

## Article

# Inclusive Education in Portugal: Teachers' Professional Development, Working Conditions, and Instructional Efficacy

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**Abstract:** Inclusive education policies thin the boundaries of special and regular education as well as teachers' roles and competencies. The present study, using data from TALIS 2018, aims to find out whether Portuguese teachers working in classes directed entirely or mainly to special education needs students (SENS) differ from teachers working in classes with few or no SENS in the following areas: (a) professional development needs in special education; (b) perceived barriers to professional development; and (c) teaching and work features related to SENS. The results show small but significant differences between teachers working and teachers not working entirely or mainly with SENS in professional development needs, perceived opportunities for professional development, and stress involved in modifying SENS lessons. No other significant differences were found. Still, the results show that both groups of teachers perceive significant professional development needs and barriers to professional development but are optimistic about the quality of professional development, job satisfaction, and self-efficacy in instruction. However, teachers of both groups are pessimistic about professional collaboration, a key element of inclusive education. Overall, it seems that some critical elements of inclusive education are still to be implemented in Portuguese schools.

**Keywords:** inclusion; professional development; special education; SEN students; TALIS 20

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## 1. Introduction

The field of special education faces significant challenges in the context of national and international educational reforms. Scholars, practitioners, administrators, and politicians have debated special education needs students' (SENS) priorities for many years. Nevertheless, there is no consensus about the best educational model(s) for SENS, and inclusion is still a controversial topic in education. It was stated in [1] that positions regarding inclusion could range from "unqualified enthusiasm for full inclusion" to "concerns about the responsibilities of general education teachers and the effects of inclusion on all students" (p. 264). A dominant perspective about inclusion (e.g., [2–5]) considers that the most critical issue is where SENS are educated. This perspective is the basis for the politics of full inclusion. Another perspective considers that instruction, not the place, is the priority for SENS [1,6–9]. Although the discussion has continued for decades, both sides' arguments are worthy of consideration.

### 1.1. Inclusive Education: Pros and Cons

An article published in "Educational Leadership" [4] thoroughly enunciated the main principles for the model of inclusion of SENS in regular classrooms: students are more alike than different; the development of effective educational practices for SENS will benefit all students because teachers and schools will be more prepared for any circumstances; the separation of students is costly, ineffective, and a violation of civil rights. Not least important, inclusion goes beyond integrating SENS into regular classrooms [4]. "It incorporates an end to labeling students" (p. 78). As [10] puts it, "... inclusive education is a franchise

of an education in and for democracy” (p. 910), in which “belonging” is a precondition of community and inclusion, and it is a powerful way to deal with social exclusion. Moreover, the promotion of inclusion “is a movement in a clear philosophical direction” [11] (p. 675–676), far more than a technical or organizational change. This movement involves not only classroom accommodations but also school and societal changes. The idea of educational inclusion has another necessary consequence: special education as a system distinct from general education becomes unnecessary and undesirable because it is at the margin of the normative system and reproduces educational and social exclusion [12]. Still, even proponents of inclusive education caution about the substitution of special education by inclusive education. For example, [13] asserts that many children with disabilities will not be able to participate in their environments without adequate support and resources. Simultaneously, [14] found that special education students placed in high inclusion settings get better reading and math results than special education students placed in low inclusion settings. Still, the authors assert that high expectations and limited resources create significant stress in educational contexts. This stress may be more evident for SENS. This tension is recognized by [15] when they assert that “the major obstacle to meaningful inclusion is a neoliberal educational system in which the meeting of academic performance targets and supply of demonstrations of progress have become overriding political priorities” (p. 448). That is, mandatory full inclusion faces demands for standard raising and teacher accountability.

With regard to the effectiveness of special education versus full inclusion, [16] found that special education services produce negative or statistically non-significant results on primary graders’ math and reading achievement, and internalized and externalized problem behaviors. However, Ref [16,17] state that, over time, special education services may be positively, but weakly, affected by learning-related results. Moreover, the authors admit that the problem might not be special education services but an inadequate delivery of the services in many cases. Indeed, several observational studies [18–21] found significant problems in many education programs: specialized teacher shortages, variable teacher quality, limitations to individualized instruction, and scarce use of research-based practices.

