




Article

Teaching Students with Learning Difficulties or Disabilities: Regular Education Teachers' Professional Development and Practices

Helena Inês ^{1,*} , José Augusto Pacheco ², Marta Abelha ^{1,3}  and Filipa Seabra ^{1,2,4} 

¹ LE@D, Universidade Aberta, 1269-001 Lisboa, Portugal
² CIEd, Universidade do Minho, 4704-553 Braga, Portugal
³ CEIS20, Universidade de Coimbra, 3004-504 Coimbra, Portugal
⁴ CIPEM/INET-Md, 4200-465 Porto, Portugal
* Correspondence: helenaines@uab.pt

Abstract: This article focuses on how curricular and pedagogical differentiation for students of special education is perceived by teachers of the second cycle of basic education in Portugal. The objectives of this research were (i) to inquire about the teachers' perceptions regarding their training path and their training needs; (ii) to characterize the teaching practices of teachers, aimed at students of special education; and (iii) to learn the perceptions of these teachers regarding their curricular and pedagogical practices directed at students of special education—this called for an interpretative methodology. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and subjected to content analysis. The results indicate a widespread concern with teachers' current professional development and the management of diversity. The respondents' perceptions, shown as favorable to change, are in line with personalized work, enhancing visible contributions to students' personal and social development.

Keywords: curriculum; teacher professional development; inclusion; curricular; pedagogical practice



Citation: Inês, H.; Pacheco, J.A.; Abelha, M.; Seabra, F. Teaching Students with Learning Difficulties or Disabilities: Regular Education Teachers' Professional Development and Practices. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 652. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12100652>

Academic Editors: Amy Roberts and Gregory S. Ching

Received: 13 August 2022

Accepted: 22 September 2022

Published: 26 September 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The present article presents Portuguese teachers' perceptions, opinions, experiences, and recommendations concerning teacher training and professional development, as well as the curricular and pedagogical practices aimed at including all students, particularly those presenting with learning difficulties or disabilities. The objectives of this research were (i) to inquire about the teachers' perceptions regarding their training path and their professional development needs; (ii) to characterize the teaching practices of teachers, aimed at students of special education; and (iii) to learn the perceptions of these teachers regarding their curricular and pedagogical practices directed at students of special education. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers of the second cycle of basic education (2CBE—comprising students aged between 10 and 12 years) and subjected to content analysis.

We begin by reflecting on the training of teachers for the 2CBE in Portugal, questioning its adequacy in an educational context marked by diversity. Next, we present the methods used as well as the most relevant data to answer the objectives presented and discuss them in relation to the conceptual framework and legal guidelines.

Teacher Professional Development: A Pathway to Inclusive Curriculum Management

Acknowledging education as a right for all, the concomitant massification of schooling has led to an unprecedented heterogeneity of schools. Such diversity brought about a concern with curriculum management and teaching capable of effectively reaching all students and potentiating equity and success for all [1,2].

Diversity contradicts a one-size-fits-all curriculum, incapable of adequately responding to all students' needs. This is particularly the case with students with learning difficulties or disabilities who require a specifically differentiated, tailored curriculum. Teachers are unequivocally and deeply implied in promoting such differentiated practices [3].

Effective curriculum management, sustained in curricular and pedagogic differentiation, will contribute to avoiding exclusion and successfully managing diversity but requires effective professional development, where reflection, research [4–7], peer collaboration [8,9], and early immersion in teaching contexts are potentiated. Reflection and collaboration contribute to the improvement of teaching quality [10,11] and have been widely defended as leading to renewed solutions emerging from the analysis of pedagogical and curricular practices.

Teacher collaboration is, therefore, one of the possible strategies to help teachers respond to the demands of a curriculum for all. Much of the success attributed to collaboration is translated into an increase in teacher confidence [12,13]; teachers' professional development reflected on improved teachers' work and consequently, on the improvement of teaching and learning processes [12,14] with significant impact on the students' success.

However, Little [15] sustains that teacher collaboration can assume different forms and meanings, namely (i) storytelling and scanning, (ii) sharing, (iii) aid and assistance, and (iv) joint work. According to this author's theoretical perspective, teacher collaboration limited to exchanging anecdotes, sharing support only when requested and sharing ideas without proper analysis and discussion, can be described as *weak teacher collaboration*. On the contrary, *joint work* concerns a strong type of teacher collaboration, which is more likely to lead to significant progress as it involves shared responsibility and reflection about teaching practices, collective commitment and improvement, as well as a critical stance concerning the work that is developed [11].

In this sense, we consider effective teacher collaboration as that which promotes diversity by stimulating interdependence, since teachers learn from each other, identify common concerns, and collaborate towards the resolution of their concerns [11]. However, we agree with Hargreaves and O'Conner when they say that "collaborative professional relationships need better tools and deeper trust, clearer structures and stronger cultures, expertise, and enthusiasm, knowing what to do and how to be with each other" [16] (p. 24).

Investing in continuous improvements in teacher training must, therefore, be a priority. This investment is particularly relevant as we are faced with an aging teaching body in Portuguese schools [17], which had residual or no contact with content related to learning difficulties or disabilities in their initial training [18,19]. However, teacher training and professional development seem to have failed to form professionals capable of responding to heterogeneity, particularly concerning students with learning difficulties or disabilities, both in Portugal [20] and elsewhere [21–23]. This may result in *precarious inclusion* [21] (p. 150).

The obtention of an undergraduate degree in Basic Education (dBE) marks the beginning of the habilitation process for Portuguese teachers of the 2CBE. The curricular plans of these cycles of studies tend to include curricular content concerning learning difficulties, disabilities, and special education—in fact, 85% of those plans include at least one curricular element in those subject areas [24]. By legal imposition [25], this degree must be complemented by a professional master's degree. Before this imposition, teachers would mostly hold a bachelor's degree, without complementary training—that is still the case for many teachers practicing in Portuguese schools. In the master's degree, the percentage of curricular units related to these matters is lower—60% [25].

