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# Addressing specific educational needs: a systematic review of teacher training for school-age children

*Atención a las necesidades educativas específicas: una revisión sistemática de la formación del profesorado de etapa escolar*

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## Abstract

From a critical and evidence-based perspective, this article presents a systematic review of empirical studies published between 2017 and 2025 that address teacher training focused on serving students with specific educational needs (SEN) in basic education. Applying the methodological guidelines of the PRISMA guide, 18 studies with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed designs developed mainly in Latin America and Europe were selected. The analysis identified four structuring dimensions: the conceptualization of training, teacher attitudes, inclusive methodologies implemented, and the architecture of training programs. The results show regulatory and declarative progress, but also the persistence of training gaps and tensions between inclusive discourse and actual teaching practice. The urgency of moving towards situated, critical, and transformative training models capable of articulating theory, practice, and ethical commitment in the construction of inclusive schools is highlighted. This study contributes to consolidating a frame of reference for the redesign of public policies and training strategies in contexts of increasing diversity.

**Keywords**: teacher training, educational inclusion, specific educational needs

## Resumen

Desde una perspectiva crítica y basada en evidencia, este artículo presenta una revisión sistemática de estudios empíricos publicados entre 2017 y 2025 que abordan la formación docente orientada a la atención de estudiantes con necesidades educativas específicas (NEE) en la educación básica. Aplicando lineamientos metodológicos de la guía PRISMA, se seleccionaron 18 investigaciones con diseños cuantitativos, cualitativos y mixtos desarrollados principalmente en América Latina y Europa y publicados en revistas indexadas de impacto regional y mundial. El análisis identificó cuatro dimensiones estructurantes: la conceptualización de la formación, las actitudes del profesorado, las metodologías inclusivas implementadas y la arquitectura de los programas formativos. Los resultados evidencian avances normativos y declarativos, pero también la persistencia de brechas formativas y tensiones entre el discurso inclusivo y la práctica docente real. Se destaca la urgencia de transitar hacia modelos de formación situados, críticos y transformadores, capaces de articular teoría, práctica y compromiso ético en la construcción de escuelas inclusivas. Este estudio contribuye a consolidar un marco de referencia para el rediseño de políticas públicas y estrategias formativas en contextos de creciente diversidad.

**Palabras clave**: formación docente, inclusión educativa, necesidades educativas específicas

## Introduction

In recent decades, the educational system has faced the challenge of moving towards more inclusive pedagogical models that guarantee the rights of all students to a quality and equitable education, as advocated by international organizations such as UNESCO (2020) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ONU, 2006). This transformation requires not only structural changes but also a profound revision of traditional teaching approaches, prioritizing the role and professional preparation of teachers, who are considered key actors in the inclusion process.

Despite the normative advances recorded in numerous countries, significant gaps persist between inclusive discourse and pedagogical practice in classrooms, especially at the basic education level. These gaps are closely related to limitations in the training of future teachers and their subsequent continuous professional development concerning the competencies necessary to address students with specific educational needs (SEN),

whether permanent or temporary (Echeita, 2021). The lack of specialized knowledge, limited implementation of differentiated pedagogical strategies, difficulties in making curricular adaptations, and minimal experience in collaborative work with interdisciplinary teams constitute persistent barriers to effective inclusion (Rodríguez, 2024).

Educational inclusion, understood from the social model of diversity, perceives individual differences as an opportunity to strengthen pedagogical processes and enhance educational practices toward greater equity. This approach implies that educational needs must be part of planning, fostering an inclusive culture through the implementation of public policies. However, its implementation faces significant structural and attitudinal challenges:

Lack of teacher competencies: Many teachers express insecurity and resistance to change due to insufficient training in inclusive methodologies (Zapata Chiroque et al., 2023).

Inadequate training: Training programs do not always robustly address the inclusive approach, resulting in a disconnection between theory and practice.

Cultural resistances: Negative attitudes towards diversity support persist, often perceived as an additional burden (Rabi et al., 2018; Latorre et al., 2022).

Resource limitations: The absence of adaptive materials and assistive technologies restricts the application of inclusive strategies (Collin et al.). In Latin America, and particularly in Ecuador, these limitations are exacerbated by structural factors such as poverty, lack of resources, poor inter-institutional coordination, and limited specialized teacher training (Aldabas, 2022; Bert & Alvarado, 2019; Serón et al., 2020). Training programs often prioritize theoretical content without providing sufficient opportunities for practice in real inclusive contexts (Peña et al., 2018).