Advocates of the need for a continuum of educational services, including special education, have long refuted the full inclusion proponents’ arguments. For example, Ref [22] asserted that the most effective interventions for students with disabilities employ intensive, individualized instruction, combined with careful and systematic monitoring of students’ progress, irrespective of the educational context. At the same time, Ref [22] contends that general education classrooms cannot provide this kind of instruction and that “Undifferentiated large-group instruction appears to be the norm in general education” (p. 81). Moreover, teachers are more likely to use easy adaptations for SENS that do not require preplanning. Still, Ref [22] indicates that in general classrooms, the average class size is larger, teacher training for SENS is limited, teachers work in a context of higher standards and expectations, and instruction is directed to average students. No less important is that “Teachers who have the greatest success at raising the academic achievement of the whole class may also have the least tolerance for students with impaired skills or with maladaptive behavior” (p. 82).

One of the main but often ignored criticisms of the full-inclusion model (FIM) is its implementation. For example, [1] have long stressed that educational models mandated at the district or government level may not get the school personnel’s engagement. The authors state that inclusion is “irresponsible” when the location prevails over the academic and social progress; when teachers are mandated to participate in inclusive classrooms; when resources are not considered before the establishment of inclusive classrooms; when FIM is the only available model; when professional development is not part of the model; when a school philosophy of inclusion is not developed; and when curricula and instruction don’t meet the needs of all students.

Overall, three criticisms of FIM seem particularly significant. One is the centrality (or the pre-eminence) of place over instruction. As [23] put it, “If we have learned anything

from the history of the treatment of disability, it is that place itself teaches nothing, is not a reliable predictor of instruction, and is no guarantee of instruction. 'Being there' and being exposed to instruction is not and never has been a reasonable measure of or a guarantee of instruction" (p. 31). One other criticism respects the dearth of regular teachers' preparation and professional development to deal with SENS and lack of resources [24,25]. The third main criticism has to do with the regular classroom's uniqueness as a context where SENS can be educated [26].

In several countries and communities, the practical problems of FIM paved the way for the movement of inclusive special education (ISE). As [6] states, "the focus of ISE is on effectively including as many children as possible in mainstream schools, along with the availability of a continuum of placement options from mainstream classes to special schools, and involving close collaboration between mainstream and special schools" (p. 247). According to [6], implementing effective practices from special and inclusive education, keeping a continuum of placement options, educating in the most appropriate setting, including as many children as possible in mainstream settings, and developing collaboration between mainstream and special classes or schools are the essential elements of ISE. These elements may well represent the best current compromise between the pre-eminence of "place" and the haste of "instruction."

### *1.2. Teachers' Professional Development and Other Needs for Working in Full-Inclusion Settings*

Teachers are probably the most essential people in implementing current inclusion policies [27]. In countries that have embraced the idea of full inclusion, the dilution of special education in regular education have made every teacher responsible for SENS progress, indeed, for the progress of every student [28]. One difficulty with this model is that while the curriculum must be general for large groups of students, it must be specific and individualized for (at least some) SENS. It turns out that classroom teachers are usually trained to teach average students, not students with special needs. At a minimum, these teachers must know how to set individual goals, design instruction, and evaluate SENS. Not less important, they must also know how to do this while teaching the other students in the classroom. However, this does not seem to be done in most countries or schools [29].

For example, [30] studied the needs and perceptions of regular teachers regarding the inclusion of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) students in classrooms and its implications for the professional development of teachers. Teachers emphasized their difficulties in accommodating ASD in classrooms, encouraging the acceptance of children with ASD by peers, and collaborating with the staff. The authors stress that previous research (e.g., [31]) referred to the importance of teachers getting a basic knowledge about ASD and the definition of classroom teachers' role. "Without this basic knowledge general educators are often overwhelmed and frustrated with meeting the diverse learning needs of students in their classrooms" [31] (p. 53). Other studies found general educators lack the confidence to work with SENS because of limited qualifications and professional development (e.g., [32,33]).

Data from TALIS 2013 was used by [29] to study teachers' special education professional development needs. The study included 121,173 teachers from 38 countries. The results suggest that teachers working with SENS have lower qualifications than their colleagues, move schools more frequently, and have more professional needs. Few teachers report a positive impact of professional development on their teaching practices. The author concludes that many schools worldwide face a shortage of qualified teachers in special education and that professional development is needed in special education instructional strategies and on how to work with an increasing number of SENS in classrooms.

