



National Policy on Inclusive Special Education: overcoming the paradigm of Full Inclusion between Decrees 12,686 and 12,773 of 2025

Lucelmo Lacerda de Brito¹ Jamile Benite Palma Lopes²
Luiz Fernando Zuin³ Maria Georgina Marques Tonello⁴

¹ Primum College, São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

^{2,3,4} FAPAE, Brasília, DF

Correspondence

Lucelmo Lacerda de Brito,

E-mail: lucelmolacerda@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyzes the recent trajectory of public policies on Special Education in Brazil in light of the tension between two theoretical currents: Full Inclusion, which holds that the regular classroom is the only legitimate space of schooling, and Inclusive Special Education, proposed by Gary Hornby, which advocates a single educational system endowed with a continuum of services. Through documentary analysis and a review of the national and international literature, three normative milestones are examined: the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (PNEEPEI, 2008), the National Special Education Policy: Equitable, Inclusive, and with Lifelong Learning (PNEE, Decree No. 10,502/2020), which was suspended and later revoked, and the National Policy on Inclusive Special Education (PNEEI), established by Decree No. 12,686/2025 and revised by Decree No. 12,773/2025. The results indicate that the final version of the 2025 policy—by prioritizing schooling in regular classes while recognizing the legitimacy of specialized schools and classrooms, making the Individualized Education Plan (PEI) mandatory, and expanding the training of specialized professionals—brings Brazil closer to the Inclusive Special Education model. It is concluded that the new regulation represents a shift of focus from enrollment to the quality of learning, retention, and participation, although contradictions persist between the formalized policy and the position of the Ministério da Educação.

Keywords:

special education, inclusive education, public educational policies, school inclusion, continuum of services

INTRODUCTION

The schooling of persons with disabilities constitutes one of the most sensitive and contested topics in contemporary educational debate. In Brazil, this debate has materialized in a set of regulations that, over the last two decades, have at times affirmed the regular class as the exclusive space of schooling and at other times recognized the legitimacy of a diversified set of educational environments and services, the continuum of schooling spaces. This oscillation is not merely terminological: it expresses profound conceptual disputes over what it means to include, over who defines the best interest of the student, and over the role of scientific evidence in the formulation of public policy.

This article analyzes the recent trajectory of Special Education policies in Brazil in light of the tension between two theoretical currents: on the one hand, Full Inclusion, which holds that the regular classroom is the only legitimate space of schooling, and, on the other, Inclusive Special Education, which advocates a single educational system endowed with a continuum of services; it also analyzes how the National Policy on Inclusive Special Education (PNEEI) approximates the latter concept.

This research has the character of a documentary analysis of the main guiding documents of Special Education in Brazil, encompassing the National Special Education Policy of 2008 (Brasil, 2008), the National Special Education Policy: Equitable, Inclusive, and with Lifelong Learning, Decree 10,502 of 2020 (Brasil, 2020), and the National Policy on Inclusive Special Education, published in its initial version in Decree 12,686 of 2025 (Brasil, 2025a) and amended by Decree 12,773 of 2025 (Brasil, 2025b). The analysis is discussed with reference to the work of Hornby (2014), which presents the concept of Inclusive Special Education, as well as other authors selected within the same theoretical field.

To this end, the text is organized into four sections in addition to this introduction. The first section presents the historical and conceptual genesis of the international debate, from the questioning of parallel education systems to the formulation of the concept of Inclusive Special Education. The second examines the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (PNEEPEI) of 2008, its normative advances and its operational tensions. The third discusses the National Special Education Policy: Equitable, Inclusive, and with Lifelong Learning (PNEE), established by Decree No. 10,502/2020, the controversies it raised, and its suspension and revocation. The fourth analyzes Decree No. 12,686/2025, which established the new National Policy on Inclusive Special Education, and the political and social process that led to its revision by Decree No. 12,773/2025.

It is argued throughout the text that the PNEEI, published in 2025 in its final form, constitutes a profound change in the schooling process of students with disabilities in Brazil, moving away from Full Inclusion and toward Inclusive Special Education.

From Full Inclusion to Inclusive Special Education

Until the 1970s, the usual practice in educational services was the existence of two teaching systems: a regular system, for typically developing children, and a parallel special education system, for students with certain disabilities, such as intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities—an arrangement that began to be questioned in that context, in the United States (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998),

After successful experiences, especially with milder cases of these conditions, in the 1980s a movement called Full Inclusion emerged and gained strength; in a first phase, it advocated that special schools and classes should be closed, the special system abolished, and all children should be in the same classrooms (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998).

At a second moment, the Full Inclusion movement came to advocate that there should not be even a single special education service within the regular class, that there should be no Individualized Education Plans (PEI) and no individualized process, which would be regarded as an act of discrimination (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998).