In light of this issue, the present study develops a systematic review of literature published in the last five years, stemming from the context of the 2020 pandemic, with the purpose of examining the theoretical and empirical corpus available on teacher training programs aimed at addressing students with specific educational needs (SEN) in basic education. From this, the following research questions are posed:

What are the essential characteristics of teacher training programs aimed at addressing students with specific educational needs in basic education?

What approaches, methodologies, and content are integrated into initial and continuous training programs within the framework of inclusive education?

What empirical evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of these programs in improving inclusive pedagogical practices?

What are the most frequent challenges and limitations in their implementation, both nationally and internationally?

What recommendations derived from the literature can guide the strengthening of inclusive training programs?

The aim of this systematic review is grounded in the need to consolidate a clear, updated, and rigorous overview of how teacher training programs are being configured concerning the attention to specific educational needs (SEN) at the basic education level. By analyzing the available scientific evidence, this study seeks to understand not only the structural and methodological characteristics of such programs but also their impact on the development of more inclusive, sustainable, and contextualized pedagogical practices. This review aims to respond to a dual need: on one hand, to strengthen teacher training through evidence-based strategies, and on the other, to provide relevant inputs for the formulation of educational policies that promote truly inclusive school environments. By identifying approaches, models, achievements, and limitations present in various national and international experiences, this research allows for the projection of recommendations aimed at improving the quality and relevance of teacher preparation in increasingly diverse contexts.

## Methodology

This systematic review was developed in accordance with the procedure established by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, recognized for its methodological rigor in the planning, execution, and presentation of literature reviews (Page et al., 2021). Its adoption ensured transparency, internal coherence, and traceability of the process, from the formulation of the research question to the final selection of included studies.

The use of PRISMA was particularly relevant for the educational field, as it allowed for addressing the diversity of approaches, contexts, and methodological designs characteristic of studies on teacher training in inclusive education. The application of its 27 items facilitated a detailed description of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the construction of search strategies, the rigorous selection of studies, as well as the assessment of bias

and synthesis of results. The methodological process followed the four established stages in the PRISMA protocol: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

During the identification phase, a structured search was conducted in six academic databases: Scopus, SciELO, Redalyc, Dialnet, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar. The choice of these sources was based on their pedagogical relevance and their coverage of scientific literature in Spanish and English. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the search, a strategy was designed that combined controlled descriptors and free terms, articulated through Boolean operators (AND, OR), truncations (*), and combinations for exact phrases.

The key terms used in the search were: "teacher training," "inclusive education," "specific educational needs," and "basic education." This combination was syntactically adjusted to the requirements of each search engine. Furthermore, the following inclusion criteria were determined: studies published between 2017 and 2025, in Spanish or English, with full-text access, peer-reviewed, of an empirical nature (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed), and that directly addressed teacher training processes aimed at inclusive school contexts.

Correspondingly, duplicates, theoretical or essay-type studies, those lacking peer review, those outside the established time frame, and those not aligned with the research objective were excluded. The application of the criteria was carried out in two stages: first, the review of titles and abstracts, and subsequently, the full reading of the preliminarily selected texts.

To control the selection process, a screening matrix was employed using Microsoft Excel, in which variables such as study title, authors, year of publication, country of origin, methodological approach, sample type, study objective, and availability of full text were recorded. This instrument allowed for the systematization of decisions made in each phase and ensured traceability.

Additionally, an internal work plan was developed, which was rigorously implemented at all stages of the review. This plan was validated by the research team and maintained as an operational support throughout the process, evaluated under the same conditions, thus avoiding interpretative biases and ensuring methodological coherence. Decisions made at each stage were documented according to the PRISMA flow diagram, contributing to the transparency of the procedure followed (Page et al., 2021).