Another critical issue that deserves consideration in mandatory inclusive classrooms is teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. The results from the literature are not positive. For example, [27] reviewed 26 studies with primary teachers and found that most studies reported neutral or negative attitudes towards SENS inclusion in the classrooms. No study reported positive attitudes. The variables related to the attitudes were (lack

of) teacher training, type of disability (more rejection of behavioral than cognitive or hearing disorders), experience with inclusive education (more experience, less rejection), and class size (the smaller, the better). In a study with 1764 Finnish teachers, [34] found that classroom teachers hold negative attitudes and subject teachers hold very negative attitudes towards inclusion. In contrast, special education teachers hold positive attitudes. The author also found that 20% of the teachers were strong opponents of inclusion, and 8% were strong advocates. In Norway, [35] reported limited cooperation and coordination between general and special education teachers and problems with the standardization of achievement goals (unreachable by SENS) and large numbers of students in classrooms. The teachers also reported that quiet and withdrawn SENS tend to be left on their own. As [35] concludes, "The lack of cooperation and coordination between teachers contradicts the understanding that inclusion is the responsibility of all of the school's staff."

Studies conducted in the US, Greece, Thailand, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Trinidad, Hungary, Turkey, and France (e.g., [36–43]), found somewhat more favorable attitudes from teachers (still, special education teachers are always more favorable than general teachers). Still, almost always, participants refer to strong concerns about their preparation to deal with SENS and low confidence with their capacity to promote SENS education effectively. One interesting study conducted in Israel [44] reported that teachers consider that inclusion is implemented to a moderate degree in schools. However, while teachers seem to feel a "moral obligation" for inclusion, they also feel that they lack the knowledge to deal effectively with SENS.

### *1.3. Teacher Professional Development, Needs and Attitudes towards Inclusion: The Case of Portugal*

The recent Inclusive Education Act [45], in Portugal, establishes as a priority "of the governmental action supporting/waging on an inclusive school where each and every one of the students, regardless of their personal and social situation, find answers that enable them to acquire a level of education and training which will enable them to be fully socially integrated" (p. 2918). In the context of this reform, every student must be educated in general classrooms. That is, special education is to be diluted in regular education. The model moves "away from the rationale that it is necessary to categorize to intervene." This model was found to be quite encouraging and seemingly accepted by stakeholders in terms of values by [46]. Still, [46] found an "inextricable challenge" originated by problems with the implementation of the model, perceived lack of resources, and the likelihood that "sharing scarce resources amongst a larger group of students might disadvantage those who are the most vulnerable (e.g., disabled students with complex needs)" (p. 282). This challenge might be unsolvable, but it is in no way a surprise. The literature we reviewed in the previous section shows that countries and schools worldwide face the same mismatch between will and circumstances.

There are not many quality studies about the attitudes of teachers towards inclusion in Portugal. Still, one study [47], published before Law 54/2018, found "an overall positive attitude of preschool teachers towards inclusion" (p. 8). Interestingly, more positive attitudes were found for teachers that personally knew someone with SENS. However, the attitudes were less positive when teachers had direct experience in classrooms with SENS. The authors provided no information about the motives of negative attitudes but suggested that they stem from negative classroom experiences.

Interestingly, the most important study to date about the application of law 54/2018 was conducted by a teachers' union [48], the National Federation of Education, not by university researchers. Six hundred and fifteen professionals participated in the survey (preschool to high school teachers, regular teachers, and special education teachers). Seventy-five percent of respondents referred to having difficulties or doubts about the implementation of the law. Sixty-one percent mentioned a lack of support from administration and training entities, and 60% asserted that the law is not functional but bureaucratic. Fifty-five percent were pessimistic about the law's scope, and 80% considered that the label "special education needs" from previous laws should be in place. More than half of

respondents did not understand the main concepts of the law. About 80% stressed that the text does not contemplate hours for collaborative work (this seems to be one of the most controversial law features). Ninety percent of respondents stated that the role of special education teachers is not clear in the text. Since the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) was discontinued, 77% of participants felt the need for a universal instrument to identify SENS. Almost 80% considered that partnerships to better identify/know SENS did not work.

Interviews with directors of groups of schools were also conducted by [48]. The main findings follow: seventy percent of schools do not have the human resources to implement the law; ninety percent of the schools claimed for human resources to implement the law, but they did not get any answer from the Ministry of Education or answers were not satisfactory; to effectively apply the law, schools need a specific professional training.

Taking the survey results into account, [48] suggests that the law explicitly mentions the category “special education needs” (as in previous laws), that teacher schedules include time allocated to collaborative work, that special education teachers’ roles be clarified, and that the number of special education teachers must increase, not decrease.

Overall, the survey results suggest that participants do not support special education dilution in regular education or the end of categories of exceptional students. Like many international studies, the lack of human resources to implement inclusion is a primary concern for teachers and schools. Teachers’ lack of qualifications to deal with SENS is another general complaint requiring further professional development. Using data from TALIS 2013, [29] found that Portugal was the country with the lowest participation of teachers in special needs professional development (17%). However, the teachers who participated refer to the high impact of professional development in their teaching practices.

