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Students' perception of the strengths and weaknesses of the inclusive educational model of Brazilian municipal public schools

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Introduction: Brazil is a signatory of important documents that advocate the promotion and access to equitable, inclusive, and quality education. However, the construction of inclusive policies, practices, and cultures has been little discussed in the country, making the process of educational inclusion of children with specific educational needs difficult.

Method: In this study, we used the *Index for Inclusion* to investigate children's perceptions considering the three things they like most about their school and the three things they dislike. Data was analyzed qualitatively through content analysis, using prefixed categories created according to the children's answers to the *Index* (strengths and weaknesses), categorized considering the dimensions and subdimensions assessed by the *Index*.

Results: The results revealed that children perceive the infrastructural and urban barriers present in their context, which are considered weaknesses for developing inclusive policies, practices, and cultures in their school contexts. On the other hand, they do not show attitudinal barriers, that is, they do not judge others for their differences.

Discussion: Working on differences, from the first school stage, to build a positive relationship between children and the development of practices and an inclusive school can benefit the construction of a school community free of segregating values present in our culture, contributing to the development of inclusive policies, practices, and cultures in school environments.

1 Introduction

Brazil is the largest country in South America and also the richest, having the largest economy (International Monetary Fund, 2023). As for education, Brazil can be considered, from a theoretical point of view, an advanced country concerning educational legislation, since it is a signatory of important international documents that advocate the promotion and access to equitable, inclusive, and high-quality education (Brazil, 2001, 2009; UNESCO, 1990, 1994).

In general, school inclusion in Brazil has gained visibility in recent decades, based on the strengthening of global policies for social, economic, and educational inclusion, which have reflected and influenced the development of new policies and regulations for the development of education in the country (Brazil, 1996, 2008, 2015). Thus, in recent years, the Brazilian government has sought to build an increasingly inclusive educational system at all levels, expanding access for all and implementing policies to develop the quality of education offered to Brazilian students (Brazil, 2008, 2009, 2014).

Despite the efforts of the Brazilian government to ensure equitable, inclusive, and quality education in its laws and legislation, from a practical point of view, the challenges of inclusive education, aiming at building more inclusive educational models, are still countless in the country. Thus, inclusive education in Brazil can be understood as an ongoing process with serious infrastructure, teaching, and professional difficulties, among others (Capellini et al., 2020; Pletsch and Mendes, 2015).

Regarding teaching, the literature points out that special education students develop better when they are in contact with other groups, and diversity within schools benefits all (Macena et al., 2018; Pletsch and Mendes, 2015). In addition, the literature points out that, when special education students have the opportunity to have well-trained teachers in the mainstream classroom, they manage to have access to quality education, develop and, in addition, contribute to the group's learning regarding differences and how to live with them, promoting in their peers the development of skills such as empathy, respect and a sense of collaboration, which are essential to moving toward a more humane society. However, even knowing that differences promote the good academic development of students, teaching that considers the diversity of all students and the uniqueness of each one present in the school context is not yet a reality in the Brazilian educational scenario (Costa et al., 2018).

As for professionals specialized in special education from the perspective of inclusive education and mainstream teachers trained to promote school inclusion, there is a deficit of these professionals in Brazil. Those that exist generally end up overloaded, within the school context, with functions that are not theirs. Moreover, in Brazil, the school community is also unprepared to deal with inclusion (Capellini et al., 2020; Pletsch and Mendes, 2015).

Concerning infrastructure, it is still very precarious in many regions of the country, with regard to inclusion. Many of the public schools in the country do not present minimal modifications (access ramps, handrails, inclusive bathrooms, among others) to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities. This occurs because, since Brazil is a country of continental dimensions, in many places the state is not present or when it is the investments made are insufficient to meet the demands and needs of the school community (Capellini et al., 2020; Pletsch and Mendes, 2015).

As the literature points out, the construction of inclusive educational models is an important factor within the school context, as it allows addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all students through greater participation in learning, cultural and community activities and the reduction of exclusion

inside and outside the education system (AuCoin et al., 2020; Fernández et al., 2021; Muñoz Martínez and Porter, 2018; Porter et al., 2011). In this sense, literature review and meta-analysis studies indicate that schools that develop an inclusive model improve in all aspects (Dignath et al., 2022; Krämer et al., 2021; Mendoza and Heymann, 2022; Subban et al., 2022; Yada et al., 2022).