Regarding the temporal distribution of the selected studies, the review evidences a sustained increase in scientific production related to teacher training and educational inclusion during the period 2017-2025, with a significant surge starting in 2020 and a peak in publications in 2023. This increase appears to respond to the international impetus to strengthen inclusive training policies in the post-pandemic context. The year 2024 also reflected relevant production, particularly focused on the impact of initial and continuous training on teaching practice. In contrast, the years 2020 and 2022 recorded moderate activity on the subject. This evolution suggests a sustained academic interest in recent years, with a focus on more rigorous and integrative methodological approaches that consider both teacher self-efficacy and the institutional conditions affecting the implementation of inclusive practices.

**Figure 1**
*PRISMA Diagram*

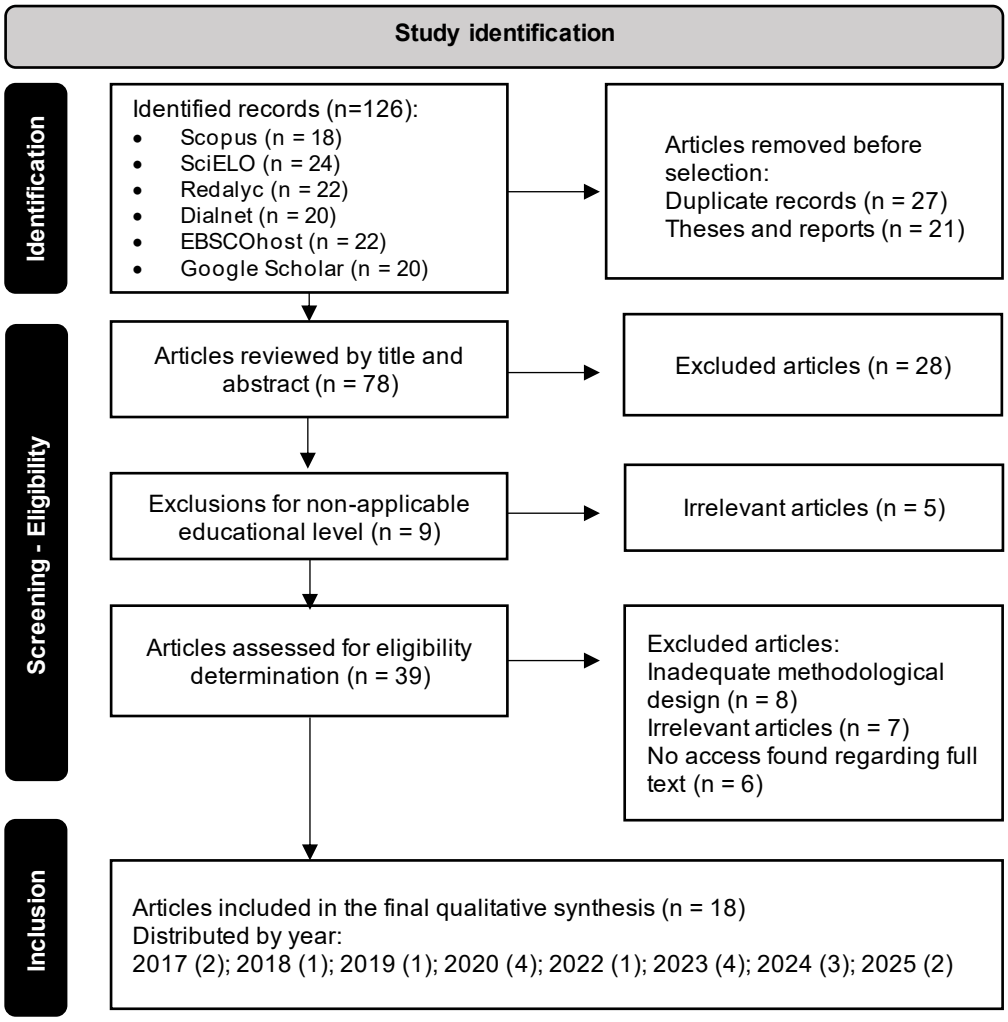



**Table 1**
*Screening matrix of studies included in the systematic review (2017–2025)*

| Author(s) | Year | Country | Methodological Design | Study Population | Study Objective | PRISMA Category |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pegalajar & Colmenero | 2017 | Spain | Quantitative (descriptive) | Secondary Education Teachers | Examine attitudes and initial training regarding inclusion | Conceptualization |
| Flores et al. | 2017 | Mexico | Qualitative (ethnographic) | Preservice Teachers | Analyze effects of inclusive teacher training on practice | Conceptualization |
| Peña et al. | 2018 | Mexico | Qualitative | Basic Education Teachers | Explore implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices | Methods |
| Bert & Alvarado | 2019 | Argentina | Qualitative | Primary School Teachers | Analyze co-teaching and collaborative work | Methods |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| García et al. | 2020 | Spain | Qualitative | University Trainers | Study inclusive approach in initial training | Conceptualization |
| Diez Gutiérrez | 2020 | Spain | Qualitative | Practicing Teachers | Evaluate continuous training programs with an inclusive focus | Teacher Training |
| Murillo et al. | 2020 | Mexico | Qualitative | Teachers and Administrators | Analyze institutional and teacher commitment to inclusion | Methods |
| Reyes-Parra et al. | 2020 | Colombia | Systematic Review | Students, Teachers, Families | Classify research lines on inclusion | Attitudes |
| Carrascal et al. | 2022 | Spain | Qualitative | Trainers | Describe conditions for inclusive pedagogy | Methods |
| Gómez Marí et al. | 2023 | Spain | Quantitative (quasi-experimental) | Future Teachers | Measure impact of inclusive training on attitudes and self-efficacy | Attitudes |
| Serna | 2023 | Dominican Republic | Qualitative | Preservice Teachers | Explore perception of initial training in inclusion | Conceptualization |
| Rodríguez Otero | 2023 | Colombia | Quantitative (descriptive) | Practicing Teachers | Study social representations of inclusion | Attitudes |
| Zapata Chiroque | 2023 | Peru | Empirical Systematic Review | Teachers | Analyze inclusive practices and teacher training | Teacher Training |
| Valderrama | 2024 | Ecuador | Quantitative (pre-experimental) | Preservice Teachers | Evaluate teacher performance post-training | Methods |
