



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conceptions of Inclusive Education in Special Education Teacher Training

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Oct 12, 2024	The aim of the study is to describe the conceptions about inclusive education processes held by students of the special education pedagogy program at a university in southern Chile at the beginning of their undergraduate studies. A quantitative methodology of descriptive, non-experimental and cross-sectional level is applied. The sample consisted of 80 undergraduate students to whom the questionnaire of dilemmas about inclusive education processes was applied. The results indicate that 13.7% of the students maintain a segregating conception, 31.6% present an integrating conception and 55.1% show an inclusive conception. It is concluded that students enter to study pedagogy with diverse implicit conceptions about inclusive education, which should be addressed in the initial training, since in their pedagogical practices these conceptions could constitute barriers to access, participation and learning for all.
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INTRODUCTION

Educational research and policies promote inclusive education in the educational system, highlighting its positive effects on the academic performance and social-emotional development of students with and without special educational needs (SEN) (Finkelstein et al., 2019). Despite this advocacy, the lack of consensus on inclusive education hinders initial teacher education in terms of understanding and competence development. This lack of consensus not only reflects the complexity of establishing a single definition, but is also seen in the use of interchangeable concepts in educational policies. For example, in Chilean policies, the terms inclusion and inclusive education are used as synonyms, although there are different conceptions.

In this research, it is essential to clarify the concepts of inclusion and inclusive education to address this ambiguity. In this context, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020) provides a key distinction by defining inclusion as an approach and as a principle. Inclusion as an approach recognizes that all people participate and learn together and possess unique characteristics, while as a principle it refers to the elimination of barriers or obstacles that limit student learning, access and participation. Inclusive education, on the other hand, implies a process of strengthening education systems to increase student participation in the curriculum, school cultures and communities, and the reduction of exclusion (Ainscow, 2001).

In addition to this conceptual perspective, various policies and training proposals in teacher education reflect different approaches to inclusive education. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2011) identifies two approaches to inclusive education. The first approach focuses on disability and SEN, while the second approach addresses diversities in a broad sense.

International research shows that there are needs in teacher training, especially in curricular adjustments, use of technologies and educational strategies for certain groups at risk of exclusion (high abilities, autism, visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual disability and physical disability) (Sandoval, 2023). Bruns and Mogharreban (2007) also stress that teachers need to be better prepared to generate inclusive environments. The European Agency for Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education (2012) defines priorities in teacher training for the implementation of inclusive practices, which are associated with valuing diversity, developing awareness of different needs, supports for all students, individualization of learning, knowing how to use technologies for inclusion, collaborative work and developing qualities such as trust, commitment, acceptance and respect.

In the Chilean context, pedagogical standards also seek to address this need for preparation. The Chilean Ministry of Education has defined common pedagogical standards for all pedagogical programs and disciplinary standards (Chilean Ministry of Education, 2021). These standards promote the development of competencies in teachers in training for the design of inclusive pedagogical practices. Table 1 systematizes competencies linked to inclusive education.

Table 1. Pedagogical Standards related to Inclusive Education

Pedagogical Standard	Description
Standard 1 Student Learning and Development	The importance of addressing individual differences in the design of teaching and learning processes is understood.
Standard 2 Disciplinary, didactic and school curriculum knowledge	Make the disciplinary knowledge taught accessible and meaningful to all students.
Standard 3 Instructional planning	Effective, inclusive and culturally relevant learning experiences are planned for the achievement of learning objectives.
Standard 5 Respectful and organized environment	A respectful, inclusive and organized classroom environment is established to promote learning.
Standard 6 Personal and social development	Students are encouraged to develop competencies for valuing diversity.
Standard 7 Teaching strategies for the achievement of deep learning	Teaching strategies are implemented to address individual differences. High expectations, participation and collaboration of students in inclusive activities are promoted.
Standard 10 Professional Ethics	All manifestations of diversity in students, families and peers are recognized, demonstrating respect for all members of the school community and a professional performance based on inclusive values.

Source: Prepared by authors based on MINEDUC (2021).

In the training of special education teachers, nine standards that emphasize inclusive education are established. Table 2 presents those disciplinary standards that are explicitly linked to inclusive education.