Although the survey of [48] is not an academic study, it is the most important study about the implementation of law 54/2018 to date. Moreover, the results are not much different from what has been found in international studies. Like many other countries, Portugal steadily substituted special schools for SENS with mainstream and inclusion models. However, most teachers seem to agree with the latest models’ principles but disagree with its implementation. This disagreement is a significant problem because educational reforms that cannot count on most teachers’ accordance will hardly be successful.

## 2. The Present Study

The present study investigates educational inclusion in Portugal and its conditions, particularly teachers’ professional development. Specifically, the study aims to know whether teachers working in classes directed entirely or mainly to SENS differ from teachers working in classes with few or no SENS in the following areas: (a) professional development needs in special education; (b) perceived barriers to professional development; and (c) teaching and work features related to SENS.

It must be noted that data from TALIS 2018 are prior to the publication of law 54/2018. However, most of the principles of the law were already underway several years ago.

## 3. Method

The present study used data from the teacher questionnaire of TALIS 2018 [49]. The schools for this study where participants were recruited are at the ISCED-2 level (International Standard Classification of Education). In Portugal, ISCED-2 corresponds to 7th-through 9th-grade classes.

### 3.1. Participants

As described in the TALIS 2018 Technical Report [50], Portuguese participants were recruited through a stratified two-stage probability sampling design. The target population was 2544 teachers from 200 schools (see Table 1). We must stress that TALIS does not inform whether participants are formal special education teachers (in terms of certification



or primary responsibility) but whether they teach in classes directed entirely or mainly to special needs students.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants.

	Teaching Class Directed Entirely or Mainly to Special Needs Students		Total
	Yes	No	
Female	86	1771	1857
Male	43	644	687
Total	129	2415	2544
Experience	22.82	22.73	

### 3.2. Variables and Measures

We extracted two types of variables from the TALIS 2018 database: single variables from responses to specific questions and latent continuous variables obtained from a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to a set of responses. In this last case, the latent variable is the combination of several observed variables. After computation, the factor scores were rescaled to a metric of convenience, with a standard deviation of 2.0, where the value of 10 corresponds to the mid-point of the scale in which the items were initially measured (i.e., 2.5 points). A result of 10 indicates average agreement with the items on the scale. A result above 10 indicates average agreement, and a result below 10 indicates average disagreement. The TALIS 2018 Technical Report [51] provides complete information about the scales' construction and the indices developed through CFA.

### 3.3. Single Measures

Teaching entirely or mainly to special needs students: this dichotomic variable is the predictor of the study's profile analysis specified in the results section.

Professional development needs: two items of this scale were used, "Approaches to individualized professional development needs learning" and "Teaching students with special needs." These items are measured on a four-point ordinal scale ranging from "No need at present" to "High level of need."

Barriers to professional development: "There is a lack of employer support," "There is no relevant professional development offered," and "There are no incentives for participating in professional development." These variables are measured on a four-point ordinal scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree."

Work stress accommodating students with special needs: this variable is measured on a four-point ordinal scale ranging from "Not at all" to "A lot." For this study, the variable was dichotomized as "yes/no."

Supporting students with special needs: this variable is measured on a four-point ordinal scale ranging from "Of low importance" to "Of high importance" to the question "Thinking about education as a whole if the budget were to be increased by 5%, how would you rate the importance of the following spending priorities?"

### 3.4. Latent Continuous Variables

Effective professional development: this variable results from the combination of four indicators ("It built on my prior knowledge," "It adapted to my personal development needs," "It had a coherent structure," "It appropriately focused on content needed to teach my subjects") ( $\Omega$  coefficient = 0.448).

Job satisfaction with the work environment: this variable results from the combination of four indicators ("I would like to change to another school if that were possible," "I enjoy working at this school," "I would recommend this school as a good place to work," "All in all, I am satisfied with my job") ( $\Omega$  coefficient = 0.843).

Self-efficacy in instruction: this variable results from the combination of four indicators (“Craft good questions for students,” “Use a variety of assessment strategies,” “Provide an alternative explanation, for example, when students are confused,” “Vary instructional strategies in my classroom”) ( $\Omega$  coefficient = 0.717).