Teacher training and professional development must be questioned in relation to the roles expected from teachers in a globalized scenario, which is essential in adapting to contemporary social needs as well as to rebuild teachers' professionalism [26–29].

Diversity must be clearly valued as it is at the core of the curricular and pedagogic activities [30]. This new perspective on curriculum requires a reorganization of teacher training and of the school and the classroom, in order to ensure quality education for all [31]. The heterogeneity of the public school, the rapid evolution of information and communication technology, and the challenges posed by the knowledge society, define ed-

education as a strategic sector [32] and promote a renewed image of curriculum management, and teacher training and professional development, understood to be essential catalysts for the promotion of educational success, change, and innovation. Knowing how teachers think and practice curriculum differentiation is, therefore, clearly pertinent. These were the issues we intended to address in this article.

The strong relationship between teacher training and professional development, the construction of a more inclusive school, and the effective management of diversity in the classroom led to the definition of our research problems: How is pedagogical and curricular differentiation seen by 2CBE teachers when working with students with disabilities or learning difficulties? How do teacher training and professional development relate to their understanding of this matter and their practices?

The perceptions, opinions, experiences, and recommendations of teachers about their training and the curricular practices they implement, are crucial factors for the development of inclusive curriculum management. In fact, we consider the teacher to be a central and irreplaceable pillar of education, a curriculum manager [33] who can contribute to valuing the diversities of the school public now present in classrooms.

2. Materials and Methods

The data presented in this article are part of a Ph.D. dissertation, concluded at the University of Minho (Portugal) [34]. Aiming to attain part of the results of that broader study, we applied a semi-structured interview to 2CBE teachers, which was particularly suited to those ends as it is close to an intentional dialogue, guided towards specific subjects, and based on a previously elaborated script [35]. This data-gathering technique is adaptable, enabling freedom and flexibility while retaining structure. The main advantages of this technique are access to rich information, which is contextualized according to the participants' words, being open to data not initially foreseen in the script, the possibility of clarifying and redirecting answers as necessary, among others. This technique has some risks and disadvantages: a desirability effect may be present. As the data-gathering and analysis processes are painstaking and long, the technique cannot be applied to a large number of participants. The interview script must be careful and clear, and the language must be adapted to the interviewee [36]. The use of semi-structured interviews to learn about teacher development is not novel—for example, Flores and Day [37] have used a similar method.

As we were interested in learning about teachers' experiences and perspectives, we undertook interpretative research, based on a qualitative approach [38,39]. Semi-structured interviews were based on a guide comprising five categories of analysis: (A) teachers' perceptions about their initial and lifelong training and professional development needs; (B) experiences in teaching students with learning difficulties or disabilities; (C) contributions of differentiated curricular and pedagogical practices for learning, personal development, and social and work inclusion of students with learning difficulties or disabilities; (D) (dis)satisfaction with implementing differentiated curricular and pedagogical practices; and (E) directions for change or alternatives for curricular practices. In the present article, we focus on categories A, B, D, and E, as they most directly respond to our objectives. The structure of the category matrix used in the content analysis of data for this paper is presented in Appendix A.

The data presented here were subject to category-based content analysis [40,41] and gathered through online interviews, which were recorded and fully transcribed. The categories of analysis are derived from the research objectives, as well as from the data themselves, and will organize the presentation of data.

The participants were seven teachers in the second cycle of basic education, all female, with an average age of 48 years. Their years of experience as teachers ranged between 15 and 40 years (average: 24 years). One teacher from each recruitment group was selected. The participants also accumulated functions as classroom directors and/or school or department coordinators. On average, each teacher had taught in seven different schools.

They all taught at the same school and are not representative of the global population under study. Rather, they illustrate experiences and positions that help develop a deep understanding of how a diverse group of Portuguese 2CEB teachers experiences the phenomena under study.

All of the interviews were preceded by informed consent. The participants' anonymity was ensured by removing all elements of transcriptions that might reveal their identities and by using identification codes instead of names. Thus, ethical principles of research in education were followed throughout the study [42,43].

3. Results

Data presentation is organized according to the categories of analysis and illustrated by excerpts from the participants' declarations.

3.1. Initial and Lifelong Teacher Training and Professional Development (A)

Category A, pertaining to teacher initial and lifelong training and professional development, included indicators of perceptions about the initial training received (subcategory (A1), regarding the characterization of initial training (A1a), opinion about its scope and adequacy (A1b), and suggestions for its improvement. A second subcategory (A2) relates to lifelong professional development, including training needs experienced (A2a); lifelong training received (A2b), and suggestions for improvement (A2c). Finally, the subcategory change (A3), included aspects related to how lifelong professional development had affected their practices or perceptions.

3.1.1. Initial Training Received (A1a)

The participants were part of different recruitment groups, thus representing the diversity of subjects taught in the 2CEB. Aside from the Music Education teacher, who was trained in the National Conservatory, all teachers began their training in a university or a higher school of education, where they completed an undergraduate degree in teaching, in a certain branch of specialization. The curricular units concerning special educational needs, and students with learning difficulties or disability, were non-existent in the paths of the older teachers. For example, (history and geography teacher) "When I did my bachelor's degree we didn't speak about special educational needs. I never learned anything on the subject".

However, the younger teachers had a different experience. For example, (mathematics and natural sciences teacher) "During the degree, yes, I had [curricular] units on those subjects".

3.1.2. Opinion about the Adequacy and Scope of Initial Training (A1b)

Initial training was unanimously experienced as insufficient to efficiently manage the work with students with disabilities or learning difficulties. Consequently, all the participants felt that the initial training should be revised. For example, (history and geography teacher) "No! Because it did not prepare me for different students and students with problems. (. . .). We have to emerge from training, at the very least, prepared to teach everyone. So, the teacher training programs should be revised and rethought. It is urgent, I would say".

