higher education institutions still have a role to play in creating spaces for critical cultural democracy, that counteracts the experiences of power imbalances, social and cultural subordination, and technocratic control that minority students experience (Darder, 2022). Through their action and models they provide, schools can become locations for democratic conviviality, making the experience of the present as rich as possible (Dewey, 2007).

As limitations to our study, we sampled the reports by looking only at the titles, abstracts, and keywords, which certainly excluded reports that could have been included. In addition, restricting our analysis to the last four years may also be regarded as a limitation for the few numbers of years and the impact that a global pandemic had on schools' and teachers' work.

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