The challenge of inclusive education in a Brazilian School: teachers' concerns regarding inclusion

O desafio da educação inclusiva em uma escola brasileira: as concepções dos professores acerca da inclusão

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Abstract

This intervention research analyzes the impact of implementation of the Brazilian inclusive education policy on the teachers of a public school. The intervention was based on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, using the methodology of Change Laboratory. Such methodology is based on the idea of expansive learning, which proposes the collective creation of new solutions to deal with the contradictions faced in an activity system (in this case, the school). Inclusive education has been a challenge to this school and its teachers: most of them were dealing with it for the first time. Ten group sessions were carried out from March to December 2014 and data were collected during such sessions. Three categories emerged from the data in an attempt to explain the teachers' concerns about inclusion: 1) inclusion as learning, 2) inclusion as fallacy and 3) manifestation of contradictions related to inclusion. Students' effective learning was the least frequent category. Manifestation of contradictions was the main category, indicating that the proposed inclusive education must advance to improve students' performance. Such advances could take place through facing the contradictions appointed by the subjects themselves. Under the light of the theoretical

framework, it was possible to perceive that the contradictions reveal the tensions involved in the inclusion process and, at the same time, the potential for change they carry in themselves.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Interventionist research; Cultural-Historical Activity Theory.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa de intervenção analisa o impacto do processo de implementação da política brasileira de educação inclusiva com professores de uma escola pública. A intervenção foi baseada na Teoria Histórico-Cultural da Atividade, utilizando a metodologia do Laboratório de Mudança. Tal metodologia está baseada na ideia de aprendizagem expansiva, que propõe a criação coletiva de novas soluções para lidar com as contradições encontradas em um sistema de atividade (nesse caso, a escola). A inclusão tem sido um desafio para esta escola e estes professores: a maioria está lidando com ela pela primeira vez. Dez sessões ocorreram entre março e dezembro de 2014 e dados foram colhidos no seu decorrer. Três categorias emergiram dos dados na tentativa de explicar as concepções dos professores acerca da inclusão: 1) inclusão como aprendizagem, 2) inclusão como falácia e 3) manifestações de contradição relacionadas à inclusão. Aprendizagem efetiva dos estudantes foi a categoria menos frequente. Manifestações de contradição foi a categoria mais frequente, indicando que a proposta de educação inclusiva precisa avançar para que se possam observar avanços no desempenho dos alunos. Tais avanços poderiam ocorrer a partir do enfrentamento das contradições levantadas pelos próprios sujeitos. Iluminadas pelo do referencial teórico foi possível perceber que as contradições revelam as tensões do processo de inclusão e, ao mesmo tempo, carregam em si o potencial de mudança.

Palavras-chave: Educação inclusiva; Pesquisa de intervenção; Teoria Histórico-Cultural da Atividade.

1. Introduction: the research context

The inclusion of special need students in Brazilian regular schools has been intensified since 2008, when schools were challenged to deal with this new public. This paper aims at presenting how teachers from a public school were perceiving inclusion and trying to build, collectively, possibilities for the school to become an inclusive institution, where learning would happen.

To introduce the research, first it is important to describe the context in which it took place: the scenario of special education and inclusion in Brazil. Before Special Education National Policy based on the Inclusive Education Approach (Brasil, 2008) there were already some students with disabilities in regular schools, although inclusion was optional. After 2008, it became mandatory to place all children, no matter what their learning conditions were, in regular schools[1].

Along with this Inclusive Education Policy, the government also started a process of implementation of resource rooms in regular schools (rooms with specific resources for working with disabled children) and training of teachers to work in these rooms. The course is offered online, and has the duration of about 9 months. Any teacher can take it and, at the end of the course, the ones who have attended it are entitled to become managers of his/her school's special education program. Here we have two problems: 1) the training is very fast and superficial; and 2) the focus is on resources, not on children, so teachers become more prepared to use the materials provided to the schools, than to work with the special needs children. Therefore, they learn just a few things about learning processes, evaluation, how to support regular teachers etc.

If we go deeply into the analysis of teachers' training, we will see that the ones that now have to teach special students have not been enough instructed on learning processes or inclusion at university. The Government is providing training for resource room teachers, but special need students spend more time with regular teachers – that have, on the whole, very little previous training – than with resource room teachers.

To make things worse, teachers in Brazil are poorly paid and, being a teacher is not a popular career. If, in the past, it was considered important, nowadays this is no longer the case. As it can be noticed, inclusion creates a scenario with plenty of challenges for teachers, without giving them any consistent support to face them.

In an attempt to understand this process of special need students' inclusion in regular schools and, consequently, discuss and improve it, an intervention based on the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, in a state school of Southern Brazil, was implemented. The participants were a group of eleven 6th grade teachers, the special education teacher (the resource room´s teacher), the pedagogical coordinator and the educational counselor.