3.1.3. Aspects to Be Improved (in Initial Training) (A1c)

Several possible aspects of change were enumerated, namely, the harmonization between training and the reality of the classrooms, promoting a specific internship with students with disabilities or learning difficulties, studying about students with disabilities or difficulties and management of diversity, and learning more about pedagogical differentiation. For instance, (music education teacher) "Yes, absolutely, namely concerning the need to differentiate pedagogy and evaluation, diversification of strategies, how to deal with indiscipline, stress, and students with special educational needs".

3.1.4. Continuous Professional Development Needs Experienced (A2a)

All participants emphatically agree with the need to keep investing in their professional development, in order to keep up with a rapidly transforming society. Developing knowledge related to teaching students with disabilities or difficulties were among the needs expressed, along with others, such as technologies, dealing with stress, and burnout. For example, (Portuguese and English teacher) “I think knowing how to plan and work with diversity in the classroom is what I need the most”.

3.1.5. Lifelong Professional Development Experiences (A2b)

Lifelong professional development was unanimously considered beneficial and useful. We noted a shift, in terms of tendencies, in the nature of the training programs the teachers went through. In the more distant past and at the beginning of their teaching careers, teachers centered their choices on the preparation of teaching activities. For example, (technological and visual education teacher) “When I began my professional career, it was about knowing how to plan”.

Progressively, and later, they became more interested in the curricular management of work with students with learning difficulties or disabilities. For example, (Portuguese and English teacher) “[Nods affirmatively] I frequented programs on inclusive education (. . .). Very useful because it allowed us to share experiences and alerted me to the importance of students learning together, whenever possible, and regardless of the difficulties or differences they may have”.

3.1.6. Suggestions for Improvement (Regarding Lifelong Professional Development) (A2c)

Regular education teachers have marked difficulty in accessing lifelong professional development programs about themes related to learning difficulties or disabilities because these tend to be offered only to special education teachers. This difficulty was highlighted as a negative aspect, and some participants suggested such programs should be open to all teachers.

There were also recommendations for lifelong professional development to approach specific pathologies and disabilities, intervention strategies, and the sharing of experiences and resources among trainees. For instance, (technological and visual education teacher) “[the programs] are only available to special education teachers, usually. After (. . .). Teach about issues, how to act when faced with them, action strategies, and sharing experiences and resources”.

3.1.7. Lifelong Professional Development—Effects on Perspectives and Practices (A3a)

Undergoing lifelong professional development was considered a source of improvement in teachers’ management of diversities. For example, (Portuguese and French teacher) “Although training in this area was limited, on a day-to-day basis, I am more alert to students with special needs”, or (Technological and visual education teacher) “Yes, mostly the sharing of school experiences, with other trainees with similar school realities (. . .). Gave me the possibility of applying new action strategies”.

3.2. *Experiences with Pedagogical and Curricular Differentiation (B)*

This category includes five subcategories, related to planning processes (B1), implementation processes (B2), evaluation processes (B3), constraints (B4), and facilitators (B5).

3.2.1. Planning Processes (B1)

All the teachers reported planning their classes. Weekly planning was the most common. This individual planning was supported by annual planning, carried out within the subject group. The privileged sources of planning were the school manual, the internet, group planning, and sharing with colleagues. All but one teacher (physical education teacher) resorted to several sources to prepare their planning. For example, (technological and visual education teacher) “The manual, and the digital resources it includes; I also consult other manuals, the internet and I share experiences with group colleagues”.

Despite most participants revealing that they do not adjust this planning to each of the student groups they teach—which they justify with the number of classes and lack of time—we could identify some adjustments regarding activities directed at the students with learning difficulties or disabilities. For instance, (technological and visual education teacher) “No, it’s unthinkable! (. . .) I plan for each grade, subject, and week. I teach four levels (. . .). 9 groups . . . But I take students of special education into consideration. I adjust activities for them when it is necessary”.

3.2.2. Implementation Processes (B2)

All the teachers stated that they differentiate their curricular and pedagogical practices. However, some answers were evasive when we tried to explore the concrete ways that differentiation was implemented. Differentiation emerged from the needs felt by the teachers; happened within the classroom; and was situated at the levels of discourse, teaching practices, pedagogical resources, and evaluation practices. For example, (mathematics and natural sciences teacher) “I have some different activities for them and always adapt tests, depending on the student”.

The differentiation process was somewhat shared with colleagues, but this was not a fully acquired practice. For instance, (history and geography teacher) “Sometimes, I talk with colleagues. It is not a habit yet. It should be.” Collaboration with special education teachers stood out as most relevant.

3.2.3. Evaluation Practices (B3)

These students’ learning was monitored individually, through frequent observation and assessment, and registered in personal or institutional documents. All teachers reported suiting their evaluation practices to the students’ needs. Those adaptations were often expressed in simplified questions, longer evaluation times, or shorter tests for evaluation. These practices were supported by legal guidelines. For example, (history and geography teacher) “Always. It is a priority (. . .). We try to understand how the student can succeed. We talk and see if they prefer speaking or writing (. . .) and then define strategies such as oral presentations, research projects to do at home, and so on (. . .). Easier questions, and different types of questions. Shorter tests”.

We found no evidence of the process of evaluation being transversally subjected to dialogue among teachers. Nevertheless, some teachers reported sharing it with other teachers, the special education teacher, and the children’s parents.

3.2.4. Constraints (B4)

Several constraints to pedagogical and curricular differentiation were reported by the participants, namely, an excessive number of students per class; an excessive number of classes taught; insufficient professional development; inadequate school organization; lack of collaborative teaching practices; and excessive bureaucratic work. For example, (technological and visual education teacher) “Lack of time. It is difficult when we only see the students once a week. And then there are the student groups . . . [they are] vast. I think there is a need for a collaborative professional in the classroom”.