Professional collaboration in lessons among teachers: this variable results from the combination of four indicators (“Teach jointly as a team in the same class,” “Provide feedback to other teachers about their practice,” “Engage in joint activities across different classes and age groups,” “Engage in joint activities across different classes and age groups”) ( $\Omega$  coefficient = 0.587).

#### 4. Results

Table 2 shows the results of teachers working and teachers not working mainly with SENS.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of teachers’ answers in TALIS 2018.

Latent variables	Type of Class							
	Entirely or Mainly SENS (N = 129)				Mainly Regular Students (N = 2415)			
	Mean Rank	Median			Mean Rank	Median		
Professional development needs								
<i>individualized learning</i>	1521.57	3			1787.46	3		
<i>teaching SENS</i>	1583.67	3			1788.96	3		
Barriers professional development								
<i>lack of employer support</i>	1717.13	3			1774.31	3		
<i>no relevant professional devel.</i>	1905.42	3			1765.94	3		
<i>no incentives for participating</i>	1729.62	3			1777.27	3		
Work stress modifying lessons for SENS	2010.85	3			1764.31	3		
Financial support SENS	1837.79	3			1774.28	3		
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Min</u>	<u>Max</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Min</u>	<u>Max</u>
Professional collaboration	9.47	1.80	6.61	14.83	9.10	1.70	6.61	15.90
Effective professional development	14.67	2.00	8.17	15.82	14.66	1.84	8.18	15.82
Job satisfaction (present work)	12.14	2.20	5.19	15.11	12.02	2.04	4.46	15.12
Self-efficacy in instruction	12.83	1.29	6.77	13.94	12.67	1.28	7.27	13.88

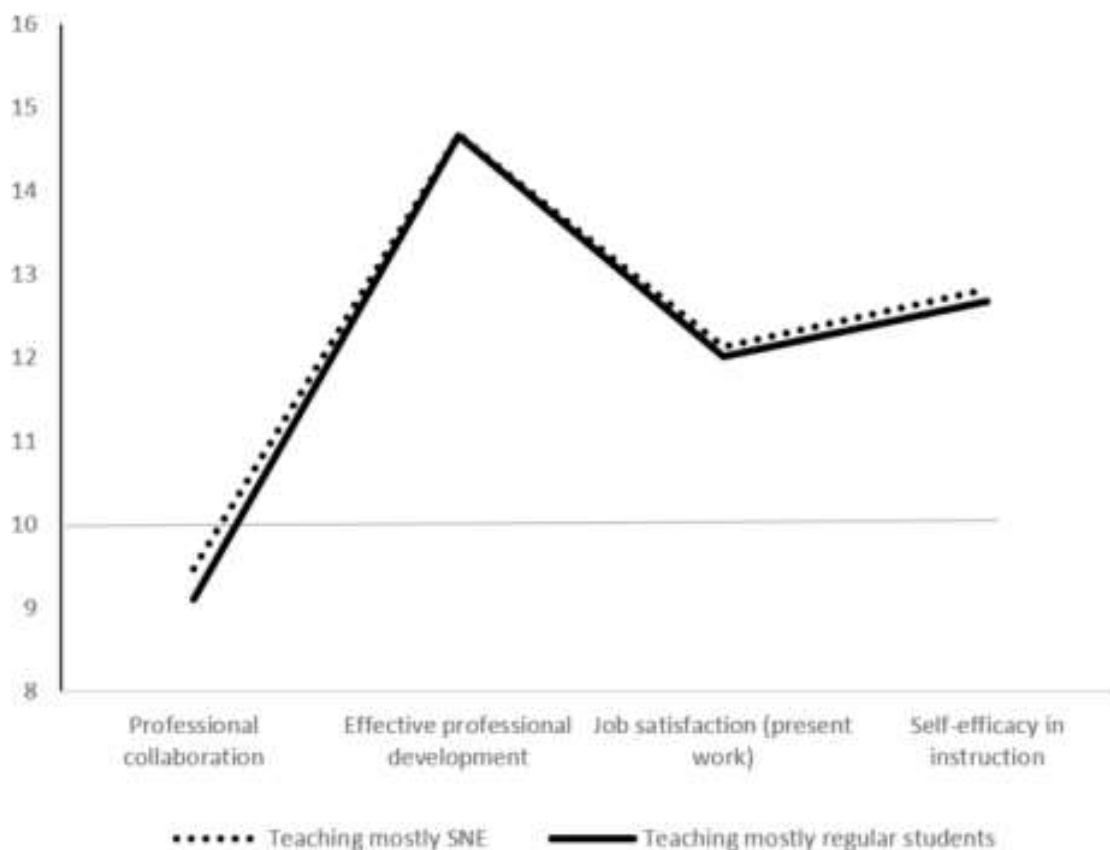
The medians of the answers ( $mdn = 3$ ) show that both groups of teachers perceive significant professional development needs, barriers to professional development, and work stress modifying lessons for SENS, and agree with the increase in budget to finance SENS. Still, Wilcoxon rank-sum tests show that teachers working in classes mainly with regular students think they need (a) more training in individualized learning strategies ( $mean\ rank = 1787.46$ ) than teachers working in classes entirely or mainly directed to SENS ( $mean\ rank = 1521.57$ ),  $W_s = 313,442.50$ ,  $z = -3.98$ ,  $r = 0.07$ ; and (b) more training teaching SENS ( $mean\ rank = 1788.96$ ) than teachers working in classes entirely or mainly directed to SENS ( $mean\ rank = 1583.67$ ),  $W_s = 327,820.50$ ,  $z = -3.11$ ,  $r = 0.05$ . Still, these teachers perceive (c) less relevant opportunities for professional development ( $mean\ rank = 1765.94$ ) than teachers working in classes entirely or mainly directed to SENS ( $mean\ rank = 1905.42$ ),  $W_s = 5,901,767.5$ ,  $z = -2.05$ ,  $r = 0.001$ ; and (d) less stress modifying lessons for SENS ( $mean\ rank = 1764.31$ ) than teachers working in classes entirely or mainly directed to SENS ( $mean\ rank = 2010.85$ ),  $W_s = 5,901,602.50$ ,  $z = -3.68$ ,  $r = 0.06$ . No significant between-group differences were found for lack of employer support for professional development, incentives for participation in professional development, and importance of spending priorities supporting SENS.

