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# Public Policies for Special Education from an Inclusive Perspective: Intentions in the Neoliberal Context

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**ABSTRACT:** Special education is a field of study constituted and interspersed with discussions on the recognition of disability and the underlying concepts, as central to the composition of dialogues in the Brazilian academic and socio-educational context. Thus, the present article aims to discuss theoretical productions on public policies for special education from an inclusive perspective in light of neoliberalism and its interference in educational research contexts. To this end, based on literature review, it begins with a survey of the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD), carried out in the last five years, to support discussions related to the authors', in a stricto sensu postgraduate program, research areas and their insertion into the context of analyzing neoliberal interference. Relevant contributions can be identified, especially when considering the conditions for and in the inclusion of students with disabilities in the Brazilian educational landscape. The possibilities for expanding this study are evident, as well as its insertion into the theoretical and methodological field of special education.

**SPECIAL EDUCATION. PUBLIC INCLUSION POLICIES. NEOLIBERALISM.**

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## Introduction

This article arises from participation in a *stricto sensu* postgraduate program and from its contributions to the analysis of research objects derived from applied studies. As a point of intersection, the authors' connection to the field of special education studies and their interest in this area is highlighted, as evidenced by some of their previous publications (Araújo & Soares, 2021; 2023; Ferreira & Soares, 2021). The way in which theoretical perspectives illuminate and expand developed studies regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities provides an opportunity to discuss theoretical productions on public policies for special education from an inclusive perspective in light of contributions concerning neoliberalism and its interferences in educational research contexts.

Special education is a field of study constituted and interwoven with discussions about the recognition of disability and the underlying conceptions that are central to the development of dialogues in the Brazilian academic and socio-educational context. Thus, although its target population is recognized as students with disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and high abilities/giftedness (Brazil, 2025), disability was selected as representative of these needs and, therefore, assumes centrality in the discussions proposed in this article.

Based on bibliographic research, the study begins with a survey conducted in the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD) between 2020 and 2025, thus supporting the discussions associated with the authors' research objects and their insertion into the context of analyzing neoliberal interference.

The discussions proposed are situated within the broader global debate on special education and neoliberalism; therefore, they may be considered in other academic and/or educational contexts, while preserving the characteristics of each investigative locus.

For organizational purposes, following this introductory section—where the objective, approach, and structure of the article are presented—the section entitled “Development: dialogues with the theoretical framework” discusses the main reflections of the study. Subsequently, the survey conducted in the BDTD and its contributions are presented in the section entitled “Deepening the discussions in light of the BDTD survey: main results.” Based on these discussions, the “Conclusion” of the study is presented with the expectation of expanding and indicating new possibilities for educational and social research contexts.

## Development: Dialogues With the Theoretical Framework

This section aims to present the main theoretical contributions of the study. As an initial approach to the theme, it is essential to recognize the historical process of exclusion experienced by people with disabilities, particularly when referring to access to education (Jannuzzi, 2006; Ferreira & Guimarães, 2003). Even after years of struggle and the implementation of public policies aimed at special education, these exclusions persist, sustained by a still dominant neoliberal model.

Special education is situated within the field of public policy and, in this sense, such policies are engendered under numerous conditions and power struggles carried out by different social groups. Thus, this article emphasizes neoliberal interferences with

diverse intentionalities in the constitution of conditions for the school inclusion of students with disabilities, in light of the theoretical contributions of Santos (2018), specifically his analogies concerning the phenomenon of globalization.

For the purpose of clarifying the objective of this section, it is important to reaffirm that, in the Brazilian context, special education is responsible for delimiting actions and strategies aimed at the inclusion of students with disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and high abilities/giftedness. As explained in the Introduction of this study, and as done in other works, we use the expression “students with disabilities” as representative of the population mentioned, given that they share, in their daily lives, a historical universe of exclusion (Figueira, 2008).

Thus, regarding the global scenario in which financial interests overlap with the educational context, the influence of international organizations - such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) - can be identified in the construction of public policies aimed at special education from an inclusive perspective (Borges & Torres, 2020).

