






Reflection Article/Essay

Inclusion in higher education and occupational therapy: accessibility and its dimensions

Inclusão na educação superior e terapia ocupacional: acessibilidade e suas dimensões

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Abstract

This theoretical essay stems from the reflections of two occupational therapists who are also professors, in collaboration with undergraduate and graduate students, research groups, and a graduate course organization on contemporary studies of disability. These reflections were enriched by participation in debates promoted by the Federal Government on disability, human rights, and public policies. The objective is to contribute to the field of inclusive education in higher education and to the practice of occupational therapy. Drawing on texts by contemporary authors who discuss disability, intersectionality, and inclusion in higher education, as well as official documents that guide the formulation of public policies, disability is understood as both a personal and collective experience of individuals with bodily diversity. These individuals, because of some form of impairment in body structures and functions, in dynamic interaction with contextual factors (personal and environmental), face restrictions to full participation in social spaces, arising from accessibility barriers. Thus, by taking accessibility and inclusion as categories for reflection, in dialogue with some authors studied in the research group, the intention is to bring elements to the practice of occupational therapy in the field of inclusive education in higher education.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy, Public Policies, Mainstreaming (Education), Architectural Accessibility, Education, Higher.

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Resumo

Este ensaio teórico resulta das reflexões de duas docentes terapeutas ocupacionais, juntamente com estudantes de graduação e pós-graduação, grupos de pesquisa e a organização de uma disciplina de pós-graduação, acerca dos estudos contemporâneos sobre deficiência. Essas reflexões foram enriquecidas pela participação em debates promovidos pelo Governo Federal sobre deficiência, direitos humanos e políticas públicas. O objetivo é contribuir para o campo da educação inclusiva no ensino superior e para a prática da terapia ocupacional. Com base em textos dos autores contemporâneos que discutem deficiência, interseccionalidade e inclusão no ensino superior, bem como em documentos oficiais que orientam a formulação de políticas públicas, entende-se a deficiência como uma experiência pessoal e coletiva de pessoas com diversidade corporal. Essas pessoas, por conta de algum tipo de impedimento nas estruturas e funções do corpo, em interação dinâmica com os fatores contextuais (pessoais e ambientais), enfrentam restrições à plena participação nos espaços sociais, decorrentes das barreiras de acessibilidade. Assim, ao tomar a acessibilidade e a inclusão como categorias de reflexão, em diálogo com alguns autores estudados no grupo de pesquisa, pretende-se trazer elementos sobre a prática da terapia ocupacional no campo da educação inclusiva no ensino superior.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Ocupacional, Políticas Públicas, Inclusão Educacional, Acessibilidade Física, Educação Superior.

Introduction

This theoretical essay is part of research conducted by a group of researchers from different universities in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, aiming to investigate the accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education, using the Inclusion Index for Higher Education (INES) as a research tool¹.

For the development of this essay, we used contemporary authors who have studied disability and inclusion from the perspectives of intersectionality and accessibility in higher education (Martins et al., 2023; Bock et al., 2018; Fougeyrollas et al., 2019). We also referred to official documents considered guiding for disability studies, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Brasil, 2007), the Brazilian Inclusion Law (Brasil, 2015), and the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (Brasil, 2008).

In the field of occupational therapy, in contrast to studies focused on basic education and school inclusion, there are few studies addressing the role of occupational therapists and the inclusion processes of students with disabilities in higher education. A search in the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) database revealed articles published in the journal *Cadernos Brasileiros de Terapia Ocupacional* by Nogueira & Oliver (2018, 2022) and Silva & Pimentel (2021). Additionally, two book chapters written by

¹“International Research Network on Accessibility and Inclusion in Higher Education.” CNPq Call for Support of Scientific, Technological, and Innovation Research No. 26/2021.

occupational therapists on the theme stand out: Roque & Rocha (2018) and Jurdi & Santos (2022).

Currently, a series of inclusive educational policies and regulations aimed at guiding the functioning and organization of Brazilian education can be identified, with more visible progress in basic education. These advances have contributed to the access of socially, economically, and culturally vulnerable groups—distinct from the majority of young people in Brazil—to higher education. Among these groups are students with disabilities, who, after regularly attending basic education classrooms, have recently been entering higher education.