3.2.5. Facilitators (B5)

Some factors were identified as facilitating the application of curricular and pedagogical differentiation: guidance and intervention by the special education teacher; revision of teacher training and professional development; reorganization of the schoolwork; and team teaching. For example, (physical education teacher) “Smaller classes, more adequate spaces, an adjuvant teacher in those classes”.

3.3. (Dis)Satisfaction Concerning Curricular and Pedagogical Differentiation (D)

Category D is divided into the following subcategories: D1, pertinence of curricular and pedagogical differentiation, and D2, degree, and factors of (dis)satisfaction with the practices implemented, including subcategories D2a—degree of (dis)satisfaction, D2b—satisfaction factors, and D2c—dissatisfaction factors.

3.3.1. Pertinence of Curricular and Pedagogical Differentiation (D1)

The participants agreed that curricular and pedagogical differentiation were pertinent and useful for promoting significant learning in students with learning difficulties or disabilities as well as for promoting equal opportunities. For example, (Portuguese and English teacher) “Personalized and differentiated practices allow for a better accompaniment of each child, and consequently, greater equality of opportunities”.

3.3.2. Degree of (Dis)Satisfaction (D2a)

Despite recognizing that curricular and pedagogical differentiation are advantageous, the interviewees were not fully satisfied with those practices. The work they develop is not considered sufficient or fully effective. For instance, (Portuguese and French teacher) “I am not totally satisfied. I believe that presently the conditions available to teachers do not enable the implementation of work like what we would like to do”.

3.3.3. Satisfaction Factors (D2b)

Dedication to the students, other professionals, and teachers, as well as the students’ success, and the improvement in inter-peer relationships and collaborative work with special education teachers were responsible for the levels of satisfaction experienced. For example, (physical education teacher) “A group of teachers, professionals and students are dedicated to overcoming detrimental factors for the student to evolve. The students themselves can see the dedication of those around them, and their evolution and wants to do better every time”.

3.3.4. Dissatisfaction Factors (D2c)

Numerous reasons led to a feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration: lack of time, excess of classes and students, accountability, feelings of incompetence/insufficiency on the part of the teachers, insufficient collaboration and support among teachers, students’ lack of motivation, indiscipline, and lack of involvement of the students’ parents/caregivers. For example, (history and geography teacher) “Overcrowded classrooms, etc. How can we do real work with so many classes, so many students, and all of them different? And be accountable at the end of the year”.

3.4. Directions for Change or Alternatives for Curricular Practices (E)

Category E includes subcategories (E1a) improvement and (E1b) alternatives.

3.4.1. Improvement (E1a)

The involvement of parents and caregivers, the presence of other teachers in the classroom, and the reduction in the number of classes each teacher is responsible for, as well as the number of students in each class, the existence of common times among teachers for collaborative work, the revision of teacher training, the active participation of students in the process, and the regular monitoring and evaluation of learning were pointed out as elements that should be improved. For example, (technological and visual education teacher) “Having collaborators in the classroom. Having smaller classes and shared times in teachers’ timetables, in order to articulate action strategies”, and (Mathematics and Natural Sciences teacher) “I would go for mandatory [teacher] training”.

3.4.2. Alternatives (E1b)

The reorganization of schools, decided at the level of educational policies, was pointed out as an alternative, as well as the reduction in the number of students per class, and the constitution of separate groups for students with learning difficulties or disabilities, apart from the remaining colleagues for some of the time, to potentiate the development of personalized activities were proposed by some of the interviewees. For example, (technological and visual education teacher) “the alternative requires a new school organization, at the national level”, and (physical education teacher) “functioning for example, once a week in a regular classroom, and twice a week separately, in a group of students with special needs”.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The interviewees received initial training in a higher education institution and obtained a bachelor’s degree. This degree and training institution were in agreement with the Portuguese legislation at the time of their training, namely, Law No. 46/86 [44] and Law-Decree No. 139-a/90 [45]. All the interviewees concluded their initial training before the issuing of law decree No. 43/2007 [25], which set the requirement for teaching the 2CBE at the master’s level. This is also a reflection of the aging of Portuguese teachers [17].

At that time, the presence of curricular units related to learning difficulties or disabilities in initial training programs was not generalized, evidencing a slow appropriation of (inter)national recommendations dating from the second half of the XX Century [44,46,47]. The declarations of the younger teachers, however, reveal a positive evolution regarding the application of such national and international recommendations.

Despite this evolution, initial teacher training was unanimously felt as insufficient or ineffective to enable responding to contemporary society, and the participants agreed that it should be rethought. This opinion is in line with the perspectives of international organizations such as UNESCO and the European Commission as well as of several academics [20–22,48].

The teachers who participated in this study suggested directions for change in initial teacher training, including the inclusion of internships with students with learning difficulties or disabilities, and the inclusion of content pertinent to pedagogical differentiation on teacher training plans.

Continuous professional development was considered useful—including that which concerned special education and the management of diversities. The need to ensure that teachers kept up to date, in the frame of lifelong learning, became a concern in the Portuguese context and integrated into legislation through Law No. 46/1986 [44]. However, this intention remains at the heart of current concerns, as teacher training and professional development in Portugal, including those related to the curricular and pedagogical management of diversity [32], are currently a topic of discussion, as the model of teacher training is being questioned and revisions are on the horizon. The access of regular education teachers to lifelong training programs focused on the curricular and pedagogical management of teaching students with disabilities or learning difficulties was considered difficult by some of the interviewees, as many such programs are directed to special education teachers. This situation appears to be changing, in agreement with international recommendations [49].

Lifelong professional development was seen as having tangible impacts on the improvement of pedagogical and curricular practices concerning work with diverse audiences. It is concerning, however, to verify that from these teachers’ perspectives, schools have yet to achieve effective and sufficient change, for inclusion to be based on diversity and curricular differentiation.