Furthermore, special education originally developed through specialized institutions. The inclusive perspective emerges as a result of the materialization of tensions (Borges & Torres, 2020) and, therefore, reveals a field of struggles and disputes in the organization of this proposal within the Brazilian educational context.

Another important aspect is the emphasis on the existing legal framework (Brazil, 1988; 1996; 2008; 2012; 2015; 2025). However, even with the support of social movements, specialists, and families of people with disabilities, in Brazil these policies have been - and continue to be - adapted within a neoliberal

rationale, privileging market interests over the common good.

For the purposes of this article, neoliberalism is understood not only as an economic policy but also as a mechanism for reorganizing the role of the State, redefining social rights as services and transforming individuals into providers serving capital.

According to Orlando et al. (2025, p. 9), this model is configured as “[...] a strategy to dismantle the welfare state, shifting the responsibility for providing essential services, such as education, to the private sector.” This logic ultimately reflects the interests of dominant classes in transforming education - whose primary function should be to guarantee a right for all - into a commodity, thereby weakening the idea of the school as a collective, transformative, and inclusive space.

Orlando et al. conducted a recent analysis covering the period from 2016 to 2023 and indicated the presence of neoliberalism in Brazilian public policies as a marker of disputes in the political, social, and economic spheres. Ultimately, “[...] educational projects are conservative and deepen the privatization of education” (Orlando et al., 2025, p. 1). Furthermore, the authors point out how neoliberal ideals contribute to the social role of the school being emptied of meaning, as it comes to be viewed as a space for training oriented solely toward the market. This logic ends up excluding individuals with disabilities for not fitting into a standard model of students characterized or perceived as productive, thereby further increasing inequalities and perpetuating exclusions (Orlando et al., 2025).

By recognizing the set of intentionalities involved in the production and maintenance of these inequalities, the contributions of Santos (2018) inspire a (re)thinking of the theoretical field of special education, as they represent the beginning of an

important dialogue concerning the critical perception of a given reality. In this sense, in his work *Toward Another Globalization*, the author invites us to reflect on globalization through the perspective of three worlds within one: “[...] the first would be the world as we are made to see it: globalization as fable; the second would be the world as it really is: globalization as perversity; and the third the world as it could be: another globalization” (Santos, 2018, p. 9).

Although without the depth required by the discussions provoked by Santos (2018), we present reflections derived from initial engagements with the author’s propositions. In this sense, we establish parallels with the three worlds, as discussed below, since we believe in the possibilities of using this “other globalization” as a tool for educational analysis.

In the field of education, I. the idea of fable may be related to inclusive education when confronting what is guaranteed in official documents with the conditions for implementing the proposal of inclusion of students with disabilities in the Brazilian context. From a legal perspective, official documents guarantee the right of all to education, understood not only as access but also as permanence in the educational environment, with learning and academic success regardless of students’ specificities, under the discourse of universal inclusion. However, in practice, the legal framework is not fully realized because, in guaranteeing these rights, among other factors, there is a lack of resources, accessibility, trained professionals, and greater investments aimed at overcoming attitudinal barriers, which ultimately leads to the invisibilization of structural inequalities.

Specifically regarding teacher education, for example, weaknesses in investments supporting teachers in regular classrooms are evident.

In this regard, among the tensions that constitute barriers to achieving the success of these students, complaints from classroom teachers across the various areas of knowledge in the basic education curriculum stand out, especially in the face of the growing demand for the enrollment of students from the Target Audience of Special Education (PAEE) in mainstream schools. Such complaints reveal the precariousness of professional training to meet this demand, reflecting the scarcity of teacher education policies within the context of Special Education in Brazil (Borges & Torres, 2020, p. 156).

There is, therefore, a divergence between what is established by law and what is actually ensured for students with disabilities in everyday practical relations, revealing inclusion - within the terms discussed here - as a fable. Large classes, lack of physical infrastructure, gaps in initial and continuing teacher education, and the absence or limited articulation with specialized sectors responsible for monitoring students with disabilities illustrate the recurrence of this issue and the relevance of this article in light of the reflections proposed.