In Brazil, the quota system is a form of affirmative action sanctioned by Law No. 12.711/2012 (Brasil, 2012b) and regulated by Decree No. 7.824/2012, with the aim of reserving 50% of available places per course in federal universities and institutes of science and technology for students who completed high school in public schools. Article 3 of the aforementioned law contains provisions regarding the reservation of places for self-declared Black, mixed-race, and Indigenous students, which must be proportional to the population of each federation unit (Brasil, 2012b).

In 2016, Law No. 13,409/2016 amended Article 3 of the aforementioned law, adding people with disabilities to the quota system (Brasil, 2016). The impacts of affirmative action policies are demonstrated by the Higher Education Census, which revealed a 76.52% increase in enrollment of people with disabilities between 2016 and 2021.

Despite the progress in inclusive education, the presence of students with disabilities in higher education is still recent in the national context (Martins et al., 2023). Data from the *Resumo Técnico do Censo da Educação Superior* (Brasil, 2024) indicate that only 59,001 students with disabilities were enrolled in 2019, representing 0.7% of total enrollments. Although the right to access education is guaranteed in legal documents, the daily practice in the educational field alerts us that the participation and permanence of students with disabilities in regular and higher education remains inconsistent (Rocha et al., 2018).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs-UN) recognizes and addresses disability as a cross-cutting issue across its entirety and, specifically in relation to education, highlights the importance of accessible, inclusive, and diversity-sensitive environments in terms of human functionality. The Disability and Development Report–2018, when analyzing the 2030 Agenda, provides evidence that people with disabilities are less likely to attend school, complete primary or secondary education, and become literate. The data indicate an urgent need to improve access to education for children and young people with disabilities, as the challenges faced result in a greater risk of social exclusion and poverty. In the long term, this could lead to significant limitations in their ability to participate in the workforce and secure employment.

Although there are legal guarantees for access to higher education, they have not been sufficient to ensure the permanence and academic achievement of students. Studies such as those by Lindsay et al. (2018), Jurdi & Santos (2022), and Santos et al. (2022) have shown that the main barriers to retaining students with disabilities in higher education are related to the lack of pedagogical and architectural accessibility, the absence of institutional support mechanisms, and the lack of accommodations that equitably address specific educational needs in regulatory, administrative, and

pedagogical terms. In addition to these challenges, the inadequate education of teachers, who face difficulties in the teaching-learning process of students with disabilities, exacerbates the situation. Furthermore, the general lack of awareness within the academic community about how to work with this population and their particularities adds another layer to the barriers to the inclusion of these students.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reaffirmed the conceptual framework of the social model of disability for understanding this phenomenon, as stated in its preamble, section E:

[...] recognizing that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with disabilities and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Brasil, 2012a, p. 17).

Thus, the Convention officially recognizes disability as one of the characteristics of human diversity, having been incorporated into Brazilian legal order as a constitutional amendment (Brasil, 2007) and subsequently included in the Brazilian Inclusion Law (Brasil, 2015). Therefore, this is the legal framework that guides lawmakers and public policy makers in guaranteeing the right to access and eliminating accessibility barriers.

In this sense, professional practices aimed at supporting people with disabilities cannot stray from the interactional and multidimensional perspective of the disability experience. As a product of social and cultural production that imposes barriers on bodily diversity, the disability experience results in situations of discrimination and inequalities experienced by these individuals (Santos, 2023).

Historically, people with disabilities have also suffered from a process that Castel (1998) termed as disaffiliation. For people with disabilities, this process culminates in the marginalization of individuals, socially produced through power relations and stigmatization that develop over time and generate social inequalities (Oliver, 2013). These inequalities reverberate throughout the social structure, as societies and their institutions are composed of individuals shaped by these unequal relations.

Fougeyrollas et al. (2019) emphasize that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted a new conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon of disability, recognizing it as a social marker of difference and as one of the characteristics of human diversity. Internalized into Brazilian legal order as a constitutional amendment (Brasil, 2007), the concept of persons with disabilities, as defined in the Convention, reverberates in the Brazilian Inclusion Law (Brasil, 2015) from an interactional and multidimensional perspective. This perspective considers the experience of disability as a product of social and cultural production that imposes barriers on bodily diversity, resulting in situations of discrimination and inequalities experienced by people with disabilities (Santos, 2023).