In the context where this study was carried out, namely, a city in the interior of the state of São Paulo, inclusive policies and actions have been developed with the aim of putting into practice national actions for the development of inclusion in the school environment (Brazil, 1996, 2008, 2015). In this sense, the city has sought to align itself with the best practices concerning inclusion worldwide. However, despite the initiatives developed, studies with different approaches point out that reality is still far from what is desired to promote access and learning for all students (Capellini et al., 2020; Petrucelli and Zanata, 2019; Rocha et al., 2019), which makes us question the implementation of policies in the country and the commitment of the authorities so that the construction of inclusive educational models becomes a reality in it. It is noteworthy to highlight that similar situations are observed in other national contexts and regions (Alves and Silva, 2013; Alves and Pinto, 2020; Kakihara et al., 2020), which allows us to state that, in Brazil, there is a gap between the laws, that regulate the policies, and the effective practice of the schools.

Regarding the perceptions of students toward inclusive education in Brazil, not many studies have been conducted that include the voices of students. Agra and Costa (2021), in their study with students with visual impairments in Brazil, concluded that students' perceptions reflect a mix of hope for better understanding and support, alongside the recognition of existing challenges and the need for collaborative efforts to enhance their educational experiences. Similarly, Tanure Alves et al. (2018) concluded that there was a significant exclusion of students with visual impairments in Physical Education classes, in which they were not allowed to participate.

1.1 The organization of education in Brazil

The educational stages in Brazil are divided into preschool (0–6 years old); elementary school I (6–10 years); elementary school II (10–14 years old); and high school (14–17 years old). About the responsibility for offering access to education in public schools in Brazil, for each age group, this is divided between the municipal and state governments.

In Brazil, municipalities are responsible for providing education for students aged 0–6 years in public municipal schools and also for those aged 6–14 years, when there is an agreement between city and state for the city to also offer education for this age group.

The state, on the other hand, is responsible for offering education from 6 to 17 years old in state public schools. Thus, in Brazil, considering public education, students begin their school life in municipal schools and can continue enrolled in it until the age of 14 and after, to finish their studies, they are

enrolled in state schools. When there is no agreement between the city and the government, students, after the age of 6, are enrolled in state schools and can continue in it until the age of 17.

1.2 Study context

The city where this study was carried out is located in the center-west of the state of São Paulo, the richest state in the country. Currently, according to official data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, the city occupies an area of 673.488 km², of which 68.9769 km² are in the urban perimeter and the remaining 604.51 km² constitute the rural area of the city. The population is estimated at 381,706 inhabitants. Its Gross Domestic Product reached BRL 13 billion in 2021, being the city part of the fourth-richest region of the state (Brazilian Institute of Geography Statistics, 2023).

Still according to IBGE, in 2020, the average monthly salary in the city was 2.6 minimum wage (US$ 583.00). The proportion of people with some occupation, in relation to the total population, was 36.7%. When compared to other cities in the state, considering the average monthly salary, it was ranked 117th out of 645 positions. With regard to the proportion of employed persons, the city ranked 55 out of 645 positions (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2023).

According to data from the State System of Data Analysis Foundation of the State of São Paulo, the city has an income disparity among its population, with a Gini index of 0.43. Also according to this foundation, classes C, D, and E represent 59% of the population, while classes B1 and B2 are 34% and class A are 7% (State System of Data Analysis Foundation, 2019).

Concerning education, the city has 78 public schools, 16 under municipal and 62 under state supervision, and a schooling rate of 6–14 years of 96.9%, occupying 537 out of 645 positions in the state of São Paulo (Brazilian Institute of Geography Statistics, 2023). It is worth noting that since 2006 the city has offered, as a public policy, the special education service to assist students with specific educational needs (Brazil, 2005).

The general purpose of this study was to describe the perception of 6 and 7-year-old students about the inclusive educational model of the municipal public schools of a city in Brazil. The specific objectives were (1) to quantitatively describe the general perception of students about the strengths and weaknesses of the inclusive educational model of the city, according to the subdimensions of the *Index for Inclusion* and (2) to qualitatively identify those aspects that were considered as strengths or weaknesses of the inclusive educational model of the city, according to the same subdimensions.

2 Methodology

This study used a mixed methodology (Creswell and Clark, 2017), quantitative and qualitative methods in the collection, analysis, and results interpretation.

2.1 Participants

Brazilian students aged 6 and 7 years old participated in this study. In the year in which the data collection was carried out, 756 female and 644 male students aged 6 and 7 were regularly enrolled in the 16 municipal schools in the city. Thus, to investigate their perceptions about the strengths and weaknesses of the inclusive educational model of municipal public schools, a survey using the *Index for Inclusion* was carried out with all the students from 16 municipal schools of the city.