When addressing II. globalization as perversity, Santos (2018) allows us to understand the perspective of exclusion of students with disabilities, since public policies directed toward education are guided and/or reformulated according to market interests. In this context, priority is given to the productive individual, the idea of the ideal student, while those who do not fit into the competitive standard are excluded. Therefore, students with disabilities are not excluded because of incapacity but because of their inadequacy to the productive model. In this sense:

“There is a true regression in relation to the notion of public good and solidarity, which is emblematic in the shrinking of the social and political functions of the State alongside the expansion of poverty and increasing threats to sovereignty, while the political role of corporations in regulating social life expands.” (Santos, 2000, p. 19)

The author thus criticizes the neoliberal model for the State’s withdrawal from its responsibility to guarantee social rights - in this case, education - and for transferring such responsibilities to a market logic that is perverse, competitive, and exclusionary.

In the face of economic disputes, private institutions directing special education in Brazil promote inclusive education as a solution to “all the problems of education,” presenting it as a more economically viable alternative for the State. However, this type of strategy, employed by large institutions, does not take into account the precarization of teaching work, the lack of school infrastructure, and the scarcity of materials within schools. The responsibility of the State is displaced to the discourse of “inclusive education” as sufficient for achieving quality education, yet its implementation is not accompanied by the necessary measures to fully guarantee students’ rights.

Discussing the struggle against inequalities created by perverse globalization leads us to reflect on how “[...] we can think about the construction of a new world through a more humane globalization” (Santos, 2018, p. 10). We therefore identify the overcoming of fatalism in Santos’ ideas (2018) when he proposes III. another globalization, that is, a globalization grounded in solidarity and social justice, in which minority groups have the same opportunities for quality education and access to their rights, among other aspects aimed at combating social inequality in the world.

The coexistence of students with and without

disabilities, we assume, indicates an important path for understanding the heterogeneity inherent in human constitution, as well as the search for solidarity proposed by Santos (2018). The challenge lies in recognizing the concrete conditions of each educational reality so that aspects of general education are not mistakenly attributed to the arrival of students with disabilities (Soares, 2020).

In this sense, and considering global development agendas - specifically the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN) established in the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), particularly SDG 4 - this article reaffirms how the goal of “quality education” may be emptied of meaning by a market-oriented logic to the detriment of human rights. Confronting “perverse globalization,” as presented by Santos (2018), reveals itself as a possibility for materializing the principle of “leaving no one behind” in genuinely inclusive practices and institutions.

Combating inequalities and discrimination against people with disabilities, we venture to say, should be a daily concern for scholars and those interested in the field of education, because it is unquestionably the task of all those committed to schooling processes for any students, aiming primarily at the development of research engaged with the formation of citizenship. Working conditions, teacher education, multidisciplinary approaches to support inclusion, among other aspects, must therefore guide the struggles for the implementation of existing legal mechanisms.

The discussion of another globalization and the reflections arising from this section awaken our interest in understanding how special education has been and continues to be interpreted in light of neoliberalism, considering theoretical productions within the Brazilian academic field. Thus, the next section aims to present this discussion based on the

methodological procedures adopted in this article.

## Deepening the Discussions in Light of the BDTD Survey: Main Results

In this section, we present the methodology adopted in the construction of the present study, as well as its main results and analysis. This work was developed through a bibliographic survey. According to Gil (2021), a literature review allows for the analysis of previously known material, particularly theses and dissertations, which are mostly composed of reports of original scientific investigations or careful bibliographic reviews.

To conduct the survey, we used the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD), as it offers a vast repository of scientific research produced in Brazil. As a theoretical framework, we adopted the discussion of academic productions concerning public policies for special education from an inclusive perspective in light of the contributions of neoliberalism, with the aim of situating the object of this study and deepening the discussion of its contributions within the analytical perspective adopted in this article.