In parallel, the current of thought known as Inclusive Education was taking shape, advocating a continuum of supports for special education students. This means that if students benefited from the regular class, that is where they should be, even with any supports that might be necessary; otherwise, they could also be in special classes or specialized schools (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998).

Table 1 presents the main propositions of each group:

Table 1

Main propositions of Inclusive Education and Full Inclusion

Aspect	Inclusive Education	Full Inclusion
Overview	Flexible model; admits different environments and supports.	Radical model: all students in the regular class, without exceptions.
Philosophical Basis	Right to participation with appropriateness and diversity of educational responses.	Absolute right to participation exclusively in the regular class.
Organization of Services	Maintains the continuum of services (regular class, resource room, partial special class, full-time special class, etc.).	Eliminates the continuum. Accepts only the regular class as a valid option.
Placement Criterion	Preference for the regular class, but with the possibility of other environments if necessary.	Mandatory placement in the regular class, regardless of the complexity of the demand.
Function of the School	To prepare for life, developing academic and functional skills.	To prioritize social interaction, friendships, and the breaking of stigmas.
Role of the Regular Class	May be appropriate for many, but not for all.	Is always appropriate, without considering the limitations of the school.

Change of the School	Believes the school can change, but recognizes practical and pedagogical limits.	Believes the school can and must be completely reinvented for all.
Emphasis	Support, adaptation, specialized services, and a combination of environments.	Physical and social presence as a priority, even if the supports are insufficient.
Recognized Risks	Recognizes risks of exclusion within the regular class if there is no adequate support.	Ignores the academic and behavioral risks of the absence of specialized services.
Relation to Deno (1970)	Aligned with the continuum cascade model, with multiple options.	Completely rejects Deno's model.
Relation to Evidence	Considers evidence on the effectiveness of the different services.	Sustained more by moral and legal arguments than by educational evidence.

Source: prepared by the authors, based on Fuchs and Fuchs (1994, 1998) and Mendes (2006).

As the more severe cases were also sent to regular classes, at the end of the 1980s, it had become clearer that regular classes were not the best option for a portion of the students. Studies began to point to this evidence and, in the context of the end of the neoliberal Reagan-Bush administrations (which sought to drastically reduce the State, including the structures of specialized education), a strong questioning of the Full Inclusion model emerged; this was the context, for example, of the publication of the work *The Illusion of Full Inclusion*, which summarizes and analyzes this evidence (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1994).

The governments of various developed countries, which had been closing specialized schools and classes at a strong pace, began to seek a balance in the ratio between them and regular classes, favoring the intermediate point of specialized classes within regular schools and hybrid enrollments—part in the regular class, part in the specialized class (Banks & McCoy, 2017; Hu & Kärnä, 2019; Roberts et al., 2008).

In this context, the idea of two separate systems gradually became distant from what was actually happening in the schooling of students with disabilities. Given the interactions between regular and specialized schooling spaces, a new theoretical articulation was needed.

It was in this sense that Gary Hornby, an English researcher and professor who published numerous texts on the value of the specialized school and classroom, proposed the concept of Inclusive Special Education, which incorporates both the lexicon of those who prefer to speak of Special Education—who, although they also support the placement of students with disabilities in regular classes, prefer this terminology—and that of those who have preferred to use inclusive education instead of special education, with the aim of emphasizing the concept of the least restrictive environment (LRE), derived from U.S.

U.S. legislation. The LRE principle holds that the student should be primarily in the regular class and, if this is not the most beneficial environment for the student, then in the specialized classroom and, as a last resort, only when the specialized classroom is not the best option for the student, in a specialized school or similar program (Hornby, 2014).

Inclusive Special Education (ISE) is the proposition that education must constitute a single educational system, and that this system needs to have specialized schools, specialized classrooms within regular schools, and regular classes, so that students can make use of these different environments according to what best serves them, with rigorous and continuous assessment processes that allow for consistent movement among these various spaces according to the student's needs (Hornby, 2014).

From the perspective of ISE, if a student in a specialized school, whose main problem is aggressive behaviors, develops more effective communication skills that allow for the reduction or elimination of these behaviors, then the educational system should transition the student back to the regular school, where curricular criteria would determine whether the best context for schooling would be the regular class or the specialized one.

Conversely, if a student with a disability is in a regular class at school and, despite all supports, falls behind in learning to the point that the curriculum practiced in the classroom becomes unreachable (at least at that moment), then the student may move to the specialized classroom, at least partially (Hornby, 2014).

These conceptual disputes, far from being restricted to the international debate, have directly influenced the formulation of Brazilian public policies on Special Education. It is in light of this theoretical framework that the following sections examine the national normative trajectory, which began more systematically with the 2008 policy and was reconfigured in the 2020 and 2025 regulations.