The need for revising initial teacher training, considered inadequate or insufficient, as well as the need to invest in lifelong professional development, were highlighted by the teachers who consider them fundamental to the implementation of curricular and pedagogical differentiation to manage diversities. This vision is aligned with the opinions of scholars and organizations [26–29,31,50].

Even though teachers reported implementing curricular and pedagogical differentiation, when asked to describe the processes in specifics, they became vague. The use of specific activities and evaluation instruments were referred to. These differentiation practices may still be limited by several factors, such as those identified by the teachers, and among which the insufficiency of their teacher training and suboptimal working conditions were most stressed. Similar constraints were recognized by other authors [31].

Another constraint to the implementation of curricular and pedagogical differentiation practices identified by the participants was a lack of collaborative teaching practices, an aspect which is in agreement with the perspectives of several authors [51–53], who defend that collaboration is more present at the level of discourse than in actual teaching practices. This study's data point toward what Little [15] calls weak or superficial collaboration practices among teachers.

However, an effective differentiation of teaching and pedagogical practices calls for collaborative professionalism, that is, "how teachers and other educators transform teaching and learning together to work with all students to develop fulfilling lives of meaning, purpose and success" [16] (p. 3). In this case, co-responsibility and critical joint reflection about teaching practices are present, supporting a strong type of collaboration—*joint work* [15]—which is more likely to lead to improvements in practice. This is supported by the fact that collaboration between regular education and special education teachers, even if scarce, led to positive outcomes.

The collaborative construction of this differentiation process was still not always a fact, thus not expressing international recommendations [54–57]. It is, therefore, urgent to foster teacher collaboration. Initial teacher training and teachers' lifelong professional development may play a role in this transformation by contemplating collaborative approaches [57]. As Lima states, "never has teacher collaboration been so vehemently advocated for, understanding it is the ideal way to ensure teachers' professional development" [58] (p. 7), and consequently contribute to school improvement [59].

The adequation of evaluation practices was often materialized in a simplification of questions, longer response times, or shorter tests. This facilitation contrasts with the notion of quality education for all, expressed by several international organizations, particularly the European Commission [54], UNESCO [56], or OECD [17], as well as by scholars [59]. While the parents' participation is clearly defended in national law, namely Law-decree No. 54/2018 [60] and 55/2018 [61], it was the exception, rather than the norm, among the interviewees. Although exceptional, one of the interviewees still assumed that students with learning difficulties or disabilities should learn separately from their peers, which is against what researchers [62], international organizations [17,54,56], and national documents [60,61] have found. This is a testament to the fact that teacher training and professional development focusing on curricular differentiation and working with students with disabilities or learning difficulties still need to be promoted.

All of the teachers considered that the curricular and pedagogical practices were advantageous, as they respect the students' singularities and potentiate their personal and academic success [1]. The pertinence of differentiating practices directed at students with disabilities or learning difficulties was justified by the possibility of developing and consolidating significant learning with those students as well as promoting equal opportunities. Nonwithstanding the recognition of this advantage, the interviewees were not fully satisfied with its implementation. In effect, the participants expressed a feeling of not doing enough, as they felt they could do more and better, as well as feelings of dissatisfaction due to the lack of conditions to promote a more differentiated work and to support individual and collective success [1–3]. In this sense and at the core of curricular and pedagogical action, diversity must effectively be valued in order to enable the construction of a more inclusive school. This new school requires not only appropriate teacher training and professional development but also an indispensable reorganization of the school and of the classroom [63]. Ensuring all students have access to quality

education [64] and responding to diversity are essential and require inclusive education to be mobilized as part of social and educational transformation [64].

Among the participants, several reasons led to dissatisfaction and frustration: lack of time, excess of classes and students per class, accountability, feelings of insufficiency by the teacher, lack of collaboration among teachers, students' indiscipline and lack of motivation, and lack of involvement by the parents. At the same time, reasons for satisfaction were also identified, including dedication, students' success, and collaborative work, including with special education teachers. The importance of collaboration for the improvement of teachers' work as well as for teachers' professionalism have widely been acknowledged as fundamental [11,62,65,66]. On the same note, teachers proposed creating conditions for collaborative work among regular education teachers as well as teachers of special education, such as creating shared times for collaboration in teachers' timetables.

Wider changes, encompassing the school and even the educational community as a whole, were also proposed by the interviewees—reducing the number of classes each teacher is responsible for, reducing the number of students per class, and involving other teachers in the classroom and parents in their children's education. Once again, revising teacher training and professional development was presented as a catalyst for change in their teaching and curricular practices.

Although the present study is qualitative and not representative of the general population, it may help illustrate 2CBE's conceptions and practices in the scope of curriculum differentiation and management concerning students with learning difficulties or disabilities. The results highlight the need to continue to rethink not only initial teacher training but also opportunities for lifelong professional development. Collaboration—among regular education teachers as well as with special education teachers—emerges as a possible avenue for the promotion of change. However, systemic change may be necessary to aid teachers in their development process.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, H.I., J.A.P. and F.S.; methodology, H.I., J.A.P. and F.S.; validation, H.I., J.A.P. and F.S.; formal analysis, H.I.; investigation, H.I.; resources, H.I., J.A.P. and F.S.; data curation, H.I.; writing—original draft preparation, H.I., F.S., M.A. and J.A.P.; writing—review and editing, H.I., F.S., M.A. and J.A.P.; supervision, J.A.P. and F.S.; project administration, H.I.; funding acquisition, H.I., J.A.P., M.A. and F.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia S.A. (FCT), grant number SFRH/BD/136655/2018, and projects UIDB/04372/2020 and UIDP/04372/2020.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Scientific Council of the Institute of Education of Minho University (03/03/2015; IE 189/2015), the General Directorate of Education (05/11/2018, n° 0636500001), and the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) (SFRH/BD/136655/2018).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available due to the confidential information involved, as per the confidentiality agreement established with the participants.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

In this appendix, we present the structure of the category framework used in this paper.