Profile analysis was conducted to explore further whether there are differences between teachers working and teachers not working mainly with SENS in four latent variables of the TALIS survey: professional collaboration, effective professional development, job satisfaction with the work environment, and self-efficacy with instruction. Before present-

ing the profile analysis results, it must be noted that teachers from both groups are highly optimistic about effective professional development (a result above the mid-point 10 indicates a positive perspective about the content of the item, and a result below 10 indicates a negative perspective). This result suggests that although professional development offers are scarce, participants appreciate the opportunities. Teachers also seem satisfied with their work and confident about their teaching efficacy. Once again, these perceptions are surprising in the absence of relevant professional development. Most important, both groups of teachers are somewhat negative about professional collaboration, which is a crucial factor for the success of inclusion policies.

A repeated measure ANOVA, with one within-subject factor (i.e., response to four items) and one between-subjects factor (i.e., teach/not teach entirely or mainly NSE), was conducted to examine the responses on the four survey items. All items were rated on a 1 to 4 scale. The means and standard deviations across groups of teachers for the items are reported in Table 3.

The test of parallelism (see Figure 1) indicates that parallelism is tenable ( $Z(3, 7626) = 2.034$ ,  $p = 0.107$ ). The profiles can be considered coincident (i.e., the same) ( $Z(1, 2542) = 1.520$ ,  $p = 0.218$ ). This result suggests that differences in teachers' groups on the four items can be considered due to sampling error. The test of equal means across the four survey items indicates a difference between the means ( $Z(3, 7626) = 782.167$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Figure 1 graphs the results of the profile analysis.



**Figure 1.** Profiles of teachers working primarily with SENS and teachers working mostly with regular students.



**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics for profile analysis.

Latent variables	Teaching Entirely or Mainly to Special Needs Students	Mean	Std. Deviation
Professional collaboration	Yes	9.64	1.80
	No	9.31	1.69
Effective professional development	Yes	14.47	2.18
	No	14.66	1.85
Job satisfaction	Yes	12.20	2.19
	No	12.04	2.05
Self-efficacy in instruction	Yes	12.82	1.30
	No	12.68	1.28

## 5. Discussion

The main goal of our study was to know whether teachers working in classes directed entirely or mainly to SENS differ from teachers working in classes with few SENS in the following areas: (a) professional development needs in special education; (b) perceived barriers to professional development; and (c) teaching and work features related to SENS. It must be noted that classrooms entirely or mainly dedicated to SENS are to be discontinued in the context of law 54/2018. However, when data for TALIS 2018 were collected, some of those classrooms were still functioning, and some still are. In addition, in the context of law 54/2018, the frontier between special education teachers and regular teachers vanished. Every teacher is expected to work with exceptional students. Therefore, our study's data were collected when there were recognizable differences between special education and regular education teachers. A short time later, schools moved into a system where many teachers seemingly do not fully understand special education teachers' roles [48].