The National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (2008): normative advances, operational tensions, and challenges in light of scientific evidence

The publication of the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education, in 2008, represented a decisive milestone in the Brazilian educational landscape by reaffirming the right of persons with disabilities to schooling in regular classes of mainstream education. Grounded in principles of human rights, equity, and social justice, the policy sought to break with historically segregationist models, repositioning special education as a cross-cutting modality and inclusion as a structuring guideline of the educational system (Brasil, 2008). By shifting the axis of public educational policies toward the inclusive perspective, the PNEEPEI consolidated itself as an important guiding instrument for the guarantee of rights.

More than fifteen years after its implementation, however, there is a need to move beyond strictly normative or exclusively axiological analyses, promoting a critical and technical analysis grounded in scientific evidence. The consolidation of the right to education cannot be understood in isolation from the guarantee of effective learning, functional development, and meaningful social participation of students. In this context, it becomes essential to analyze the policy in light of its foundations, advances, limits, and tensions, considering the national and international scientific literature that has addressed the concrete effects of school inclusion (Hehir et al., 2016; Rangel-Pacheco, 2023).

The PNEEPEI/2008 finds support in important international frameworks, such as the Salamanca

Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ONU, 2006), incorporated into the Brazilian legal system with constitutional status by Decree 6,949 of 2009 (Brasil, 2009). These documents advocate schooling in inclusive environments as a means of promoting equity, social participation, and the overcoming of exclusionary educational practices.

In line with this framework, Brazilian policy adopts an expanded conception of inclusion, grounded in principles of social justice and equality of opportunity. From a conceptual standpoint, the PNEEPEI shifts the focus from the individual deficit to environmental, pedagogical, communicational, and attitudinal barriers, approximating the social model of disability (Brasil, 2008). From this perspective, the scientific literature highlights that the inclusive regular school comes to be understood as a space that must reorganize its pedagogical practices to address diversity, overcoming the logic of homogenization and normalization historically present in educational systems (Florian, 2014; Ifadireó et al., 2021; Inglês et al., 2014; Peixoto, 2025; Rios et al., 2025; Uchôa & Chacon, 2022). This conceptual shift represented a significant advance in questioning educational models centered on exclusion. In this sense, the policy establishes as its central guideline the schooling of students who are the target population of special education—comprising persons with disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and high abilities/giftedness—exclusively in the mainstream education network, ensuring Specialized Educational Support (AEE) as a complementary or supplementary service, and not a substitute, for schooling (Brasil, 2008). This arrangement sought to guarantee specialized support without removing the student from ordinary school life.

Among the main advances associated with the implementation of the PNEEPEI/2008, the significant expansion of access to the regular school stands out. School Census data show a marked growth in the enrollment of students who are the target population of special education in regular classes after the adoption of the policy, especially among students with Intellectual Disability (ID) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Brasil, 2018, 2022), rising from fewer than 400,000 special education students in regular schools in 2008 to about 750,000 in 2015 (Batista, 2019) and about 2 million in 2024 (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [Inep], 2025). In parallel, there was an expansion of the AEE, the establishment of multifunctional resource rooms, and increased visibility of specific educational demands in public debate. These advances contributed to the reduction of social stigma and to the strengthening of the human rights discourse, favoring coexistence in diverse educational contexts and expanding opportunities for social participation (Brasil, 2018, 2022; Costa et al., 2021; Melo et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, the expansion of access, although fundamental from a pragmatic and ethical standpoint, does not by itself guarantee the pedagogical effectiveness of inclusion, an aspect widely discussed in the contemporary literature. Despite its merits, the implementation of the PNEEPEI/2008 revealed important weaknesses. One of the recurrent criticisms concerns the absence of clear operational criteria for pedagogical decision-making, the definition of the intensity of support, and the selection of evidence-based methodologies (Kassar, 2011; Mendes, 2019).

As a consequence, inclusive policies centered predominantly on enrollment may result in the phenomenon of formal inclusion without pedagogical inclusion, in which the student is physically present in the regular school but does not access the curriculum, makes no measurable learning progress, and does not fully benefit from social interactions (C. B. F. Lacerda, 2020; Lindsay, 2007).

The literature in special education and neurodevelopment has consistently demonstrated that the intensity, structuring, and individualization of interventions are determining factors for educational

progress, especially in the case of students with severe intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder at high support levels, or multiple disabilities (Schreibman et al., 2015; Steinbrenner et al., 2020). In this context, one of the most sensitive points of the contemporary debate emerges: the sometimes generalizing interpretation that all students should be included in the same way and in the same educational contexts.

Although grounded in legitimate concerns with the guarantee of rights, this reading ignores consolidated evidence from developmental psychology, special education, and the cognitive sciences. C. B. F. Lacerda (2020) warns that the defense of unrestricted inclusion, dissociated from technical criteria, may constitute a form of institutional neglect, by replacing evidence-based interventions with symbolic practices of inclusion. The refusal to recognize individual functional limits, under the argument of avoiding stigmatization, may compromise the student's academic, adaptive, and communicative development (Steinbrenner et al., 2020).