Table 2. Disciplinary Standards related to Inclusive Education

Disciplinary Standard	Description
Standard A Special Education Approaches and Fundamentals	A body of knowledge that allows a critical analysis of the educational system and the role of special education, and the tensions with inclusive education.

Standard D Inclusive Educational Communities	The factors that facilitate the development of inclusive educational communities are analyzed in order to guide improvement decisions that favor coexistence, learning and participation of all students, particularly those who are at risk of marginalization and exclusion.
Standard H Collaborative Work	Collaborative practices are implemented with teachers, other professionals and families to respond to the needs of those students who face greater barriers to learning and participation, from an interdisciplinary and inclusive perspective.
Standard I Professional Ethics and Inclusive Values	An ethical action that values diversity, promotes the recognition and dignity of each student from an inclusive and rights-based approach, to contribute to the learning, participation and quality of life of all students, particularly those who are at greater risk of exclusion and discrimination.

Source: Prepared by authors based on MINEDUC (2021)

Considering this background, it is necessary to explore how special education students perceive inclusive education at the beginning of their studies. This research is relevant, given that the beliefs and attitudes that teachers have towards diversity can act as barriers or facilitators for inclusive education, as stated in the disciplinary standard I. The research focuses on conceptions, given that these directly influence teachers' practices (Pozo, 2006; Prieto & Contreras, 2008; Espinoza & Valdebenito, 2016). The aim of the study is to describe the conceptions about inclusive education processes of differentiated instruction/special education pedagogy students from a university in southern Chile at the beginning of their training.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research is developed with a quantitative approach, exploratory level (Bisquerra, 2014) and non-experimental cross-sectional type (Monje, 2011). It is investigated through a questionnaire of dilemmas in the conceptions that students entering the special education pedagogy program have about the processes of educational inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities.

The dilemmas questionnaire is made up of 17 questions that describe conflict situations that usually occur in educational institutions. These questions offer three possible answers and each one of them considers an argumentation that approaches one of the three conceptions (segregating, integrating and inclusive) regarding the problem posed, and the person must choose an answer.

The instrument was validated by López et al. (2009) and used in the Chilean context with management teams and practicing teachers (Espinosa and Valdebenito, 2016). For detailed information on the development process, the content of the dilemmas and the validation of the instrument, the works of López et al. (2010) and López et al. (2009) should be consulted. The instrument is made up of 3 dimensions and 11 subdimensions, which are detailed in Table 3. In this study, the version of the questionnaire validated by Espinosa and Valdebenito (2016) for the Chilean context was used.

Table 3: Description of the data collection instrument

Dimensions	Description of dimensions	Subdimensions	Questions/ conflict situations
Nature of individual differences in learning	It considers different assumptions about the nature of individual differences, representations about teaching and learning processes, and ideas about the origin and transformation of learning abilities. Static and interactive	Nature and areas of diversity	1, 5 and 8
		Teaching and learning processes	12
		Origin and transformation of learning difficulties	6

	perspectives of individual differences and direct and constructivist theories of learning are considered.		
Educational center's educational response to student diversity	It considers those assumptions about the management and organization of the educational response. It integrates different visions about methods and objectives, professional collaboration and classroom organization. These visions consider those assumptions about homogeneous teaching and collaborative inclusive teaching.	Adaptation of methods and objectives	2, 13 and 14
		Professional culture	3 and 9
		Support responsibility	10
		Social organization of the classroom	11
Values and ideologies	It considers those educational and social values involved in inclusive education. This is based on the understanding that educational action is based on ethical principles and values.	Educational ideology	15
		Equity level	7
		Declared values	4
		Attitude towards improvement	16 and 17

Source: López et al. (2009)

The participants were 80 first-year students of special education pedagogy at a university in southern Chile, who were selected using the purposive sampling technique (Bisquerra, 2014). The sample inclusion criteria were: 1) to be a first-year student of special education pedagogy; 2) not to have previous training in education and inclusive education. The participants answered the questionnaire voluntarily, after signing the informed consent form.

The descriptive analysis of the data was carried out with the Microsoft Excel program, version 16.16.27, with commercial license, in which percentages for each subdimension and averages for the dimensions were calculated.

RESULTS

This section presents the results obtained in each of the dimensions of the dilemma questionnaire according to the research objective: 1) Nature of individual differences in learning, 2) Educational response of the educational center to student diversity, 3) Ideology and educational values.