2.2 Instrument

The *Index for Inclusion: developing learning and participation in schools* (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) in its Brazilian version, translated and adapted for Brazil (Santos and Esteves, 2012), was used for data collection. The *Index* is a set of materials to support self-review of all aspects of a school, including activities in the playground, teachers' rooms, classrooms, and in the communities around the school. And from there, encourage all employees, parents/guardians, and children to contribute to an inclusive development plan and put it into practice.

Although the *Index for Inclusion* is not specifically a data collection instrument, it makes possible the collection of data for the further development of inclusive processes. Furthermore, according to the results of several studies (e.g., Arizabaleta Domínguez and Ochoa Cubillos, 2016; Fernández-Archilla et al., 2020; Sánchez et al., 2019) the *Index* makes it possible to improve school education, by providing opportunities for teachers to reflect on their schools, beliefs, and values, approaching their practices; the voices and perspectives of families and students are heard and taken into account in schools' change processes. The *Index for Inclusion* consists of 26 items, 24 of which are part of a three-point Likert scale (1: agree, 2: partially agree, 3: disagree) and the last two questions are open. Specifically, in these last two items, students are asked about the three things they liked most about their school and which three things they would change. Of all the data collected in this study, only those related to students' perceptions (open questions) are presented and analyzed in this article. The data resulting from the closed questions have already been published (Coiado et al., 2021; Santos and Capellini, 2021).

2.3 Procedures

Access to the schools was carried out with authorization from the Administration and, later, from the management teams of the schools. All were informed about the approval of the study by the Ethics Committee of the University, the objectives and ethical commitments of the study, namely, the guarantee of anonymity, the absence of harm to the participants, as well as the possibility for them to withdraw their consent at any time, if they wish, during study development, in accordance with best practices in scientific research development. The application of the Index was carried out with the individualized support of the teaching staff and the research team, who read the questions to students who could not

TABLE 1 Global perception of students on strengths and weaknesses of their schools according to the subdimensions of the *Index for Inclusion*.

Subdimension	Strengths		Weaknesses		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1.1. Building community	354	8.4	238	5.7	592	14.1
1.2. Establishing inclusive values	19	0.4	127	3.02	146	3.42
2.1. Developing the school for all	510	12.1	804	19.2	1,314	31.3
2.2. Organizing support for diversity	4	0.1	2	0.05	6	0.15
3.1. Constructing curricula for all	905	21.6	269	6.4	1,174	28
3.2. Orchestrating learning	811	19.4	150	3.6	961	23
Total	2,603	62	1,590	38	4,193	100

f, frequency; %, percentage.

yet read and helped them mark their answers after solving any doubts that might arise in this regard. Also, in the case of open-ended questions, the researchers helped students who did not yet have sufficient writing skills to write their answers. The inclusion criteria adopted to participate in this study were: students from 6 and 7 years old, regularly enrolled in the school. There was no need to address missing data and outliers, as they did not appear during the data analysis.

This study followed the ethical guidelines and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University (Protocol No. 3.634.519). It is part of a larger investigation whose objective was to evaluate the quality of education for students with specific educational needs in public schools in Brazil (Capellini et al., 2020).

2.4 Data analysis

A content analysis using prefixed categories was applied to the open-question data (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Specifically, complex variables called strengths (three things students like most about your school) and weaknesses (three things students would change about your school) were identified, and student responses were categorized using the dimensions and subdimensions assessed by the *Index* (Booth and Ainscow, 2002), which are: (a) 1.1. Creating inclusive cultures (a1: Building community; a2: Establishing inclusive values), (b) Producing inclusive policies (b1: Developing the school for all; b2: Organizing support for diversity), and (c) Evolving inclusive practices (c1: Constructing curricula for all; c2: Orchestrating learning). Both the codification and the interpretation of the data were reviewed several times by the research team and the coders, to guarantee rigor in obtaining the results (Morse et al., 2001).

3 Results

Table 1 presents the results according to each subdimension of the *Index for Inclusion* considering the students' global perception

of the strengths and weaknesses of the inclusive model of their schools.

Figure 1 presents a comparison between the responses for each subdimension of the *Index for Inclusion* considering students' perception of the strengths and weaknesses of their schools.

As can be seen, subdimensions 3.1 (Constructing curricula for all) and 3.2 (Orchestrating learning) are the ones that showed the most significant strengths, in the children's opinion. On the other hand, subdimensions 2.1 (Developing the school for all) and 3.1 (Constructing curriculum for all) present the most significant weaknesses. Thus, subdimension 3.1 is perceived as very relevant, but also with many difficulties. Subdimension 2.2 generated almost no contributions from children, neither in terms of strengths nor weaknesses. It is noteworthy to highlight that subdimensions 1.2 (Establishing inclusive values) and 2.1 (Developing the school for all) showed more weaknesses than strengths.