Contemporary models, such as the Response to Intervention model (Response to Intervention [RTI]) and multilevel support systems, reinforce that educational decisions must be guided by objective data on performance, progress, and functionality, and not exclusively by normative guidelines (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Sugai & Horner, 2002).

In the field of autism, for example, interventions based on Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), structured teaching, and naturalistic approaches have robust empirical support, especially when applied intensively and individually (Odom et al., 2010; Schreibman et al., 2015). The mere insertion of the student into the regular class, without such supports, does not automatically translate into effective inclusion (Steinbrenner et al., 2020).

Another widely documented obstacle concerns the initial and continuing training of teachers. Research indicates that teachers frequently report insecurity in managing challenging behaviors, in curricular adaptation, in functional assessment, and in the use of assistive technologies and alternative communication resources (Capellini & Mendes, 2018; Florian, 2014).

Although the PNEEPEI/2008 recognizes the need for teacher training, it does not establish minimum scientific benchmarks, opening space for pedagogical practices based on empirically unvalidated approaches. Added to this is the fragility of intersectoral coordination among education, health, and social assistance, compromising the comprehensiveness of educational provision (Kassar, 2022; Mendes, 2019).

In view of this scenario, the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (2008) remains an undeniable historical and normative advance in the recognition of the educational rights of persons with disabilities in Brazil. However, its effectiveness depends on a critical, technical reading guided by scientific evidence. Inclusion cannot be understood as an end in itself, but as a means to guarantee learning, functional development, and quality of life (Florian, 2014; Steinbrenner et al., 2020). Recognizing that different students require different levels and forms of support does not weaken inclusive policy; on the contrary, it strengthens it by aligning human rights, science, and educational responsibility. The contemporary challenge therefore consists in constructing public policies capable of reconciling ethical principles with empirical data, ensuring that diversity is addressed with technical rigor, pedagogical sensitivity, and scientific commitment.

The 2020 PNEE under debate: controversies, suspension, and revocation of Decree No. 10,502/2020

Special Education policies in Brazil have been marked by theoretical disputes, in addition to a continuous movement of changes and attempts at reformulation over the years. The debate surrounding public policies on Special Education in Brazil intensified significantly in 2020, through Decree No. 10,502, of September 30, 2020, which established the National Special Education Policy: Equitable, Inclusive, and with Lifelong Learning (PNEE) (Brasil, 2020).

The 2020 PNEE was presented by the Ministério da Educação, through the Secretaria de Modalidades Especializadas da Educação. Although it does not represent the most recent normative milestone, it constitutes a fundamental point of reflection for understanding the conceptual, political, and legal disputes that remain ongoing, including those taken up again in Decree No. 12,686, of October 20, 2025, subsequently amended by Decree No. 12,773/2025 (Brasil, 2025a, 2025b).

The 2020 policy presented a set of possibilities for educational provision by simultaneously affirming the right to enrollment, retention, and learning in the regular school, and the right of access to other educational modalities. In this sense, the policy recognized as legitimate enrollment in specialized schools, in specialized classes, as well as in bilingual schools and classes for the deaf. In addition, it incorporated the perspective of lifelong learning, understanding education as a continuous process that extends beyond the school space, oriented toward the student's life project (Brasil, 2020).

The 2020 PNEE triggered intense debate in the field of Special Education, as it asserted that many students were not being duly benefited by inclusion in regular classes and that there was growing public demand for educational alternatives. The document emphasized that there would be no removal of rights, but rather an expansion of possibilities, by arguing that, in addition to access to the regular school, students in the target population of Special Education would also be guaranteed the right to specialized schools and services, when this was the family's choice (Brasil, 2020).

The main controversy raised was that the policy would be contrary to full inclusion, by admitting, as a legitimate and permanent alternative, schooling in specialized classes and institutions. This argument constituted one of the main points of criticism in the academic literature regarding the decree. Oliveira and Mello (2024) point out that, by asserting that certain students “do not benefit” from the regular school, the decree shifts the focus from the structural barriers of the educational system to the individual characteristics of the subjects. From this perspective, according to the authors, pedagogical assessment comes to function as a criterion for permanence in or exclusion from the regular school, weakening the right to Inclusive Education.

The centrality of the family decision was also one of the elements that triggered numerous criticisms, being interpreted as a setback in the understanding of school inclusion and as a potential opening for the weakening of the priority of the regular school as the main space of schooling (Oliveira & Mello, 2024; Silva & Silva Lima, 2021). The policy maintained that there are no fundamental freedoms if the right to choose is suppressed, arguing that families could opt for the school considered most appropriate for their children. The families' “freedom of choice” and the transfer of decision-making responsibility to families, mediated by technical opinions, is also widely problematized in the literature. This guideline, by conditioning the right to inclusive schooling on criteria of performance or adaptation, shifts the focus from institutional barriers to the individual, reinforcing processes of educational exclusion (Oliveira & Mello, 2024). According to the authors, in these contexts, the so-called “choice” tends to be induced by the insufficiency of supports in the regular school, and not by a pedagogical assessment grounded in the right to inclusion.