Category	Sub-Category	Specification
(A) Teachers' perceptions about their initial and lifelong training and professional development needs;	(A1) Initial training	(A1a) Initial training received (A1b) Adequacy and scope of initial training (A1c) Aspects to be improved
	(A2) Lifelong professional development	(A2a) Continuous professional development needs experienced (A2b) Lifelong professional development experiences (A2c) Suggestions for improvement
	(A3) Impact of lifelong professional development	(A3a) Lifelong professional development—effects on perspectives and practices
(B) Experiences in teaching students with learning difficulties or disabilities;	(B1) Planning processes (B2) Implementation processes (B3) Evaluation processes (B4) Constraints (B5) Facilitators	
(C) Contributions of differentiated curricular and pedagogical practices for learning, personal development, social and work inclusion of students with learning difficulties or disabilities;	Not analyzed in the present article	
(D) (Dis)satisfaction with implementing differentiated curricular and pedagogical practices;	(D1) Pertinence of curricular and pedagogical differentiation	
	(D2) Degree and factors of (dis)satisfaction with the practices implemented	(D2a) Degree of (dis)satisfaction (D2b) Satisfaction factors (D2c) Dissatisfaction factors
(E) Directions for change or alternatives for curricular practices	(E1) Future directions	(E1a) Improvement (E1b) Alternatives

References

- Seabra, F. Equidade e Inclusão: Sentidos e aproximações. In *Currículo, Inclusão e Educação Escolar Pacheco [Equity and Inclusion: Meanings and Approaches]*; Lunardi Mendes, G.J.A., Seabra, F., Viana, I.C., Eds.; Centro de Investigação em Educação, Instituto de Educação da Universidade do Minho: Braga, Portugal, 2017; pp. 763–781.
- UNESCO. *Guía para Asegurar la Inclusión y la Equidad en la Educación*; UNESCO: Paris, France, 2017. Available online: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259592> (accessed on 10 April 2022).
- Zeichner, K. *The Struggle for the Soul of Teacher Education*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2018.
- Alarcão, I. (Ed.) *Formação Reflexiva de Professores—Estratégias de Supervisão [Teachers' Reflexive Training—Supervision Strategies]*; Porto Editora: Porto, Portugal, 2013.
- Quitambo, A. Currículo, formação de professores e desenvolvimento curricular no contexto africano. In *Currículo, Formação e Internacionalização: Desafios Contemporâneos [Curriculum, Teacher Training and Professional Development in the African Context]*; Morgado, J.C., Sousa, J.R.F., Moreira, A.F., Vieira, A., Eds.; Centro de Investigação em Educação (CIED), Universidade do Minho: Braga, Portugal, 2018; pp. 198–217.
- Sousa, F. A investigação enquanto prática de deliberação curricular: O caso do projeto ICR [Research as a practice of curricular deliberation: The case of the ICR project]. *Interações* **2010**, *6*, 32–56.