For occupational therapists, work in the field of inclusive education is grounded in human and social rights, with education being a key element for promoting justice and social participation for all citizens, without any form of discrimination (Jurdi & Santos, 2022).

O Federal Council of Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy (COFFITO) highlights that environmental adaptations aimed at accessibility are key areas of

occupational therapy practice, with the goal of enabling better occupational performance of students in educational spaces (Brasil, 2018).

Pereira et al. (2021) assert that occupational therapists working in the field of education need to reflect on their role in this context, considering education as a human right for children, adolescents, and young people, as well as access, permanence, and the quality of learning. In this regard, these authors question the construction of a quality public school system for all, ensuring that the specificities and particularities of each individual are respected and guaranteed.

The study by Nogueira & Oliver (2022), conducted with occupational therapists who hold management positions in Accessibility and Inclusion Centers (NAI) at Higher Education Institutions (IES), highlights the specificity of the occupational therapists' intervention in this context. The study participants pointed to few references to actions focused on attitudinal, communicational, programmatic, and methodological accessibility in their universities, particularly regarding adaptations of assessment processes, methodological and curricular reorganization, or even changes in communicational behavior.

For Nogueira & Oliver (2022), building actions to address the challenges of accessibility requires expanding the debate and promoting greater collective involvement of the different members of the academic context. The study participants emphasized that the scope of accessibility needs to be significantly broadened to overcome the barriers in the process of including people with disabilities in higher education.

Silva & Pimentel (2021) argue that the increase in enrollments of students with disabilities in higher education is due to affirmative action policies and changes in basic education targeting this population. In this regard, these authors highlight the importance of examining the accessibility conditions provided by the IES to ensure the permanence of these students at the university.

Although there have been advances and a legal framework supporting the access of students with disabilities to higher education, institutions must effectively promote the inclusion and permanence of this population at the university (Melo et al., 2016; Martins & Silva, 2016; Jurdi & Santos, 2022). The theoretical contributions from disability and human rights studies intersect with the philosophical and epistemological foundations of occupational therapy, strengthening the theoretical framework for occupational therapy practice in the field of education, with a view to inclusion in higher education (Jurdi & Santos, 2022).

It is the responsibility and commitment of the IES to create suitable conditions for access to knowledge, providing quality, accessibility, and the necessary adjustments to meet the needs of each student for an excellent educational process.

Policies and Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Higher Education

The inclusion of people with disabilities in higher education is provided for by the Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education (LDB No. 9.394/1996, Brasil, 1996), which establishes the right to education in its Article 4, emphasizing access to the highest levels of education. According to Moreira & Liebl (2022), by bringing the principle of transversality as fundamental to ensuring guidelines for the access and permanence of

students who are the target population of special education, the LDB legally highlights the process of school inclusion from basic education to higher education.

The National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (PNEEPEI), from 2008, reinforces the transversality of special education also in higher education, providing access, permanence, and participation of its target population, that is, students with disabilities, global developmental disorders, and high abilities/giftedness (Brasil, 2008).

In Brazil, Ciantelli & Leite (2016) outline a historical trajectory of policies and affirmative actions that have promoted the access and permanence of people with disabilities in higher education. Among the main initiatives is the INCLUIR Program – Accessibility in Higher Education (Brasil, 2013a), which, years after its creation, established NAI in the IES. According to Nogueira & Oliver (2022), the creation of NAI boosted the contribution of occupational therapists to the process of institutionalizing inclusion actions in higher education.

The Brazilian Inclusion Law (Brasil, 2015), already mentioned, reinforces the right to an inclusive educational system that can ensure conditions of access, permanence, participation, and learning. The New *Viver Sem Limite* Plan, launched in 2023, has four areas of action, with Area III, “Accessibility and Assistive Technology,” focused on actions that enable the use, by people with disabilities, of spaces, furniture, urban devices, transportation, information and communication, as well as services and facilities open to the public (Brasil, 2023).

The New Plan reinforces the importance of implementing accessibility measures and assistive technologies to ensure that people with disabilities are guaranteed equal opportunities and full participation in society, by eliminating architectural and communicational barriers, among others.