Nevertheless, the policy document argues that inclusion is not restricted to the physical space of

the regular classroom, but extends to different social contexts throughout life. Participation in cultural life, in the world of work, in community relations, in academic training, and in political action depends, for many students, on a solid foundation built through specialized pedagogical interventions. Thus, according to what the policy advocates, specialized educational provision, especially when offered intensively and with quality in the early years, can provide autonomy and future participation in multiple social spaces. From this perspective, the specialized school is not opposed to inclusion, but may constitute a strategic stage for it to be achieved more consistently and lastingly in the life trajectory of the person with a disability (Brasil, 2020).

Another aspect discussed in the 2020 PNEE is the emphasis on consolidating a special education grounded in scientific evidence. This guideline values the use of knowledge produced by research conducted with methodological rigor, allowing educators to identify practices and strategies that demonstrate greater effectiveness in the teaching and learning process. The policy notes that, despite this conceptual advance, it is still observed that the absence of clearer and more systematic guidance on how to implement evidence-based education in different school contexts and in the face of the diversity of learners weakens teacher training in the field of Special Education in Brazil (Brasil, 2020).

According to L. Lacerda (2023), an important aspect addressed in the 2020 PNEE was the recognition of the importance of the Individualized Education Plan (PEI) as an instrument in the person-centered educational model. The author especially highlights the incorporation of self-advocacy and family participation in the process of defining the PEI, understanding that this shared construction strengthens the student's agency and makes pedagogical planning more coherent with the student's needs, interests, and life projects. For the author, the refusal to individualize educational processes, attributed to the perspective of authors who defend full inclusion, such as Ropoli et al. (2010), is justified by arguments based on general perceptions about the unpredictability of learning; however, it is not supported by consistent scientific evidence. Another argument frequently used by the full inclusion current is that specialized schools segregate the individual, removing the opportunity for coexistence and socialization in regular schools.

For Hornby and Kauffman (2023), this discourse critical of specialized education recurrently occurs in order to disqualify any provision carried out outside the regular classroom. The use of the term “segregated,” however, is, according to Hornby and Kauffman (2023), a reductionist interpretation of the concept of segregation, disregarding that, in certain cases, specialized educational environments are defended as the most appropriate way to guarantee the right to learning and inclusion for some students. Thus, the term comes to function as a rhetorical device of delegitimization, and not as a grounded analysis of educational needs (Hornby & Kauffman, 2023).

Despite all the defense presented regarding the Special Education policy established by Decree No. 10,502 of 2020 (Brasil, 2020), its validity was suspended, and the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education, published in 2008, associated with the guideline of full inclusion in the regular school, remained the guiding reference. The Decree was suspended by an injunction from Justice Dias Toffoli, of the Supremo Tribunal Federal, through the interim measure in Direct Action of Unconstitutionality No. 6,590 (Supremo Tribunal Federal, 2020) and subsequently revoked, with the inauguration of the new Federal Government on January 1, 2023, through Decree No. 11,370 of 2023 (Brasil, 2023).

In this context, the discussion is resumed on the criteria that should guide the evaluation of public policies in the field of Special Education. For L. Lacerda (2023), this analysis must consider, above all,

learning, understood not only as academic performance but also as social development and the construction of repertoires that foster readiness to learn. The author emphasizes that, despite the validity of the 2008 PNEEPEI, consistent scientific data on the learning outcomes of students in the target population of Special Education have not been widely disseminated.

Kauffman and Hornby (2025) argue that Special Education, in the context of specialized schools, has been weakened by academics who defend full inclusion. According to Kauffman and Hornby (2025), this current adopts an ideological stance that disregards evidence and the complexity of students' educational needs, jeopardizing the continuity of essential specialized services. For the authors, Special Education cannot be guided by idealizations, but by a realistic understanding of the difficulties faced by students with disabilities and their families, requiring diversified educational responses grounded in effectiveness, and not in extreme positions (Kauffman & Hornby, 2025).

Also according to the perspective of Kauffman and Hornby (2025), one of the greatest misconceptions in the contemporary educational debate is the idea that only full inclusion guarantees social justice in education. The argument that all students, without exception, must remain only in the regular school, without considering the need for specific supports, may become excessively ideological and detached from the realities of classroom practice, jeopardizing the very objective of inclusion, which should be the educational benefit and right of the student (Hornby & Kauffman, 2023).