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[1]Nowadays, there still are special schools, but they have fewer students because they are receiving less money from the State. Some schools have closed their doors and some have changed the way they work, becoming an aid tool to be used by regular schools.

In 2014, there were two students with special needs[2] in 6th grade, at this school, being it the first time the school had disabled students included in the final years of elementary school (grades 6th to 9th). Both students were mentally handicapped. Although the school's resource room became operational in 2010, special students were attending this school much earlier than that. However, the teachers who participated in the intervention emphasized how "novel" inclusion was for them – as there used to be included children only in the first years of elementary school (grades 1st to 5th).

2. Methodology

The methodological approach was sustained by an interventionist methodology, proposed by Sannino (2011) and Engeström (2011), discussed and adapted by Damiani et al. (2013), which focus on planning, implementation and evaluation. The intervention was inspired on the Change Laboratory model (Engeström, 2007, 2011; Virkkunen, Newnham, 2013).

The Change Laboratory model is based on the Expansive Learning concept (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, Sannino, 2010), which proposes the collective creation of new learning to deal with the contradictions and transformations faced in an activity system. The Change Laboratory is a research tool and, at the same time, a space for creation of the new within an activity system (Virkkunen, Newnham, 2013).

The Change Laboratory was taken as a toolkit to sustain the process of discussion, collaborative analysis, and change. Based on Vygotsky's idea of double stimulation (1998), it provides tools, as the three surfaces called mirror, models and vision, and ideas and tools to: 1) analyze; 2) model and plan; and 3) find possibilities for facing and finding solutions for the problem/s faced in an activity system (Engeström, 2007) – in the case of this research, the inclusive school.

From March to December of 2014, ten Laboratory sessions were organized and implemented in the school. They lasted 1 to 2 hours each and took place during schools' working hours. Students did not have classes while the sessions were on. The intervention was organized in this fashion because it would be impossible to have meetings with teachers in any other occasion, as most of them work in more than one school, having no spare time.

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[2]These two students had been officially diagnosed as presenting special needs. However, it is likely that there were more who remained undiagnosed.

The Laboratory was understood as a space where the group of teachers could learn about the inclusion process in addition to sharing points of views and worries and facing the contradictions involved in it, as well as trying to find ways to deal with them. As most of these teachers were dealing with the inclusion of special need students for the first time in their classrooms, this situation was making them anxious because they did not know what they had to do to teach or what to expect from them.

The analysis of the intervention (the Laboratory) was based on data produced over the sessions, which were registered in audio and video and fully transcribed. Data were approached using the discursive textual analysis (Moraes, 2003) which is carried out according to the following steps: 1) deconstruction of the corpus – unitarization; 2) establishment of relations between the unities – categorization; and 3) attainment of the new that emerge from the data – formulation of a metatext that represents a new understanding of the data – communication. The quantitative of each category represents the frequency of the episodes. The episodes were composed by a variable number of speech shifts. The software QSR NVivo 10 was used to help in the quantitative-qualitative analysis of the data, allowing for the organization of the categories and the establishment of the relations among them. The categories of analysis were taken from the theory and centered on the movements of the object of the activity and on the manifestations of contradiction – aspect that will be discussed next.

3. Research theoretical background

Engeström (2013) defines an activity system as a relatively stable group of people that work together (sharing a set of rules, a community and a way of dividing labor), with the mediation of some artifacts. The system, which is directed to a shared object is taken as a unit of analysis. In this research, the activity system under analysis is represented in Figure 1.

The subject refers to the individual or group chosen as the center in the activity analysis – in this research we considered the intervention participants as the subjects of the activity and refer to them as teachers even though some are not. The object is what guides the activity, but it is not necessarily something concrete, a material object, it can also be, for example, a problem – in this research, it is the inclusion of special need students. The outcome is the object transformed by the mediating artifacts – in this investigation, the understanding of inclusion. The mediating artifacts can be material tools and/or signs (psychological tools) –in this investigation, the resources used during the sessions to bring up