Therefore, despite the advances in affirmative action policies in higher education, there is still a path to be taken to achieve good professional and management practices capable of transforming ableist and meritocratic institutional cultures. Affirmative actions in academia not only imply compliance with the quota policy but also highlight the importance for universities of producing knowledge about the phenomenon of disability, accessibility, and human rights. As Bernardino-Costa & Borges (2021) mention, for affirmative policies to be realized, it is essential that the notion of diversity be taken as a radical idea, destabilizing the existing power and hierarchical relations in universities, and linking them to the principles of social, epistemic, and cognitive justice. To this end, a combination of curricular changes and radical epistemological and methodological diversity is needed.

Dimensions of Accessibility and Implications for the Inclusion Process in Higher Education

The dimensions of accessibility in the school inclusion process are outlined in the document titled *References for Accessibility in Higher Education* (Brasil, 2013b), which presents important aspects of the necessary conditions to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities in higher education. These dimensions include attitudinal, architectural, methodological or pedagogical, programmatic, instrumental, transportation, interpersonal communication, written and virtual, and digital accessibility.

According to the document, accessibility conditions are fundamental for realizing an education grounded in the social model of disability, which emphasizes society's responsibility in the paradigm shift regarding the concept of disability. In this perspective, society must promote accessibility conditions, regardless of the type of bodily impairment.

According to Martins et al. (2023), current literature has focused on studying accessibility barriers in university spaces to expose practices that hinder the academic journey of students with disabilities. These studies generally point to the presence of barriers beyond architectural ones, also encompassing social relations in the communicational and methodological realms. An example of this is the selective exams, such as *vestibular* (college admission test), which ignored the right of people with disabilities to access them (Martins et al., 2023).

Von der Weid (2023), a researcher studying the inclusion of blind individuals, brings a new perspective on how to think about the dimension of accessibility for people with disabilities. She starts from the principle that the bodily diversity of disabilities should not be treated as an attribute that prevents or inhibits a person from living life but rather as a singularity that is also a generative force of life's expression, capable of offering another way of experiencing and relating.

From this perspective, accessibility goes beyond the elimination of architectural and communicational barriers, becoming more comprehensive and involving political, normative, social, and cultural aspects. This author points out that we have become accustomed to thinking of accessibility as a series of parameters and measures defined by legislation to adapt the environment so that blind people, those with reduced mobility, neurodiverse individuals, or deaf people can have an environment suited to their needs. She advocates for accessibility as a commitment to learning and a disposition to be present differently with others, naming this perspective as transformative accessibility, which invites us to understand accessibility as a relational dimension capable of modifying the parameters of our interactions to include more bodily realities (Von der Weid, 2023).

In the context of the educational inclusion paradigm, the Disability Studies in Education present the perspective of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a possibility for developing educational environments designed to address and eliminate barriers in the schooling of all people, including those with disabilities (Bock et al., 2018).

In this scenario, which calls us to research and study the accessibility and permanence of students with disabilities in higher education, it becomes necessary to know instruments that assess how the academic community understands what accessibility is and how this is reflected in institutional policies for the permanence and inclusion of this target population.

An example of how we can advance the discussion and studies on accessibility and inclusion in higher education is the use of INES (Colômbia, 2017), which follows the trend of instruments aimed at surveying the ways of understanding and characterizing institutional political processes to foster inclusion and accessibility in higher education.

INES was developed as a central part of the policy for organizing the Institutional Guidelines for Higher Education in Colombia (Carrillo & Aristizabal, 2017) and focuses on indicators for analyzing policies, cultures, and practices of inclusive education

in the university context, advocating for data collection with different collectives within the university community, whose rights and needs must be met and respected.

Thus, the use of INES allows for the collection of information on the perceptions of staff, faculty, and students regarding a set of indicators that range from the analysis of admission and permanence systems to strategies for academic development, in conjunction with research and artistic and cultural creation processes in university educational environments (Louzada, 2022).

Louzada (2022) emphasizes that the instrument has been applied in some higher education institutions in Colombia to facilitate improvements in the quality of education, using inclusion and accessibility as benchmarks. Pérez-Castro (2019) advocates for the use of INES to identify accessibility barriers in higher education, with the aim of identifying strengths to implement inclusive cultures, policies, and practices, promoting a university improvement plan focused on educational inclusion.