Currently, in Brazil, philanthropic institutions linked to Special Education are legally supported to offer regular elementary education and Specialized Educational Support (AEE), depending on the accreditation they hold within the educational system in which they operate (Brasil, 2025b). These institutions have a teaching staff with specific training in the field of Special Education, a reduced number of students per class, a multiprofessional team, a curricular proposal, and specific strategies for the target population of Special Education. In addition, they develop individualized pedagogical assessments/case studies, Individualized Education Plans (PEI) in schools, and Individualized Educational Support Plans (PAEE) in the case of AEE services, and they promote periodic pedagogical training for their professionals, focused on specialized education. This set of conditions represents an important differential in supporting the development, learning, and participation of students, as well as in welcoming and guiding their families (Lehmkuhl, 2021; Salaberry, 2008).

Research in Special Education in Brazil must advance in the investigation of the educational process, considering variables of everyday school life. Among the variables to be investigated, the following stand out: the amount of time the student remains in the classroom, participation and the strategies adopted in pedagogical and extracurricular activities, as well as the perception of safety, participation, and belonging of students and their families at school. This discussion becomes fundamental in the face of situations in which the student is enrolled in the regular school but with reduced retention and participation, which calls into question whether the right to education is being effectively guaranteed.

The publication of Decree No. 12,686, of October 20, 2025, subsequently amended by Decree No. 12,773/2025, once again placed the educational landscape under discussion regarding the direction of school inclusion in Brazil. The regulation rekindled tensions around the conception of full inclusion, especially with respect to the organization of teaching systems, the educational provision alternatives for students in the target population of Special Education, and the continuity of specialized schools, constituting the focus of the following section.

Analysis of Decree No. 12,686/2025: the new National Policy on Inclusive Special

The establishment of the new National Policy on Inclusive Special Education, through Decree No. 12,686/2025 (Brasil, 2025a), represented a significant and controversial milestone in the Brazilian educational landscape. Published in October 2025, the text sought to consolidate education as a fundamental human right, reaffirming educational institutions as spaces of equity and citizenship.

However, the reception of the regulation was marked by tensions, resulting mainly from the claim of an absence of prior dialogue with representative entities and families of persons with disabilities (TV Senado, 2025, 3:19:00).

The first version of the policy established the premise of full inclusion, determining that the educational system should ensure the enrollment of students with disabilities exclusively in regular classes of mainstream education, as provided for in Chapter I:

§ 3 The guarantee of the inclusive educational system occurs through the organization of the general educational system, so as to ensure that students who are the public of special education are included in regular classes and schools, with the support necessary for their participation, retention, and learning (Brasil, 2025a, Chapter I, § 3).

Although grounded in the pursuit of full participation, this exclusivity generated fear of the delegitimization of specialized schools, treating them as spaces of segregation. It is worth recalling that the PNEEPEI already treated specialized schooling spaces in this way, but the 2008 document was a regulation of the Ministério da Educação (MEC) and not a legally binding norm, as is the case with a federal decree, which in the case of 12,686 has the role of regulating special education policy on the basis of the Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional (LDB), the Constituição Federal (CF), and the Lei Brasileira de Inclusão (LBI) (Brasil, 2025a), which confers on the document a relevant legal value.

According to L. Lacerda (2023), this movement is defended by academics who maintain that the regular classroom is the only ethical space of schooling, under the argument that any other possibility would be discriminatory and that this is the environment where the best learning occurs. In this sense, studies conducted by Kauffman and Badar (2014) and L. Lacerda (2023) argue that the place of schooling should not be the starting point of inclusion, but rather the individual need of the learner, on which the choice of the school environment should depend.

According to Hornby and Kauffman (2023), the idea that all students, without exception, must be in the regular school lacks a practical basis and is often seen as an ideological excess. Ignoring the reality of classrooms in the name of a single banner harms the students who require specific care, turning inclusion into an absolute end, rather than a means for the benefit of the student (Hornby & Kauffman, 2023).

This concern with the delegitimization of specialized schools called upon representative institutions, such as the Federação Nacional das APAES, the Federação Nacional das Associações Pestalozzi, and the Associação Brasileira de Autismo, and civil society to reflect on the constitutional admissibility of public policies from the standpoint that, although they respect pedagogical freedom, they could disregard the autonomy of families, the diversity of the educational trajectories of students with disabilities, and the legitimacy and effectiveness of specialized schools as institutions that make up the inclusive educational system, treating them as expressions of segregationist regression. In their own words, in co-authorship with Senator Flávio Arns: “The wide diversity that exists in this area makes multiple solutions necessary to meet the specificities of each person with a disability. We cannot rely on only one schooling alternative, as the Decree provides.” [emphasis in the original] (Arns et al., 2025)

The Brazilian legal system provides support for the coexistence of specialized schools. The Brazilian Federal Constitution (Brasil, 1988, Art. 208, III) establishes that the State's duty with regard to education includes guaranteeing specialized educational support, preferably within the mainstream education system (Brasil, 1996, art. 58).