| Morales Endrino et al. | 2024 | Spain | Quantitative (descriptive) | Preservice Teachers | Explore perception of the CRPD and inclusive training | Attitudes |
| PRODEV LatAm | 2024 | LatAm/Caribbean | Mixed | Teachers, Trainers | Evaluate inclusive professional development programs | Teacher Training |
| Kimhi & Bar Nir | 2025 | Israel | Qualitative | Trainers, Candidates | Analyze inclusive training policies | Teacher Training |
| Borja Ramos | 2025 | Ecuador | Empirical Reflection | Teachers | Analyze teacher competencies for inclusion in Latin America | Teacher Training |

## Results and discussion

The empirical evidence collected through the PRISMA protocol reveals that teacher training in inclusive education is structured around four fundamental categories: (1) conceptualization of teacher training; (2) attitudes towards inclusion; (3) inclusive methods and development; and (4) teacher training in inclusion.

***Conceptualization of teacher training for inclusive education***

The analyzed studies consistently define teacher training for inclusion as a continuous, dynamic, and situated process aimed at eliminating barriers to education as a right for all students, particularly those with specific educational needs (SEN). This training should promote a comprehensive understanding of diversity as an

educational value, fostering not only technical competencies but also attitudes committed to equity and social justice.

Various studies indicate that inclusive training must articulate professional and social relationships based on trust, as a condition for planning and implementing effective inclusive practices (Flores et al., 2017; García et al., 2020). From a regional perspective, Latin American authors such as Lozano et al. (2021) highlight persistent gaps in initial training programs due to curricula that are not sensitive to sociocultural differences. Pegalajar and Colmenero (2017), in the Spanish context, identify similar limitations in initial training despite a favorable attitude among teachers towards inclusion. Serna (2023), in the Dominican Republic, emphasizes that training is often theoretical and disconnected from school realities, with little preparation for collaborative work and curricular adaptation.

However, some conceptual tensions also arise. While certain studies emphasize the relational and collaborative dimension as central to inclusive training, others, such as Sierra and García (2020), propose structural and systemic approaches focused on institutional redesign and educational policies. Regional differences are also observed: in Europe, there is a predominance of a focus on practical teaching competencies, whereas in Latin America, there is an emphasis on the need for alignment with principles of social justice (Lozano et al., 2021).

From this evidence, the conceptualization of teacher training for inclusion, although approached from various perspectives, converges on a comprehensive vision that articulates ethical, pedagogical, and contextual principles. This training should promote a humanistic approach grounded in human rights and the affirmation of diversity as an educational value. Additionally, it requires a solid integration of theoretical knowledge with practical and reflective experiences, enabling teachers to understand the complexities of diverse classrooms.