7. Zabala, A. *A Prática Educativa—Como Ensinar [The Educational Practice—How to Teach]*; Artmed: Porto Alegre, Brasil, 1998.
8. Imbernón, F. *Formação Continuada de Professores [Teachers' Lifelong Training]*; Artmed: Porto Alegre, Brasil, 2010.
9. Hernández, F.; Ventura, M. *A Organização do Currículo por Projetos de Trabalho: O Conhecimento é um Caleidoscópio [The Organization of Curriculum by Work Projects: Knowledge Is a Kaleidoscope]*; Penso Editora: Porto Alegre, Brasil, 2017.
10. Rodrigues, F.; Mogarro, M.J. Imagens de identidade profissional de futuros professores [Images of future teachers' professional identity]. *Rev. Bras. Educ.* **2020**, *25*, e250004. [[CrossRef](#)]
11. Seabra, F.; Abelha, M.; Henriques, S.; Mouraz, A. Policies and practices of External Evaluation of Schools: Spaces for teacher collaboration? *Ens. Aval. Polít. Públicas Educ.* **2022**, *30*, 644–668. [[CrossRef](#)]
12. Hernández, A. *14 Ideas Clave: El Trabajo en Equipo del Profesorado*; Editorial GRAÓ: Barcelona, Spain, 2007.
13. Reeves, P.M.; Pun, W.H.; Chung, K.S. Influence of teacher collaboration on job satisfaction and student achievement. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2017**, *67*, 227–236. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Sawyer, L.B.E.; Rimm-Kaufman, S.E. Teacher collaboration in the context of the Responsive Classroom approach. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2007**, *13*, 211–245. [[CrossRef](#)]
15. Little, J.W. The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations. *Teach. Coll. Rec.* **1990**, *91*, 509–536. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. Hargreaves, A.; O'Connor, M. Solidarity with solidarity: The case for collaborative professionalism. *Phi Delta Kappan* **2018**, *100*, 20–24. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. OECD. *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators*; OECD: Paris, France, 2019; Available online: <https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/> (accessed on 5 April 2022).
18. Inês, H.; Seabra, F.; Pacheco, J.A. Formação Docente para Gerir Diversidades em Sala de Aula Regular em Portugal [Teacher training for the management of diversity in the regular classroom in Portugal]. *Rev. Lusófona Educ.* **2021**, *53*, 11–30. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Inês, H.; Seabra, F.; Pacheco, J.A. Gestão curricular inclusiva e formação de professores do 2º Ciclo do Ensino Básico em Portugal: Perceções de coordenadores de cursos de formação inicial [Inclusive curricular management and the training of second cycle of basic education teachers in Portugal: Perspectives of coordinators of initial training degrees]. *Rev. Port. Educ.* **2022**, *35*, 310–330. [[CrossRef](#)]
20. Formosinho, J.; Niza, S. Iniciação à prática profissional nos cursos de formação inicial de professores [Initiation to professional practice in teachers' initial training degrees]. In *Formação de Professores—Aprendizagem Profissional e Ação Docente*; Formosinho, J., Ed.; Porto Editora: Porto, Portugal, 2010; pp. 119–140.
21. Pletsch, M. A formação de professores para a educação inclusiva: Legislação, diretrizes políticas e resultados de pesquisas [Teacher training for inclusive education: Legislation, political directives and research results]. *Educar* **2009**, *33*, 143–156.
22. Pegalajar, M.; Colmenero, M. Actitudes y formación docente hacia la inclusión en Educación Secundaria Obligatoria. *Rev. Electrón. Investig. Educ.* **2017**, *19*, 84–97. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Torres, J.; Mendes, E. Atitudes sociais e formação inicial de professores para a educação especial [Social attitudes and teachers initial training for special education]. *Rev. Bras. Educ. Espec.* **2019**, *25*, 765–780. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Inês, S.; Seabra, F. Formação para docentes do ensino regular do 2.º CEB sobre necessidades educativas especiais [Teacher training for regular education teachers of the second cycle of basic education about special educational needs]. In *Proceedings of the II Congresso Internacional Direitos Humanos e Educação Inclusiva: Múltiplos Olhares*, Faro, Portugal, 23–25 February 2017; pp. 479–494.
25. Law-decree no. 43/2007, of 22nd February—Approves the juridical regimen of professional habilitation for teaching in preschool education and basic and secondary education. In *Diário da República*, 1st ed.; No. 38; Imprensa Nacional: Lisbon, Portugal, 2007.
26. Leite, C.; Leal, A.R. Políticas da formação inicial de professores, em Portugal, decorrentes de Bolonha: Posições da comunidade científica [Policies of teachers' initial training in Portugal, stemming from Bologna: Positions of the scientific community]. *Interrit.-Rev. Educ.* **2017**, *3*, 5–30.
27. Pacheco, J.A. *Inovar Para Mudar a Escola [Innovating to Change the School]*; Porto Editora: Porto, Portugal, 2019.
28. Pereira, C.; Guimarães, S. A educação especial na formação de professores: Um estudo sobre cursos de licenciatura em pedagogia [Special education in teacher training: A study about graduate degrees in pedagogy]. *Rev. Bras. Educ. Espec.* **2019**, *25*, 571–586. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Tardif, M. *Saberes Docentes e Formação Profissional [Teachers' Knowledge and Professional Training]*, 17th ed.; Editora Vozes: Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, 2018.
30. Morgado, J.C. Políticas, Contextos e Currículo: Desafios para o século XXI [Policies, Contexts and Curriculum: Challenges for the XXI Century]. In *Currículo, Formação e Internacionalização: Desafios Contemporâneos*; Morgado, J.C., Sousa, J., Moreira, A., Vieira, A., Eds.; Centro de Investigação em Educação (CIED), Universidade do Minho: Braga, Portugal, 2018; pp. 72–83.
31. Cantorani, J.; Pilatti, L.; Helmann, C.; Silva, S. A acessibilidade e a inclusão em uma Instituição Federal de Ensino Superior a partir da lei n. 13.409 [Accessibility and inclusion in a Federal higher education institution from the law no. 13.409]. *Rev. Bras. Educ.* **2020**, *25*, e250016. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Lima, N.; Dorziat, A. Formação docente para educar na diversidade: Concepções subjacentes nos documentos oficiais e na prática explicitada [Teacher training to educate in diversity: Conceptions underlying the official documents and the explicit practice]. *Ens. Aval. Polít. Públicas Educ.* **2015**, *23*, 437–460. [[CrossRef](#)]