The effectiveness of educational decrees is linked to their democratic nature. As Mainardes (2006) points out, the participation of school actors prevents the policy from being an abstract imposition, conferring on it the social legitimacy necessary for adherence in everyday life. The lack of this participatory process in Decree No. 12,686/2025 would have been, according to the mobilized entities, the catalyst for the mobilization of civil society.

In this context, the lack of social legitimacy, combined with the current legal framework, drove the mobilization of representative entities toward a careful analysis of the decree, resulting in demonstrations and political articulations in the Congresso Nacional in pursuit of changes to the text. The entities, through the Senado Federal, launched a public consultation (Senado Federal, n.d.) on the institution's portal for the vote on Legislative Decree Bill (PDL) No. 845/2025, authored by Senator Flávio Arns (Senado Federal, 2025). The initiative resulted in 52 signatures of senators in favor of the PDL, which aimed to suspend the effects of Decree No. 12,686/2025, which established the National Policy on Inclusive Special Education and the Rede Nacional de Educação Especial Inclusiva (Brasil, 2025a).

The main objective of the Senado's public consultations is to stimulate the debate of proposals under consideration in the legislative house before the final vote, providing citizens the opportunity to express themselves and to participate actively in the legislative process.

In view of the political scenario presented, the Ministério da Educação (MEC) and the Secretaria de Educação Continuada, Alfabetização, Diversidade e Inclusão (SECADI) summoned the representative entities (Federação Nacional das APAES, Federação Nacional das Associações Pestalozzi, and Associação Brasileira de Autismo) and the leading senators and deputies in the Congresso Nacional to an extraordinary meeting (Santana, 2025).

From this meeting, the representative entities, the senators, the MEC, and SECADI consolidated an agreement that ensured the revision of Decree No. 12,686/2025, taking into account the proposals aligned with current legislation. The result of this democratic clash was the revision of the policy, consolidated in Decree No. 12,773/2025. The main changes are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2

Normative changes in Special Education policy (Decrees No. 12,686/2025 and No. 12,773/2025)

Aspect Analyzed	Decree No. 12,686/2025 (1st Version)	Decree No. 12,773/2025 (2nd Version with amendments)
Inclusion Model	Emphasis on full inclusion: ensured that all special education students were included in regular classes and schools.	Inserts Art. 3, IX: provision of special education preferably in the mainstream education network, aligning with the constitutional text and the LDB.
Enrollment Target	Provided for a target to universalize the enrollment of special education students aged 4 to 17 in the regular classes of the mainstream network.	Target removed. Provides for the guarantee of basic education to students aged 0 to 17, with reasonable accommodations ensured according to individual
Specialized Schooling	Did not provide for specialized schooling, only complementary or supplementary support services in the counter-shift.	Expressly provides for specialized schooling within the education systems (States, Federal District, and Municipalities), including through partnerships with private nonprofit institutions.
Individualized Education Plan (PEI)	Optional and dispensable document.	Mandatory document, of a pedagogical nature, with continuous updating, derived from the case study.
AEE Professional Training	Minimum workload of 80 hours.	Minimum workload of 360 hours.
Support Professional Training	Minimum workload of 80 hours.	Minimum workload of 180 hours.
Principles of the Policy	Not provided for.	Inserts a new principle: respect for the diversity of students with disabilities and their specificities within the scope of education.
Guidelines (Provision)	No corresponding provision in the previous text.	Inserts a new guideline: provision of special education preferably in the mainstream education network.

Financing (Institutions)	No corresponding provision in the previous text.	Inserts a new guideline: technical and financial support from the Public Authorities to private nonprofit institutions that are specialized and operate exclusively in the field.
Objectives	Provided only for “lifelong learning.”	Adds the concept of “education,” setting the objective as “education and lifelong learning.”
Resources (FUNDEB)	No corresponding provision in the previous text.	Guarantees the distribution of FUNDEB resources as a result of partnerships with agreement-holding entities.

Source: prepared by the authors based on Brasil (2025a, 2025b)

As can be seen in Table 2, the changes made to the National Policy on Inclusive Special Education were numerous and central. The training of AEE teachers went from 80 to 360 hours, that of the school support professional from 80 to 180 hours, the PEI was recognized as a mandatory and central document, and, above all, the legality and pertinence of specialized schools and classrooms were recognized as possibilities for students with disabilities.

The inclusion of persons with disabilities in regular classes allows many to learn more than they would in specialized classrooms or schools, but not all. There are persons with disabilities whose needs cannot be adequately met in the regular class, or who, when served in this context, do not produce the same effects, with possible academic and social harms measured in various empirical studies (MacMillan et al., 1996, as cited in L. Lacerda, 2023).