As a temporal framework, we considered the period from 2020 to 2025, taking into account the signing of Decree No. 10,502/2020, which established the National Policy on Special Education: Equitable, Inclusive, and Lifelong Learning, during the government of Michel Temer (Brazil, 2020). Although this decree was revoked during the administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva through Decree No. 11,370/2023 (Brazil, 2023), the document reflects the spectrum of actions proposed during that period and their repercussions for subsequent years.

To identify studies addressing public policies for special education from an inclusive perspective in light of neoliberal contributions and their

interferences in educational research contexts, the following descriptors were used: special education; inclusion; disability; neoliberalism; and public policy. Through this search, 23 studies were identified.

The selection of theses and/or dissertations was not limited solely to the presence of these descriptors. Rather, we primarily considered their relevance to the article's theme and their contribution to understanding public policies for special education from an inclusive perspective under the critical lens of neoliberalism. Thus, priority was given to studies articulating educational policy, school inclusion, and the role of the State.

Based on these analytical criteria, it was possible to identify that, within the total universe of 23 studies, 15 were not directly related to the topic of interest, although they were associated with at least one of the descriptors used in the search. Of the total number of studies, only eight were related to all the descriptors analyzed and were consistent with the theme of this article, which are presented in the table that follows.

Therefore, the complete reading of these eight studies was considered a necessary condition for the analysis presented here. Among them, one study was embargoed<sup>1</sup> by the author, and although it was related to the theme of interest of this research, its thesis could not be analyzed due to the restriction indicated on the BDTD website itself. This study is that of Melo (2023), which discusses “The New National Common Curricular Base for Secondary Education: Dilemmas and Perspectives in Inclusion Policies in the Federal Education Network.”

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<sup>1</sup> Embargoed works, in most cases, occur due to restrictions related to the publication of articles in academic journals, the presence of sensitive topics, potential patents, or issues within the work whose disclosure could be detrimental to the rights or interests of the author.

**Table 1** – Studies on public policies for special education from an inclusive perspective in light of contributions on neoliberalism (2020-2025)

TITLE/AUTHOR/YEAR/ TYPE	OBJECTIVE	METHODOLOGY	CONTRIBUTIONS
<p>Brazilian Inclusion Law: The (Dis)configuration of School Support Professionals in Special Education Policies</p> <p><b>Author:</b> Flávia Junqueira da Silva</p> <p><b>Year:</b> 2024</p> <p><b>Type:</b> PhD Thesis</p>	<p>To analyze how the provisions of the Brazilian Inclusion Law (LBI) unfold in special education policies related to the service of School Support Professionals from 2016 to 2022, from the perspective of the neoliberal state, within municipal education departments.</p>	<p>Qualitative analytical-documentary methodology. The research is characterized as post-critical, theoretically grounded in Foucauldian discourse analysis using the genealogical method.</p>	<p>In the municipalities analyzed, the documents guiding the work of School Support Professionals reveal the influence of neoliberal discourse on professional practice, especially regarding what could be considered more efficient and economically viable for maintaining the service within basic education networks. In many cases, one professional performs the role of two. The research indicates that neoliberal discourse sustains inclusive education policies while simultaneously precarizing the teaching profession.</p>
<p>Special Education Policy in Venda Nova do Imigrante – ES in the Context of Early Childhood Education: Challenges and Possibilities</p> <p><b>Author:</b> Cinthia do Carmo Gonçalves</p> <p><b>Year:</b> 2024</p> <p><b>Type:</b> Master's Dissertation</p>	<p>To reveal and problematize the implementation process of special education public policies in a public early childhood school in the municipality of Venda Nova do Imigrante – ES.</p>	<p>Qualitative research using a case study design. Data collection included bibliographic review, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews.</p>	<p>The results show that the municipality has made efforts to establish quality inclusive education. However, the lack of intersectoral communication and the evident presence of neoliberalism in the organization of municipal documents have hindered the process. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink and reorganize the policy, promoting continuing teacher education, improving intersectoral coordination, and strengthening school autonomy.</p>
<p>Portraits of Damaged Life: Context, Culture, and Everyday Life in the School Trajectory of People with Disabilities</p> <p><b>Author:</b> Carolina Mariane Miguel</p> <p><b>Year:</b> 2022</p> <p><b>Type:</b> PhD Thesis</p>	<p>To understand how the inclusion of people with disabilities in regular education has occurred in Brazil over the last 25 years, based on public education policies.</p>	<p>Qualitative and empirical research based on the analytical method of negative dialectics, grounded in the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory.</p>	<p>Despite advances, inclusive education in Brazil is still marked by stereotypes and neoliberal logic that invisibilizes and marginalizes people with disabilities. Under conservative governments, there were setbacks and strengthening of segregationist discourses. The study argues that schools should promote a humanizing and emancipatory education capable of confronting the structural exclusion present in society.</p>