### 5.1. Teachers' Professional Development to Work with SENS

A critical feature of teaching is whether teachers receive adequate training. This feature becomes even more relevant in a full-inclusion system because most Portuguese teachers do not receive training to work with exceptional students while keeping the lesson's pace for the whole classroom. However, special educators can experience even more difficulties because while they might have adequate training to deal with SENS, they have less time working with crowded classes, where behavior management and curricular demands are challenging [51–53].

The Wilcoxon rank-sum tests show that teachers working mainly with SENS feel significantly less need to receive further training in individualized learning and teaching SENS, which is not surprising. However, both groups' median is 3, indicating that both groups feel only a "moderate level of need" [49]. This result contrasts, in some way, with studies that found, for instance, Portuguese teachers' high need for training in strategies to deal with classroom discipline [52]. Most likely, teachers feel that disruptive students are more threatening to the classroom lesson than SENS. Still, it is of concern that teachers do not feel much need for training in teaching SENS. Without further and specific teacher training, SENS might not receive adequate instruction.

The demands of inclusion are significant and add to the high demands of teachers' accountability for students' achievement [54–56]. These demands might generate high levels of stress and burnout and the inability to cope with classroom challenges [57–59]. About 70% of school directors interviewed in the study of [48] confirm that the schools do not have the human resources to implement the law 54/2018, and do not expect to receive them. The tension between curriculum fulfillment and inclusive education is highlighted by [46]: "... the imprecision regarding the processes of implementing inclusive education may in fact compromise educational success in some schools with lower commitment to the success of all pupils" (p. 284). Our study results suggest that teachers are not committed enough to professional development in teaching SEN, perhaps because they reason that the level of demands is too high and that choices must be made.

### 5.2. Barriers to Professional Development

Both teachers working and not working mainly with SENS agree that there are no relevant professional development opportunities. However, teachers that work mainly with regular students complain significantly more about the lack of opportunities. School directors interviewed in [48] also referred to a lack of opportunities for teachers' professional development in SENS. This finding is of significant concern because without adequate resources (including teachers' professional development), inclusion risks being a kind of placement with poor instruction.

It is asserted by [60] that inclusion demands can affect teachers' health and wellbeing. However, the authors are not optimistic about external resources, namely professional development being provided. According to [60], special education teachers and teachers with less exposure to inclusion-related activities assess their resources significantly more positively than general education teachers or teachers with more exposure to inclusion-related activities. Without adequate and readily available professional development, the perception of resources will hardly be positive. Most important, negative perceptions of resources are related to more negative attitudes towards inclusion [61–63].

The availability of professional development for teachers and the funding of inclusion policies have been debated, mainly in the recent years, when full inclusion policies were more clearly adopted. As stated by [64], "financing is now a vital component of inclusion, with research suggesting that if a country advocates inclusion, then legislation and especially financial regulations have to be adapted to this goal" (p. 926). This financing must include continuous professional development. Some (e.g., [65]) have estimated that special education is twice the cost of general education. According to [64], many countries have begun to re-examine their "funding formula" to accommodate the ever-changing landscape of needs in the area of SEN.

It is not clear how Portugal is dealing with this formula, but the [48] survey results suggest that the budget for professional development and other resources for inclusion to succeed are far from granted. Still, it must be noted that Portuguese participants in TALIS 2018 consider that the financial support to SENS should increase.

### 5.3. Teaching and Work Features Related to SENS

The results show no significant differences between teachers who work and teachers who do not work entirely or mainly with SENS in professional collaboration, effective professional development, job satisfaction, and self-efficacy in instruction. Still, it is interesting to stress that both teachers' groups are pretty optimistic about the professional development they receive. We may conclude that Portuguese teachers perceive moderate professional development needs and little supply of relevant specialized training, but they value the professional development training they have received. Interestingly, both groups of teachers seem confident in their ability to teach and are satisfied with their jobs. This finding is relevant because teaching self-efficacy and job satisfaction have been associated with better student outcomes [36,57,66–70].

One of our study's most relevant findings is that teachers from both groups perceive professional collaboration negatively. This finding is of much concern since professional collaboration is a crucial component of inclusion policies. For example, [71] stresses that, before 2018, special education teachers tended to work with small groups of students identified as SENS outside the classroom. "Conversely, the current expectation is for special education teachers to work as resources for the school, collaborating and supporting mainstream teachers in their role of responding to all students" (p. 869). In the same vein, documents from the Ministry of Education "... encourage schools and teachers to work collaboratively and in an interdisciplinary way, rethinking practices based on principles of curricular flexibility and school autonomy, to develop appropriate responses for all students".