3.1 Dimension 1

With regard to subdimensions 1.1 and 1.2, related to the creation of inclusive culture and values, students identified teachers and peer support as their greatest strengths, as well as the values that the school itself provides through actions such as the morning prayer. On the other hand, they considered that the main weaknesses stem from the inadequate climate in the classrooms and in the playground and inappropriate behavior by students (fights between children and excessive noise).

3.2 Dimension 2

Students pointed out that school facilities are key elements in their satisfaction with inclusive policies that support diversity. In particular, they highlight that the playground, sports court, furniture, and equipment are key elements for them. On the other hand, they identified that there are schools in which the playground and sports court still need improvement.

3.3 Dimension 3

Dimension 3, related to the organization and orchestrating curriculum and learning for all, is the one that students perceived as the most positive and developed in the city's schools. In particular, they considered that physical and artistic education courses are organized and implemented in a particularly inclusive way. Likewise, they considered that the time dedicated to learning and how this is carried out, as well as the time dedicated to playing in their schools, are inclusive and productive. On the negative side, they pointed out that aspects such as informatics course, walks or plays are aspects that can be improved in some schools.

4 Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the perception of 6- and 7-year-old Brazilian students about the strengths and weaknesses of the

FIGURE 1
Strengths and weaknesses according to the subdimensions of the *Index for Inclusion*.
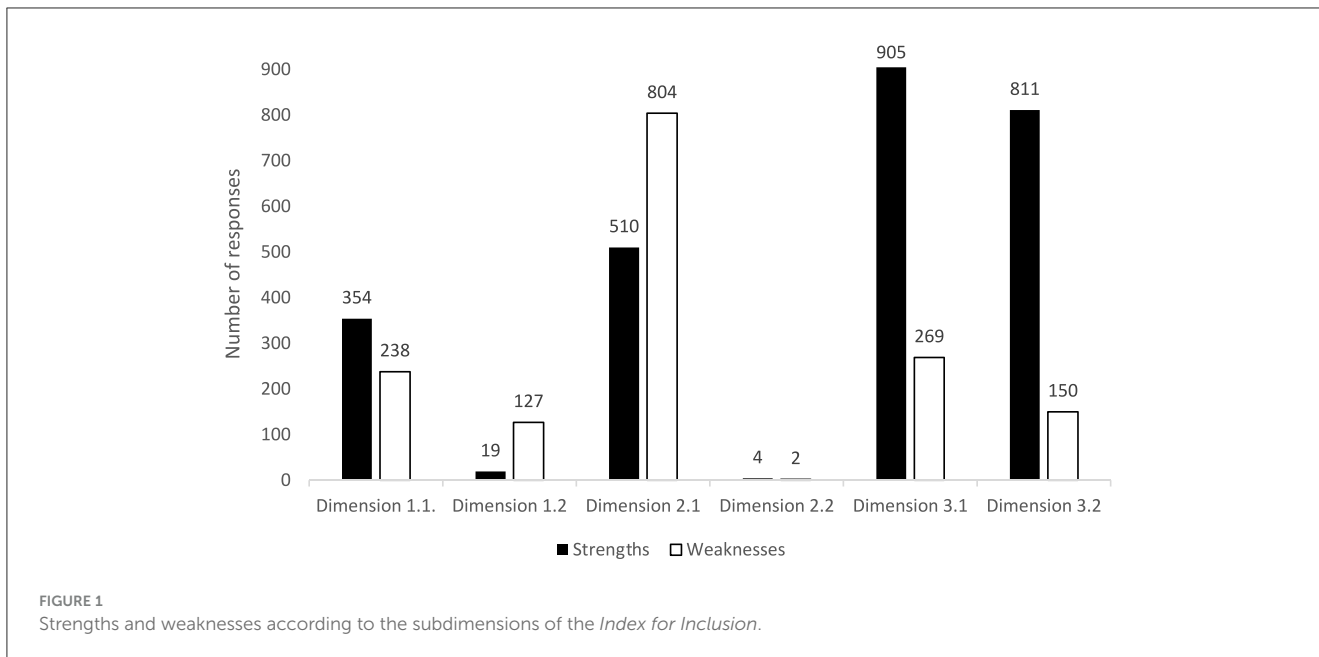
inclusive educational model of municipal public schools of a city in Brazil.