There is also a need to train professionals committed to educational transformation, capable of identifying and removing barriers that affect the learning and collaboration of all students. Finally, there is an urgency to transition from models focused on technical preparation to critical, ethical, and contextualized training proposals that respond to the real challenges of inclusion in complex and socially diverse educational contexts.

***Attitudes of teachers towards inclusion***

Twelve reviewed studies explore teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, revealing a polarization between those who view it as an ethical responsibility and those who identify obstacles such as lack of resources, insufficient training, or time constraints. There is consensus that positive attitudes are associated with prior formative experiences in inclusion, contact with students with SEN, or processes of professional reflection (Gómez Marí et al., 2023).

The studies agree that teachers' attitudes are a determining factor in the implementation of inclusive practices. The experimental study by Gómez Marí et al. (2023) shows that specific training—especially when it includes case analysis, legislation, and testimonies—positively impacts attitudes and perceived self-efficacy of future teachers. However, these attitudes are often mediated by limited conceptions of inclusion that are still close to integration.

Differences are identified between preservice and practicing teachers. While the former tend to show greater openness to inclusion, the latter present more traditional representations, often associated with a welfare-oriented and disability-centered view (Rodríguez Otero, 2023).

Among the variables influencing attitudes, the following stand out: (a) age and experience, with a trend towards more conservative positions among teachers with greater tenure; (b) the quality and focus of the training received; (c) positive personal experiences with individuals with disabilities; and (d) the perception of teacher self-efficacy (Kunz et al., 2021).

Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion represent a key factor for the consolidation of educational policies aimed at equity. While the reviewed studies indicate a core of positive disposition, particularly among preservice teachers, this initial attitude does not always translate into effective inclusive practices. There remains a significant gap between discourse and pedagogical action, fueled by professional insecurity, limited contextualized training, and a restricted understanding of what it truly means to teach in diverse contexts. In this regard, continuous training, reflective support, and direct contact with heterogeneous educational realities emerge as essential conditions for transforming these attitudes into genuine, sustainable pedagogical commitments oriented towards justice.

***Methods and professional development for inclusion***

Fifteen included studies highlight the relevance of active, reflective, and collaborative methodologies as necessary conditions for inclusive professional development. Practices such as problem-based learning, project work, and co-teaching help consolidate student-centered strategies tailored to their needs (Peña et al., 2018; Carrascal et al., 2022).

In this regard, authors like Kimhi et al. (2019) and Grassi-Roig (2022) emphasize the importance of fostering teacher self-assessment and action research as tools for continuous improvement. Leifler (2020) advocates for curricular planning from a diversity perspective, while Tamm et al. (2019) stress the creation of welcoming school climates. In the Latin American context, Bert and Alvarado (2019) document successful experiences of co-teaching and peer collaboration as effective collaborative practices.

Geographical context differences are also notable. In Europe and the Global North, there is a preference for technical preparation in light of behavioral challenges and material adaptation. In contrast, studies in Ibero-America tend to value the ethical and political commitment of teachers as a cornerstone of inclusive training (Murillo et al., 2020).

However, common obstacles are identified: scarcity of resources, administrative overload, decontextualized training models, and lack of institutional support.

The category related to methods and inclusive professional development reveals that educational inclusion cannot be understood merely as the adoption of new methodologies; it demands a comprehensive professional development process structured around principles of educational justice and social transformation. The most effective inclusive pedagogical practices are those that combine collaborative approaches, formative assessment, interdisciplinary work, and contextual adaptation to school realities. In this framework, critical reflection on practice and the ethical commitment of teachers are indispensable conditions for ensuring that applied methods not only meet technical criteria but also translate into sustained actions that promote the participation and learning of all students.

***Teacher training in inclusion: a comprehensive vision***

Thirteen studies delve into the structural nature of inclusive teacher training, proposing a holistic vision that integrates the theoretical, practical, and ethical dimensions. This training must enable teachers to identify barriers, design tailored strategies, and exercise their roles from an equity perspective (Gómez Marí et al., 2023; Valderrama, 2024).