The first dimension, *Nature of individual differences in learning*, explores the origin attributed by the participants to learning difficulties and the options for transformation and improvement of learning. This dimension is made up of three sub-dimensions. As shown in Table 4, in the subdimension *Nature and areas of diversity*, the teachers in training present inclusive (48.2%), integrating (44.4%) and segregating (7.6%) positions. Students who position themselves from the integrating and segregating perspectives evidence a static and individual understanding of differences in learning (Coll and Miras, 2001), in which the origin of learning difficulties is attributed to the person, which are inherent to the individual, with little influence of teaching and learning processes and giving priority to cognitive processes, i.e., abilities. Students who evidence an inclusive position are framed in an interactionist position of differences, in which learning difficulties emerge from the interaction between the individual characteristics of the person and the teaching provided. In addition, barriers to learning and participation can arise in all aspects of school, in this context any person may require educational support during schooling.

Table 4: Nature of individual differences in learning dimension Percentages

Subdimension	Positions		
	Segregating	Integrating	Inclusive
Nature and areas of diversity	7.6	44.4	48.2
Teaching and learning processes	7.5	27.5	65
Origin and transformation of learning difficulties - Modification	6.3	13.8	80
Dimension average	7.1	28.6	64.4

In the subdimension *Teaching and learning processes*, the teachers in training present inclusive (65%), integrating (27.5%) and segregating (7.5%) conceptions, with a predominance of the inclusive conception, which alludes to the fact that all teachers and education professionals assume responsibility for the progress of all students in learning and their participation. The inclusive conception is linked to the constructivist perspective of teaching and learning processes (Poza et al., 2006), in which learning is conceived from a transformative vision of mental processes with respect to knowledge and the learner, an interactive vision of motivation and a pedagogical function of evaluation. Students who present a segregating and integrating position in their responses are situated from a direct and interpretative perspective (Poza et al., 2006) of the teaching and learning processes, a conception considered reproductive of learning, which focuses on identifiable results and, therefore, an objectivist and accrediting evaluation, in which the origin of motivation is attributed to the individual.

Regarding the subdimension *Origin and transformation of learning difficulties*, the teachers in training are mainly inclined towards an inclusive conception (80%), although there is another group with responses that, to a lesser extent, lean towards an integrating (13.8%) and segregating (6.3%) position. The participants who position themselves from an inclusive conception conceive the transformation of learning capacities and their origin as possible (Martí, 2006) and, therefore, understand that by modifying the characteristics of teaching it is possible to achieve learning in students. In relation to participants who present an integrating vision, they understand that learning depends exclusively on the individual and that their difficulties are fixed and permanent. In the particular case of those who present a segregating conception, they would be from the perspective that it is not possible to transform learning capabilities.

In summary, in the dimension *Nature of individual differences in learning*, there is a predominance of the inclusive conception (64.4%), although it should not be ignored that 28.6% of the participants show an integrating conception and 7.1% a segregating conception. These results show diverse and at the same time opposing conceptions among students regarding the nature of people's individual differences. It is relevant to consider the understanding of future teachers regarding the nature of differences in learning, given that depending on their conception, they could implement a different type of support in their professional role.

The second dimension, *Educational response of the school to student diversity*, explores the conceptions about the management and organization of the school institution to respond to diversity in the classroom. This dimension is made up of four sub-dimensions. As shown in Table 4, in the subdimension *Adaptation of methods and objectives*, which refers to the adjustment between the educational action and the individual characteristics of the students, there is a predominance of integrating (47.9%) and inclusive (44.6%) positions among the teachers in training. Participants who present an integrating conception visualize support from a compensatory perspective aimed at certain groups of students, while from the inclusive conception the educational response is based on an adaptive perspective, i.e., it is necessary to adapt teaching to all students according to their characteristics and not only to those with

difficulties. The segregating conception represents 7.5% of the responses, and considers a selective perspective, which is characterized by educational proposals for students considered normal and different educational proposals for those students who cannot follow the regular curriculum.