<p>Science Teaching: The Teaching-Learning Process of Deaf Students on the Pollution of the Streams of the City of Manaus</p> <p><b>Author:</b> Carla Andréa Sampaio Mendonça  <b>Year:</b> 2020  <b>Type:</b> Master's Dissertation</p>	<p>To analyze the teaching process and the construction of knowledge among deaf students in the 7th grade of elementary school regarding the pollution of streams in the city of Manaus, aiming, among other aspects, to obtain elements for the development of a didactic sequence capable of enhancing the educational quality of these students through scientific language in Libras.</p>	<p>Qualitative research using structured and semi-structured interviews with teachers and participant observation. The analytical approach was dialectical.</p>	<p>The study identified that teachers' discourses and conceptions regarding science teaching and environmental education directly influence their pedagogical practices. Despite legal advances recognizing Libras, structural problems persist, such as lack of adequate materials and teacher training, which often result from neoliberal productive restructuring.</p>
<p>Bilingual Education Policy for Deaf Students in Recife/PE: Conceptions and Practices</p> <p><b>Author:</b> Leonardo da Silva Santos  <b>Year:</b> 2025  <b>Type:</b> Master's Dissertation</p>	<p>To understand how the bilingual education policy for deaf students is structured in Recife, considering current legislation, the role of different stakeholders, and the strategies adopted in the municipal plan.</p>	<p>Qualitative research based on document analysis and interviews with education professionals, administrators, and individuals involved in deaf education.</p>	<p>The study deepens the debate on special education within current educational policies, showing that despite legal advances guaranteeing bilingual education for deaf students, its implementation in the municipality remains fragile due to the absence of teacher training, teaching materials, and articulation among administrative sectors. It also highlights neoliberal influences and tensions that may lead to setbacks in inclusive public policies.</p>
<p>Universal Design for Learning in Times of Neoliberal Schools: Contributions to Inclusive Education</p> <p><b>Author:</b> Rosane Santos Gueudeville  <b>Year:</b> 2024  <b>Type:</b> PhD Thesis</p>	<p>To enable the use of the principles of Universal Design for Learning in closed educational contexts in order to promote inclusive pedagogical practices.</p>	<p>Collaborative research conducted in a regular school in the city of Crato-CE with five teachers from regular classrooms and two from multifunctional resource rooms. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field notes, and classroom observation.</p>	<p>The study indicates that pedagogical practices continue to be based on the transmission of knowledge under a technicist conception. It analyzes how neoliberalism influences school organization and pedagogical practices, presenting it as part of the context of "neoliberal schools," which prioritize efficiency, competitiveness, and standardization—elements that may become obstacles to the realization of truly inclusive education.</p>
<p>The Schooling of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students in the Pearl of Caparáó</p> <p><b>Author:</b> Franceane de</p>	<p>To reveal and problematize the schooling process of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the municipality of Guaquí, Espírito Santo, in light of</p>	<p>Qualitative case study based on Vygotsky's historical-cultural theory. Data collection included bibliographic and document analysis,</p>	<p>The results reveal institutional advances, such as the creation of local policies aimed at inclusion and the publication of a public call for hiring Libras instructors, indicating ongoing institutional efforts. However,</p>

<p>Paula Figueredo do Nascimento  <b>Year:</b> 2025  <b>Type:</b> Master's Dissertation</p>	<p>the norms of Special Education from an inclusive perspective.</p>	<p>classroom observation in both regular classes and Specialized Educational Assistance (AEE), and semi-structured interviews with AEE teachers, school management staff, the municipal coordinator of special education, and a Libras interpreter.</p>	<p>fragilities remain due to the influence of neoliberal guidelines, which may limit the implementation of policies and practices that ensure the rights and address the specific needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing students.</p>
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**Source:** Prepared by the authors.