33. Goodson, I. Currículo, narrativa e futuro social [Curriculum, narrative and social future]. *Rev. Bras. Educ.* **2007**, *12*, 241–252. [CrossRef]
34. Inês, H. A Formação Inicial e Contínua de Professores do 2º Ciclo do Ensino Básico e a Gestão Curricular pelos Professores do Ensino Regular do Atendimento a Alunos com Dificuldades de Aprendizagem ou Incapacidades [Initial and Lifelong Training of Teachers of the Second Cycle of Basic Education and curricular management by Regular Education Teachers with Students with Learning Difficulties or Disabilities]. Ph.D. Thesis, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal, 2021. Available online: <http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/handle/1822/74770> (accessed on 21 September 2022).
35. Manzini, E. Considerações sobre a elaboração de roteiro para entrevista semi-estruturada [Considerations about the elaboration of an interview script]. In *Colóquios sobre Pesquisa em Educação Especial*; Marquezzine, M., Almeida, M., Omote, S., Eds.; Eduel: Londrina, Brazil, 2003; pp. 11–25.
36. Bardin, L. *Análise de Conteúdo [Content Analysis]*, 4th ed.; Edições 70: Lisboa, Portugal, 2013.
37. Flores, M.A.; Day, C. Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers' identities: A multi-perspective study. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2006**, *22*, 219–232. [CrossRef]
38. Flick, U. *El Diseño de Investigación Cualitativa*; Ediciones Morata: Madrid, Spain, 2015.
39. Bogdan, R.C.; Biklen, S.P. *Investigação Qualitativa em Educação: Uma Introdução à Teoria e aos Métodos [Qualitative Research in Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods]*; Porto Editora: Porto, Portugal, 1994.
40. Carmo, H.; Ferreira, M. *Metodologia da Investigação—Guia para Auto-Aprendizagem [Research Methodology—A Guide for Self-Learning]*, 2nd ed.; Universidade Aberta: Lisboa, Portugal, 2008.
41. Henkel, K. A categorização e a validação das respostas abertas em surveys políticos [The categorization and validation of open answers to political surveys]. *Opin. Pública* **2017**, *23*, 786–808. [CrossRef]
42. AERA. Code of Ethics. *Educ. Res.* **2011**, *40*, 145–156.
43. SPCE. *Carta Ética. Instrumento de Regulação Ético-Deontológica [Ethics Chart. Instrument for Ethical and Deontological Regulation]*; Sociedade Portuguesa de Ciências da Educação: Porto, Portugal, 2020; Available online: <http://www.spce.org.pt/assets/files/CARTA-TICA2.EDIO-2020.pdf> (accessed on 3 March 2022).
44. Law no. 46/1986, of 14th October—Defines the Law of Bases of the Educational System. In *Diário da República*, 1st ed.; No. 237; Imprensa Nacional: Lisbon, Portugal, 1986.
45. Law-decree no. 139-A/90, of 28th April—Approves the statutes of the careers of childhood educators and teachers of basic and secondary education. In *Diário da República*, 1st ed.; No. 98; Imprensa Nacional: Lisbon, Portugal, 1990.
46. Warnock, H. *Special Educational Needs: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People*; Her Majesty's Stationery Office: London, UK, 1978.
47. UNESCO. *Declaração de Salamanca e Enquadramento da Acção na Área das Necessidades Educativas Especiais [Salamanca Declaration and Framing of Action in the Scope of Special Educational Needs]*; UNESCO: Paris, France, 1994. Available online: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000139394> (accessed on 15 March 2022).
48. Mouraz, A.; Leite, C.; Fernandes, P. A Formação Inicial de Professores em Portugal Decorrente do Processo de Bolonha: Uma Análise a Partir do “Olhar” de Professores e de Estudantes [Teachers' initial training in Portugal stemming from the Bologna Process: An analysis from the «eyes» of teachers and students]. *Rev. Port. Pedagog.* **2012**, *2*, 189–209.
49. OECD. *TALIS 2018 Results: Teachers and Schools Leaders as Lifelong Learners*; OECD: Paris, France, 2019; Volume 1. Available online: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/talis-2018-results-volume-i_1d0bc92a-en#page1 (accessed on 15 March 2022).
50. European Commission. *Teaching Careers in Europe: Access, Progression and Support—Eurydice Report*; Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg, 2018. Available online: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/309510> (accessed on 20 May 2022).
51. Thurler, M.; Perrenoud, P. Cooperação entre professores: A formação inicial deve preceder as práticas? [Teacher cooperation: Should initial training precede practice?]. *Cad. Pesqui.* **2006**, *36*, 357–375. [CrossRef]
52. Tardif, M.; Lessard, C. *O Trabalho Docente: Elementos para Uma Teoria da Docência como Profissão de Interações Humanas [Teachers' Work: Elements for a Theory of Teaching as a Profession of Human Interaction]*, 9th ed.; Vozes: Petrópolis, Brazil, 2005.
53. Vangrieken, K.; Dochy, F.; Raes, E.; Kyndy, E. Teacher collaboration: A systematic review. *Educ. Res. Rev.* **2015**, *15*, 17–40. [CrossRef]
54. European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. *Educação Inclusiva e Práticas de Sala de Aula [Inclusive Education and Classroom Practice]*; EADSNE: Brussels, Belgium, 2003.
55. Alberta Education Inclusive Learning Supports. *Indicators of Inclusive School—Continuing the Conversation*; Alberta Government: Edmonton, AB, Canada, 2013. Available online: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9781460107157> (accessed on 15 May 2022).
56. UNESCO. *Educação para os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável—Objetivos de Aprendizagem [Education for the Sustainable Development Goals—Learning Objectives]*; UNESCO: Paris, France, 2017; Available online: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002521/252197POR.pdf> (accessed on 12 February 2022).
57. European Commission. *Shaping Career-Long Perspectives on Teaching: A guide on Policies to Improve Initial Teacher Education*; European Union: Luxembourg, 2015.
58. Lima, J. *As Culturas Colaborativas nas Escolas: Estruturas, Processos e Conteúdos [Collaborative Cultures at the Schools: Structures, Processes and Contents]*; Porto Editora: Porto, Portugal, 2002.
59. Maia, V.; Freire, S. A diferenciação pedagógica no contexto da educação inclusiva [Pedagogical differentiation in the context of inclusive education]. *Rev. Exitus* **2020**, *10*, e020003. [CrossRef]

60. Law-decree no. 54/2018, of July 6th—Establishes the juridical regimen of inclusive education, as a process aiming to respond to the diversity of needs and potential of all and every student, through an increase in the participation in learning processes and in the life of the educational community. In *Diário da República*, 1st ed.; No. 129; Imprensa Nacional: Lisbon, Portugal, 2018.
61. Law-decree no. 55/2018, of July 6th—Establishes the curriculum for basic and secondary education and the guiding principles for the assessment and evaluation of learning. In *Diário da República*, 1st ed.; No. 129; Imprensa Nacional: Lisbon, Portugal, 2018.
62. Bush, A.; Grotjohann, N. Collaboration in teacher education: A cross-sectional study on future teachers' attitudes towards collaboration, their intentions to collaborate and their performance of collaboration. *Teach. Teach. Educ.* **2020**, *88*, 102968. [[CrossRef](#)]
63. OECD. *PISA. Preparing Our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World the OECD-PISA Global Competence Framework*; OECD: Paris, France, 2018.
64. Dreyer, L. Inclusive education. In *Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development*; Ramrathan, L., Le Grange, L., Higgs, P., Eds.; Juta: Cape Town, South Africa, 2017. Available online: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316352226_Inclusive_Education (accessed on 5 April 2022).
65. Fullan, M.; Hargreaves, A. *Por Que é Que Vale a Pena Lutar? O Trabalho de Equipa na Escola [What Is Worth Fighting for? Teamwork at the School]*; Porto Editora: Porto, Portugal, 2001.
66. Hargreaves, A. Teacher collaboration: 30 years of research on its nature, forms, limitations, and effects. *Teach. Teach.* **2019**, *25*, 603–621. [[CrossRef](#)]