Table 5: Educational center's educational response to student diversity dimension Percentages

Subdimension	Positions		
	Segregating	Integrating	Inclusive
Adaptation of methods and objectives	7.5	47.9	44.6
Professional culture	12.6	24.4	63.2
Support responsibility	27.5	25	47.5
Social organization of the classroom	21.3	15	63.8
Dimension average	17.2	28.1	54.8

The subdimension *Professional culture* refers to the theories on the organization of educational responses among teachers and professionals for the attention of diversity. An inclusive conception predominates among the teachers in training (63.2%), which is characterized by a collaborative culture, that is, with a flexible division of labor based on collaboration and coordination, with positive interdependence between work teams (Skrtic, 1991). Another group of students evidences an integrating conception (24.4%), understood as a pseudo-collaboration that is limited to closed groups within school institutions and with reduced permeability and permanence over time (Hargreaves, 1994). While a lower percentage of students present a segregating conception (12.6%), which represents an individualistic professional culture based on a bureaucratic approach, with isolated work of professionals, standardized educational processes and an assignment of responsibilities from the viewpoint of specialization, which do not share knowledge and do not solve problems collaboratively (López et al., 2009).

With respect to the subdimension *Support responsibility*, the conceptions about the commitment of professionals regarding support to respond to the diversity of students are explored. It is observed that an inclusive conception predominates in the teachers in training (47.5%), which is characterized by a responsibility shared by all teachers and education professionals (López et al., 2009). However, there are other students who present segregating (27.5%) and integrating (25%) conceptions regarding the support responsibility. From the segregating conception, it is conceived that supports are for students with SEN, where the responsibility is exclusive of the specialist professionals (Echeita, 2006). The integrating conception considers that each professional delimits his or her functions and supports according to his or her specialty or area and coordinates for specific aspects.

Regarding the subdimension *Social organization of the classroom*, which seeks to know the teachers' conceptions about the forms or criteria for grouping students in the classroom, there is a predominance of inclusive conceptions (63.8%), in which classroom organization is characterized by heterogeneous groups and cooperative learning is promoted (López et al., 2009). The segregating conception (21.3%) is present in the conceptions of future teachers and considers that students with lower abilities should be organized in homogeneous groups with similar deficits. Regarding the integrating conception (15%), two forms of classroom organization are considered, according to the objectives of the pedagogical activities and the severity of the students' deficit.

To summarize, in the dimension *Response of the educational center to student diversity*, there is a predominance of the inclusive conception (54.8%), although the data show that there are students who present integrating (28.1%) and segregating (17.2%) conceptions. As in the first dimension, the results show diverse and opposing conceptions among future teachers regarding the educational response to diversity.

The third dimension, *Ideology and educational values*, explores the conceptions about the ideologies and values that support the educational response to diversity. This dimension is made up of four subdimensions. As shown in Table 4, in the subdimension *Educational ideology*, which refers to the beliefs and values that support the various views on the function of education and its relationship with society, there is a predominance of inclusive (48.8%) and integrating (40%) conceptions, and a lower representation of the segregating conception (11.3%). The inclusive conception is based on a pluralist ideology (Marchesi and Martín, 1998), in which education is considered a public service that should be guaranteed to all, and in which the autonomy of educational centers and free choice are accepted. The integrating conception is based on the egalitarian ideology (Marchesi and Martín, 1998), where compulsory education is understood as a common aspect for all, which should ensure equal opportunities. From this perspective, the autonomy of educational centers is limited. The segregating conception is based on the principles of liberal ideology (Marchesi and Martín, 1998), which are characterized by competition among educational centers based on academic performance and the free choice of centers by the family, it is a reductionist vision of quality, in which the selection of students according to performance is promoted.

Table 6: Educational ideology and values dimension Percentages

Subdimension	Positions		
	Segregating	Integrating	Inclusive
Educational ideology	11.3	40	48.8
Level of equity	30	16.3	53.8
Declared values	20	62.5	17.5
Attitude towards improvement	5.7	30.7	63.8
Dimension average	16.8	37.4	46

The subdimension *Level of equity* seeks to know the understandings about equity in education presented by teachers in training, with a predominance of an inclusive conception (53.8%). From this conception, equity is understood from the perspective of equality of results, that is, it is sought that all students achieve learning and that achievement is not determined by social or cultural factors, that educational goals are the same for all (Marchesi and Martín, 1998). Another group of students presents a segregating conception (30%), being the most basic level of equity, which seeks to offer the same opportunities, which are more or less taken advantage of according to the capacity, motivation and personal effort of the students. The least representative conception is the integrating one (16.3%), which is characterized by understanding equity from the point of view of equal access and equal educational support.