The results from TALIS 2018 and the results from the [48] survey suggest that collaboration is not progressing in Portugal despite law 54/2018 determining that "The special

education teacher, within the scope of their specialty, supports, in a collaborative and co-responsibility way, the other teachers ... ” (p. 2922). A study conducted in Portugal [72] found that teachers perceive difficulties in collaborative work, and consider these difficulties to come more from organizational and structural features (e.g., time and work conditions) than from teachers’ predisposition to work together. It was stated by [72] that the results support the contention that effective leadership “is central to enhance teacher motivation and job satisfaction and, therefore, authentic and productive collaborative work” (p. 103).

Literature about professional collaboration clearly states that collaboration between special education and regular teachers is vital to implementing inclusive education. However, the literature is also clear that this goal is far from being accomplished in many countries [73–78]. Additionally, [79] found that even Response to Intervention (RTI) models did not serve to improve cooperation between special and general education teachers until the referral stage. As the author put it, “Special education instructors did not have a formal space at the ‘RTI table’ prior to referral meetings, as evidenced by their absence from RTI PDs and intervention sessions. This meant that teachers missed multiple opportunities to expand their knowledge of both fields to refine their approaches to intervention and referral, despite teachers’ desire to collaborate.” (p. 16).

It was stressed by [25] that inclusion policies demand that regular teachers teach all students since they are taught in regular classrooms. Theoretically, this would imply the collaboration of regular and special educators. However, the authors state, this will only be possible if the number of special educators is somehow multiplied. Moreover, even with collaboration, regular teachers must assume most if not all responsibility for every student, which implies “general knowledge of great breadth” (p. 208), not specialization. As [25] claims, “Expecting competent regular education teachers to meet the needs of all students effectively is akin to expecting competent general practitioners to meet all the medical needs of their patients” (p. 208). Therefore, the authors raise serious doubts about the success of teachers’ collaboration (at least in the current conditions) and the possibility of the regular teacher performing the dual role of special and general educator.

## 6. Limitations of the Study and Future Avenues

Our study had two main limitations. The first limitation is that TALIS 2018 does not entirely reflect the implementation of the full-inclusion model in Portuguese schools because the main survey data collection took place between March to May 2018, just before the publication of law 54/2018. It reflects most of the elements of that reform, however. The second limitation is that TALIS does not record whether participants are formal or regular special education teachers. It only provides information about who mainly works with SENS.

Future research should focus on the systematic collection of data about the implementation of the full inclusion model. There are almost no academic studies about critical issues such as the professional development of educators, teachers’ and principals’ perceptions about the feasibility of the model, or the availability of resources. With no such data, the full inclusion model will hardly be scrutinized or subject to changes and improvements.

## 7. Conclusions

Like other studies conducted in Portugal, the present study suggests that initial and in-service teacher training in SENS issues is scarce and not readily available. Perhaps the trend to dismiss special education limits and discourages the supply of specialized training. This trend is disturbing because in a full-inclusion model, much more, not less, specialized training is necessary. It is hardly conceivable that general teachers can effectively deal with the diversity of SENS when they perceive inadequate training and significant barriers to professional development.

The current blurring of roles between special education teachers and regular teachers is also a reason for concern. The statement that “every teacher is responsible for every child”

does not adequately fit the need for shared responsibility in most SENS cases. Portugal's most significant problems with the full-inclusion model seem to be, precisely, low levels of teacher collaboration and the blurring of responsibilities. TALIS results and other studies e.g., [48,70] show that Portuguese teachers claim for scheduled time to increase teamwork, but they exhibit difficulties in collaborating productively and sharing responsibilities even if time is available.

There are no obvious or straightforward solutions to the problems of special education in Portugal. Perhaps some or most of these problems are not workable in the framework of a full-inclusion model. Conceivably, inclusive special education would better deal with the challenges of including all exceptional students in regular classrooms. This model proposes a continuum of services for children and a more precise definition of special and regular educators' roles and functions, likely favoring teachers' shared responsibility for student outcomes.

Overall, it seems that some critical elements of inclusive education are to be implemented in Portuguese schools. These elements imply a massive increase in the budget for education (in Portugal and elsewhere) that does not seem within reach of most countries and educational systems. The problem is that without such an increase, the goal of placement might be accomplished, but instruction is at risk.

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