Given this, the assessment of institutional indicators of accessibility, inclusion, and permanence becomes essential to understand the context and shift professional practices from being centered on the person with a disability to a person-context-centered practice, inviting the academic community to discuss the topic of accessibility and inclusion in higher education.

The professional practice of occupational therapists is philosophically and epistemologically centered on the multidimensionality of the subject in action within a context. Therefore, reflecting, studying, and understanding accessibility in all its dimensions becomes an object of intervention for occupational therapists in the inclusion processes in higher education. Jurdi & Santos (2022) highlight an intervention experience of occupational therapy in a higher education institution, which can assist occupational therapists in their work on the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education.

The first point is participation in the formulation of institutional policies for the inclusion of people with disabilities. Occupational therapy faculty members can contribute to developing institutional policies based on their experience with school inclusion processes, critically examining pedagogical practices and strategies such as educational support, curriculum content flexibility, student support, and the elimination of barriers.

The second point refers to taking on coordination roles, such as coordinating NAI. Nogueira & Oliver (2022) interviewed occupational therapy faculty members who took on management positions within the NAI of higher education institutions and emphasize this area of activity. Jurdi & Santos (2022) reaffirm that coordinating NAI can expand the role of occupational therapy faculty members, providing them with representation in other institutional bodies, such as the Undergraduate Council² – a strategic space for giving visibility to institutional policies and critically examining potential experiences of disability resulting from accessibility barriers that hinder the permanence and academic achievement of these students.

Another important and relevant point for occupational therapists in shaping their role in the inclusion of students in higher education is the creation of professional

²The Undergraduate Council is an advisory and deliberative body responsible for proposing, planning, and coordinating undergraduate policies and actions, submitting them to the relevant authorities.

internships for undergraduate students in occupational therapy programs. This educational experience can provide undergraduate students with the opportunity to follow the academic trajectories of students with disabilities or specific needs, establishing support networks and identifying barriers to accessibility and inclusion. Moreover, the educational space within the scope of internship practices offers occupational therapists the chance to go beyond the therapeutic realm and enter the academic and institutional domains, producing new epistemic and instrumental knowledge.

In this way, the various spheres of intervention and action demonstrate that the barriers imposed by the institution—because of its rigid organizational structures and institutional flows—can and should be challenged. In this field of practice, it is the responsibility of the occupational therapist to engage with faculty, staff, institutional leaders, and, most importantly, students with disabilities, being attentive to their educational needs, everyday college life, and the challenges they face in accessing knowledge and participating socially.

Final Remarks

People with disabilities are understood as citizens with rights. Access to education is paramount for promoting justice and is an essential condition for individual and collective development. The experience of disability is seen as the result of the multidirectional interaction between contextual factors and bodily diversity.

The university, as a social institution, reflects the functioning and structuring modes of society, reproducing power struggles and processes of stigmatization, segregation, and exclusion of historically marginalized groups. Therefore, when addressing inclusion in higher education, it is imperative to discuss the elimination of accessibility barriers in all their dimensions. Occupational therapy, as a field of study and practice, has much to contribute to the development of good practices for inclusion in higher education, respecting diversity and promoting the elimination of accessibility barriers that foster independence, autonomy, and social participation.

This theoretical essay discussed the importance of the category of accessibility, or the absence thereof, in its various dimensions for the necessary understanding of the experience of disability as a social phenomenon in which various aspects intersect within the context of university life and institutional culture.

Occupational therapists working in IES must actively participate in developing inclusion policies, engage with bodies and centers dedicated to ensuring accessibility for students with disabilities, and secure their effective social participation in everyday academic and institutional activities.

Studies on access, permanence, and academic achievement for students with disabilities in higher education need to identify everyday peculiarities related to accessibility and participation, which can significantly influence the academic life of this group. In this sense, it is timely to recognize the specific contribution of occupational therapy intervention.

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Author's Contributions

Andrea Perosa Saigh Jurdi: study design, data organization, and manuscript writing. Adriana Martins de Oliveira, Ana Luiza Magalhães Bastos and Heloar Moreira Silverio: data organization, manuscript writing and revision. Maria da Conceição dos Santos: theoretical framework and manuscript revision. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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