The transition from Decree No. 12,686 to Decree No. 12,773 (Brasil, 2025b) demonstrates that public policy on special education in Brazil has come to recognize the diversity of schooling spaces for persons with disabilities, in order to address the complexity of their specificities and trajectories. This change is manifested in the recognition of the legitimacy of specialized schools, in the mandatory nature of the Individualized Education Plan (PEI), and in the increase in the training workload of professionals in the field. Such changes indicate a shift of focus from mere enrollment to the quality of learning, retention, and participation of students with disabilities in school spaces.

The first version of the National Policy on Inclusive Special Education (Brasil, 2025a) expresses the manifestation of will of the management team of the Ministério da Educação and positions itself fully aligned with Full Inclusion, establishing in a norm what the PNEEPEI presented as guidance. Given the negative repercussion of the decree and the strong institutional pressure from the Congresso Nacional, an intense negotiation process was opened, the final result of which was a document profoundly different from the original, creating a complex scenario for understanding and managing Special Education policy from then on.

Since the original version of Decree No. 12,686, the Ministério da Educação has called the new

norm the National Policy on Inclusive Special Education, a name identical to that adopted by Hornby to designate his theory, which describes the different schooling spaces for persons with disabilities—namely, regular classes, specialized classrooms, and specialized schools—as part of a single educational system, rather than parallel systems and also rather than full inclusion models. At that point, there was a contradiction between the name adopted—Inclusive Special Education—and the theory it designates, given that that text did not express the same concept, but a model of full inclusion.

Nonetheless, the significant change in the new special education policy through Decree No. 12,773, which recognized specialized schools and classrooms and individualized processes through the Individualized Education Plan, made the policy congruent with Hornby's (2014) concept of Inclusive Special Education; at the same time, it produced a new and profound contradiction. The current situation is that of a Ministério da Educação that we understand to be committed to Full Inclusion—and that understands this commitment as an ethical imperative—alongside a policy that frontally opposes this perspective, formulated, under intense political pressure, by this same Ministério da Educação. The question that this contradiction raises is whether the Ministério da Educação will proceed in the same direction as its policy or pursue its conviction. The publication of other documents subsequent to the decree itself may allow for some glimpses on the subject, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

Final Considerations

The aim of this article was to analyze the guiding documents of special education in Brazil over the last two decades, specifically with regard to the assumptions of Full Inclusion and Inclusive Education and the way in which they approximate the concept of Inclusive Special Education by Garry Hornby (2014), based on a documentary analysis, complemented by an interpretation grounded in the scientific literature of the field.

The political struggle surrounding the schooling processes of persons with disabilities in Brazil over the last 20 years has centered mainly on the place of schooling of these students, with one group defending the continued existence of spaces such as specialized schools and classrooms (Inclusive Education) and another defending the closure of specialized schools and classrooms and the enrollment of all students in regular classes (Full Inclusion).

The dispute between these different groups, beyond the space of schooling, reaches more basic processes, such as the need, or not, for individualized strategies and curricula, advocated by the Inclusive Education movement and rejected by the Full Inclusion movement, bringing more complexity to the confrontations.

While the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education, of 2008, was the consecration, without concessions, of Full Inclusion, this did not annihilate the disputes surrounding the topic, which intensified mainly with Decrees No. 10,502 of 2020 and No. 12,686 of 2025, causing the central themes listed to return to the center of public debate.

Abroad, a new theory on the schooling of persons with disabilities was developed by Gary Hornby (2014), called Inclusive Special Education, conceived as an intermediate path, in which alternative school placement spaces, such as specialized classrooms and schools, are conceived as part of an inclusive system, in which movement of enrollments among these spaces is pursued whenever possible.

The central argument of this article is that, after the political dispute surrounding Decree No. 12,686/2025, which culminated in the publication of Decree No. 12,773/2025, Brazil aligned itself with

Hornby's perspective, insofar as schooling in regular schools was prioritized, while specialized schools and classrooms were recognized and valued, as an intermediate solution among the different conflicting groups.

In the end, the name given to the new regulation on the service supporting the schooling of students with disabilities, the National Policy on Inclusive Special Education, proved to be fully consistent with the new alignment of special education in Brazil.

Limitations and Future Research

This work focuses on the most central documents of the guidelines of special education policy in Brazil, but each of them unfolds into several other documents, beyond the scope of this work, yet which are a fundamental part of a more comprehensive understanding of these disputes surrounding the schooling of persons with disabilities in Brazil.

Beyond the documents, the empirical data on the execution of the policies, such as the creation of programs, training processes, and financing, were also not accessed and analyzed, which may offer new perspectives on the topics addressed.

Finally, the National Policy on Inclusive Special Education was published only a few months before the writing of this text, which gives us a limited perspective on its actual existence, guiding other documents and programs derived from it—that is, how it will be understood and implemented, not only by the Ministério da Educação, but also by states and municipalities.

We suggest that research address the limitations described, and that oral and documentary history studies also be conducted to analyze how these documents were constructed, which agents acted in these disputes, and how they unfolded.

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