Findings converge on the notion that initial training is still deficient in specific content related to inclusion (Pegalajar & Colmenero, 2017), while continuous training faces issues regarding availability, contextualization, and alignment with school realities (Zapata Chiroque, 2023). Nonetheless, structured training experiences for practicing teachers have shown positive impacts on professional practice, especially when incorporating universal design, emotional management, and co-education (Diez Gutiérrez, 2020).

Among the main obstacles identified are: the absence of an inclusive curriculum, lack of clear institutional policies, weak specialized mentoring, and poor connections between universities and local educational systems.

From a Latin American perspective, studies by Herrera et al. (2018), Diez (2020), and Ponce and Barcia (2020) propose rethinking teacher training from a critical sociocultural perspective, recognizing diversity as a collective value rather than merely a technical category.

Inclusive training should be conceived as an articulated, continuous, and situated process that combines cognitive, affective, and practical components. Training institutions must integrate inclusive pedagogical models both in content and teaching methods, promoting authentic experiences, collaboration, and critical reflection as transformative axes.

The empirical evidence reviewed underscores that teacher training for inclusion must be conceived as an articulated, situated, and continuous process that coherently responds to the complexities of diverse educational contexts. This training demands a balanced integration of cognitive, affective, normative, and practical components capable of developing not only technical competencies in teachers but also ethical sensitivity and social commitment. In this sense, it is crucial for training institutions to transition towards inclusive pedagogical models that are reflected in both content and teaching strategies. The most effective training proposals are those based on authentic experiences, promote collaborative work, and encourage constant critical reflection on teaching practice through the lens of equity and educational justice.

**Table 2**
*Comparison of the four categories*

| Category | Coincidences | Differences / Tensions | Notable Authors |
|---|---|---|---|
| Conceptualization of Teacher Training | Training as a continuous, ethical process centered on diversity. Diversity as a value. | More relational vs. structural approaches; regional differences in the approach. | Flores, Lozano, Pegalajar, Serna. |
| Teachers' Attitudes | Positive attitudes favor inclusion; influenced by training, prior experience, and self-efficacy. | Preservice teachers show better attitudes than practicing teachers. Confusion between inclusion and integration. | Gómez Mari, Rodríguez Otero |
| Methods and Inclusive Teacher Development | Use of active, collaborative, and student-centered methodologies. Systemic approach. | Contrast between technical approaches (North) and ethical-political (Latin America). | Peña, Carrascal, Grassi-Roig, Leifler, Murillo. |
| Teacher Training in Inclusion | Need for continuous, articulated, situated training with practical and normative components. | Disarticulation between initial and continuous training. Lack of accompanied practical experiences. | Gómez Marí, Valderrama, Zapata Chiroque, Diez Gutiérrez. |

## Conclusions

The systematic review conducted has allowed for the identification of trends, advances, and challenges in teacher training to address specific educational needs from an inclusive perspective. From the synthesis of recent empirical studies, four interpretive axes are established that structure the current understanding of the phenomenon: the conceptualization of training, teachers' attitudes, inclusive pedagogical methods, and training models.

Regarding conceptualization, studies agree on the need for training conceived as an ethical, continuous, and situated process aimed at transforming teaching practices and recognizing diversity as a pedagogical principle. However, fragmented approaches persist that limit its effectiveness.

Concerning teachers' attitudes, it is evident that these significantly influence the implementation of inclusive practices. Although positive dispositions are evident, especially among preservice teachers, traditional representations and low levels of self-efficacy persist that limit real commitment to inclusion.

In terms of methods and professional development, studies highlight the effectiveness of active, collaborative, and reflective approaches. Methodologies that incorporate practical experiences and institutional support show a greater impact on acquiring inclusive competencies.

Finally, in the training dimension, a gap is identified between initial and continuous training, as well as weak connections between theoretical content and real intervention contexts. There is a clear need to rethink training programs from a comprehensive logic, with a rights perspective and anchored in everyday pedagogical practice.

In summary, teacher training for inclusive education requires a structural redesign that responds to both regulatory demands and school realities. This entails reviewing the curriculum for teacher training, fostering coherent institutional policies, and strengthening support systems that ensure inclusive professional development. These findings can serve as a foundation for future research and for decision-making in the academic context of

higher education and in human talent management within school institutions, as part of ongoing educational policy improvement.

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