The analyzed studies provide significant contributions to understanding the impact of neoliberalism on Brazilian educational policies and practices, particularly in the field of special and inclusive education. In general terms, they reveal that, despite advances related to inclusive education, there remains a strong conditioning of an economic logic that prioritizes efficiency and cost reduction to the detriment of the quality of education.

The research reveals the prevalence of neoliberalism both in the formulation of laws and in the organization of services, as in the case of the precarization of teaching work, when teachers are guided by productivity criteria and curricular documents that condition their practice according to the assumptions of the capitalist market.

On the global stage, inclusive education was strengthened through international milestones, such as the Salamanca Statement (1994), promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), at the same time that educational reforms were taking place under the influence mainly of the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Gueudeville, 2024). In this context, and based on the studies analyzed, it is

possible to highlight how they contribute significantly by emphasizing the tensions and practices that remain present in the educational context. These studies expand the international debate and reaffirm special education as a right for all.

In light of the aspects discussed, it is possible to reflect on the school inclusion of students with disabilities in Brazil which, although marked by significant advances, is still related to a political and structural contradiction. Neoliberalism, by influencing discourses, legislation, and practices, not only limits the scope of inclusive policies but also reinforces stereotypes, marginalization, and exclusion. The studies therefore advocate the need for a humanized, emancipatory education articulated with social reality, making it necessary to (re)think inclusion as a process of struggle and of guaranteeing rights in the lives of people with disabilities.

## Conclusion

Making special education a reality from an inclusive perspective remains a major challenge today. Even with legislation concerning the rights of people with disabilities, we still live in a society marked by the erosion of rights. Numerous challenges and difficulties remain within the school environment for the effective inclusion of these individuals.

Returning to the objective of discussing theoretical productions concerning public policies for special education from an inclusive perspective in light of neoliberalism and its interferences in educational research contexts, we identify a scenario marked by power struggles. Access materialized through the enrollment of students with disabilities represents an important step; however, it requires conditions that ensure their permanence in the educational system. Based on the study conducted, inclusion therefore appears as a demanding process, characterized by a trajectory of struggles, challenges, and achievements.

Another relevant point for discussion concerns the idea that education alone is responsible for the process of inclusion, as if schools by themselves were sufficient to accomplish it. Society as a whole must understand and recognize these individuals as citizens with rights, just like any other person.

The contributions of Milton Santos (2018) are grounded in the defense of an emancipatory education aimed at the construction of citizenship through the active participation of individuals, with their rights guaranteed. This perspective also values the lived reality of students as a starting point for social transformation - an education that stimulates critical thinking, whose central focus lies in recognizing diversity as a means of combating exclusion.

The analogy inspired by the contributions of Santos (2018), presented in the second section of this article, indicates the possibility of thinking about another globalization. It is important to emphasize that this aspiration is constituted through many struggles, considering the intentionalities imposed by neoliberalism in the early construction of special education in Brazil. The inclusive perspective is intertwined with market-oriented purposes and, although its objectives are recognized, analyses within the field of public policy reveal processes of reshaping its main intentionalities according to the characteristics of the studies examined.

This article highlights the importance of developing and expanding studies on this topic, since combating exclusion does not occur outside society and the relationships constructed within it. Overcoming inclusion as a “fable” requires recognizing the perversity of exclusionary practices and maintaining a continuous effort to value differences in our everyday practices.

Relevant contributions can be identified, especially when considering the conditions for and within the inclusion of students with disabilities in the Brazilian educational context. The possibilities for expanding this study are evident, as well as its insertion into the theoretical and methodological field of special education.

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