Regarding the subdimension *Declared Values*, which seeks to know the ethical principles from which teachers in training would approach the problem linked to quality education for all, a predominance of the integrating conception is evident (62.5%). This position emphasizes the role of solidarity, which on many occasions promotes paternalistic attitudes, such as, for example, that the most favored students help their classmates with difficulties, denying the principle of autonomy (Etxebarria, 2003, Escudero, 2006). Another group of students presents a segregating conception (20%), in which liberal values such as individualism are present, prioritizing the opportunities offered to students according to their capacity, initiative and effort to progress in their personal, social and scholastic development. There is also a lower presence of inclusive conceptions (17.5%), in which justice is highlighted as a guiding principle of educational action, in which effective opportunities are granted for each student to achieve learning and improve the quality of education for all.

With respect to the subdimension *Attitude towards improvement*, which seeks to know the conceptions of teachers in training about school improvement processes, there is a predominance of the inclusive conception (63.8%), which is characterized by an optimistic view about change and the development of

new teaching responses that allow stimulating the participation of all in the educational communities (Ainscow et al., 1994). Another conception that shows a certain preference among teachers in training is the integrating conception (30.7%), which is characterized by being conformist in relation to the transformation of educational communities, which leads to a commitment of minimum demands towards students who are at risk of exclusion. A lower percentage of participants present a segregating conception (5.7%), which seeks to maintain the status quo, in which it is assumed that it is the students who have a problem and there is no sense in transforming the school.

In summary, in the dimension *Ideology and educational values*, there is a predominance of the inclusive conception (46%), however, there are 54% of students who present conceptions that could constitute a barrier to inclusive education, such as the integrating conception (37.4%) and the segregating conception (16.8%).

CONCLUSION

The results of this study highlight a diversity of conceptions among differentiated instruction/special education pedagogy students about inclusive education, revealing heterogeneity in their understandings. This finding underscores the importance of teacher training programs prioritizing the deconstruction of segregating and integrating conceptions, since these can become barriers to the implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices if they are not adequately addressed. It is essential that teacher training considers this aspect as a priority, since these conceptions could influence both the practical training stages and the future professional practice of teachers in training.

In this sense, addressing conceptions of inclusive education from the first years of training through theoretical and practical reflections is crucial to foster the transformation of those segregating and integrating conceptions and, in the case of students with inclusive conceptions, to consolidate them. The development of an inclusive conception is not only an objective of the students, but an institutional responsibility of the training entities, in coherence with the international agreements signed by Chile and with national educational policies. Therefore, teacher training, in this context, must promote in future teachers a critical and transformative understanding of differences and diversity in the classroom.

It is important to highlight that there are subdimensions with a tendency towards integrating conceptions, which could be influenced by the students' previous experiences in the Chilean school system. These subdimensions are associated with a static and individual understanding of learning differences and a compensatory educational response focused on certain groups of students. This situation reflects the persistent tensions between integration and inclusion in Chilean educational policies, where a conception of diversity focused on individuality and a biomedical discourse oriented by the demand-side subsidy funding model prevail (López et al., 2014; Peña, 2013; Gutiérrez-Saldivia, 2019). This poses an additional challenge for teacher training, as it requires implementing curricular activities aimed at transforming these conceptions rooted in the previous educational experience of future teachers.

Finally, this research highlights the need to deepen the study of the evolution of conceptions at different stages of initial training. Understanding how conceptions evolve throughout this process would make it possible to identify which curricular experiences and activities are most effective in consolidating an inclusive perspective in teachers in training, orienting them towards the promotion of inclusive educational communities. In this way, teacher training can enhance the development of specific competencies in future special education teachers who not only understand diversity, but also act as agents of change in their future educational communities.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

XG led the process of planning, coordination and execution of the study, participated in the delimitation of the problem to be addressed, data analysis and writing of the manuscript.

XD participated in the data collection process and in the search and retrieval of the literature according to the study problem and the methodology employed.

DD participated in the development of the methodology, data analysis and critical revision of the manuscript.

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