As defined by UNESCO (2005), the purpose of inclusion is to provide adequate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs, both in formal and non-formal educational environments. In this sense, inclusive education can be conceived as a process that allows meeting and responding to the diversity of needs of all students through greater participation in learning, cultural, and community activities and reduction of exclusion inside and outside the educational system. Thus, it implies changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, and strategies based on a common vision that encompasses all children of school age and on the conviction that it is the responsibility of the ordinary educational system to educate all boys and girls. This implies breaking with certain practices, cultures, and policies that have been happening in Brazil, which have to do with specialization and the belief that each type of child should be attended to by a type of teacher specialized in educational needs.

Inclusive education, which is more than a marginal issue that deals with how to include certain students in mainstream education, represents a perspective that should be used to analyze how to transform educational systems and other learning environments in order to respond to student diversity. Therefore, we would not be talking about special education or special educational needs, we would be talking about school improvement in the perspective of quality education for all children. In this way, all children can have the opportunity to belong, learn and maximize their potential through a school from everyone and for everyone (Porter et al., 2011; Muñoz Martínez and Porter, 2018).

In this study, when analyzing the strengths and weaknesses pointed out by the participating students, in general, and for each subdimension, we noticed that some subdimensions were positively mentioned by the participants (1.1. Building community, 2.2. Organizing support for diversity, 3.1. Constructing curriculum for all, 3.2. Orchestrating learning) and others not (1.2. Establishing

inclusive values, 2.1. Developing the school for all). Students perceive the infrastructural and urban barriers present in their context, these being, the weaknesses for the development of inclusive policies, practices, and cultures in their contexts. In the same line regarding inclusive cultures, we find the results of Agra and Costa (2021) where the need for understanding and support, collaboration, social dynamics, and equal opportunities are highlighted. Regarding our findings that point to physical and architectural barriers as elements that hinder progress toward inclusive education, we also found the study of Dutra et al. (2021), with children from elementary education, whose results indicate that the main access barriers are restricted access, slippery surfaces, lack of ramps, and inadequate external environments.

On the other hand, we noticed, in our analysis of the children's responses, that children at this age do not show attitudinal barriers, that is, they do not judge others for their differences. Similarly, we find the results of Tanure Alves et al. (2018), which indicate that the participants reported feeling included in their classes when they engaged in positive social interactions with classmates, without prejudiced attitudes or behaviors. This issue can be understood as a strength for the creation of inclusive policies, practices, and cultures when studying children of this age. Thus, we point out that, when they have not yet apprehended the segregating values present in the culture, children value difference and do not portray it as something that justifies the need for inclusion.

Concerning specific subjects in which inclusive education is developed, the results of our study indicate that students consider that physical and artistic education courses are organized and implemented in a particularly inclusive way. These results contrast with those of the studies by Tanure Alves et al. (2018), which found that students with visual impairments did not participate in physical education classes, and physical education teachers did not consider it a suitable subject for these students. This contradiction is interesting, as it should lead us to reflect on whether, when students refer to

inclusion, they are talking about the inclusion of everyone or only about the diversities they are familiar with in their immediate context.

Although the results of this study indicate important aspects of the perceptions of the investigated group, children aged 6 and 7 years, regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the inclusive educational model of Brazilian municipal public schools, we highlight, as a limitation of our study, the fact that this study was carried out considering the reality of the Brazilian school population. Thus, the results obtained here should not be generalized to other school contexts in other countries, since different realities can produce different results. In this sense, future studies should be developed to investigate and understand the inclusive reality of other contexts.

As implications of this study, from the theoretical and practical point of view, considering that children aged 6 and 7 years are not concerned about the differences of their peers, that is, they do not perceive the difference, as they have not incorporated or learned it yet in this age, we highlight that it should be a target point for society and schools to discuss how to address this issue to cultivate and maintain this idea throughout children school life, considering that they get older and move on to other educational stages, since it could contribute to the construction of a better and more inclusive school and society for all.

5 Conclusion

Considering the study's aim, we conclude that children perceive the infrastructural and urban barriers present in their context, which are the weaknesses for developing inclusive policies, practices, and cultures in their contexts. On the other hand, we emphasize that children at this age do not show attitudinal barriers, that is, they do not judge others based on their differences. Thus, working on differences, from the first school stage, to build a positive relationship between children and the development of practices and an inclusive school can benefit the construction of a school community free of segregating values present in our culture, contributing to the development of inclusive policies, practices, and cultures in school environments.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by São Paulo State University Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

VC: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. YM-M: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JG: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. VR: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ER: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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