the discussion (presentation of the laws that guide the inclusion process in the country, of interviews with parents and with the special needs students, of Vygotsky´s theoretical ideas about learning and development, of the questions we had previously asked the subjects, to instigate discussion – most of them using visual media, as Power Point). The community represents other subjects that have relations with the object – in this research it was composed by the other teachers of the school, the principal, all the students and the special needs students' families. The division of labor defines the tasks in the activity – here, there are the researcher's and the participants' roles. The rules refer to norms, conventions that constraints actions in the activity system – in this research, the rules resulted from an agreement between the researcher, the principal and the teachers.
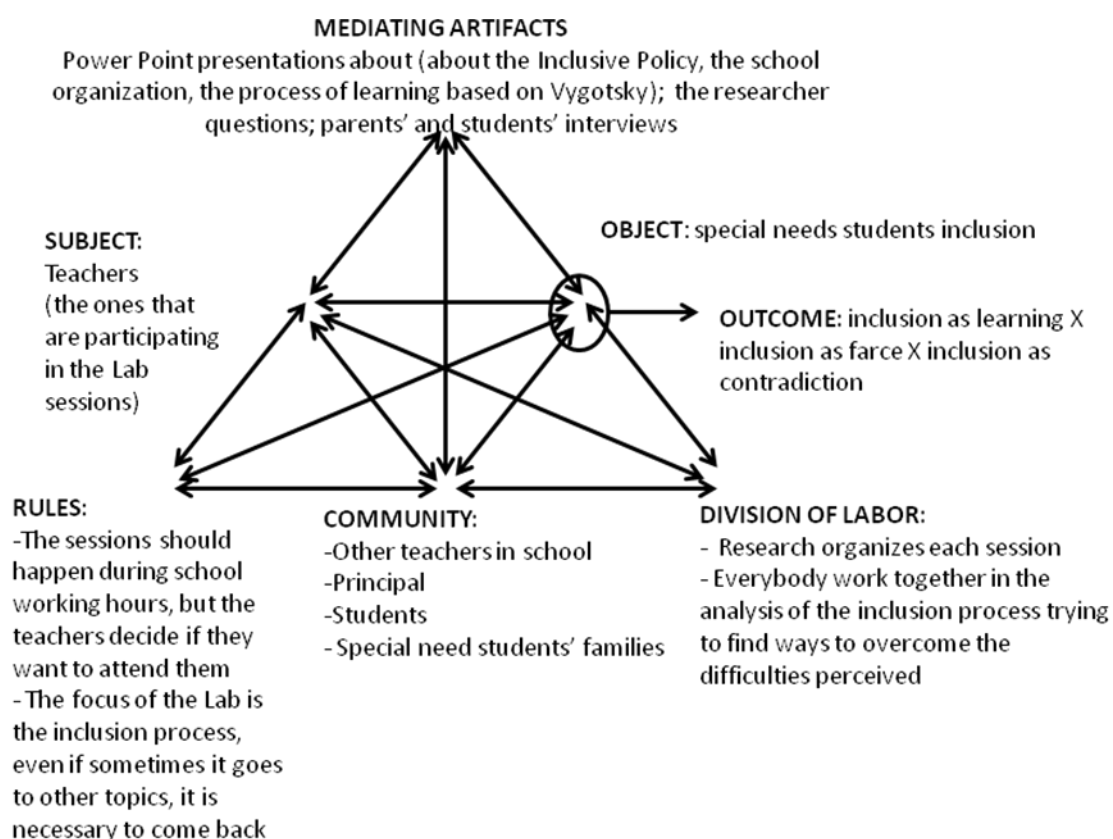
MEDIATING ARTIFACTS
Power Point presentations about (about the Inclusive Policy, the school organization, the process of learning based on Vygotsky); the researcher questions; parents' and students' interviews

SUBJECT:
Teachers
(the ones that are participating in the Lab sessions)

OBJECT: special needs students inclusion

OUTCOME: inclusion as learning X inclusion as farce X inclusion as contradiction

RULES:
-The sessions should happen during school working hours, but the teachers decide if they want to attend them
- The focus of the Lab is the inclusion process, even if sometimes it goes to other topics, it is necessary to come back

COMMUNITY:
-Other teachers in school
-Principal
-Students
- Special need students' families

DIVISION OF LABOR:
- Research organizes each session
- Everybody work together in the analysis of the inclusion process trying to find ways to overcome the difficulties perceived

Fig. 1. Model of the intervention activity system (adapted from Engeström, 1987, p.78)

From all the components of the activity system, special attention is given to the object. The object is what defines the activity. In Leontiev's (1978) words, it is the motive of the activity. We understand that the motive is a necessity that finds its object. The shared object, or the shared motive, is what connects the subjects' actions and give them direction. The object is the sense-maker of the activity (Kaptelinin, 2005). We only understand the

individuals' actions if we know what is the activity they are nested in. In this research, we investigated the object – the subjects' concerns about special needs students' inclusion – to understand the actions carried out in the school and what was behind them (the activity), what is its motive.

The intervention was built as an attempt to expand the object: the special need students' inclusion. However, there was not a predetermined endpoint. The researcher tried to suggest tools to construct a new object, but the appropriation of them was out of her control. The tools were steps, not answers. Nobody knew exactly what was needed to be learned – following the proposition of expansive learning (Engeström, 2010; Engeström, Sannino, 2010). The purpose was the collective construction of the new object.

After the intervention, the researcher realized how difficult the idea of expansive learning was. It is different from the traditional way of thinking about learning, a situation in which one teaches and the other learns, in which one knows what it is to be learned. Teachers shared this mainstream view on learning. It seems – now, because it was not clear before – they were expecting that the researcher would give them the answers to their questions. However, more than answers, the Lab Sessions brought to light contradictions, and they were not be seen as problems, but as historically evolving tensions in the activity system. In this sense, instead of considering contradictions as something to avoid, they should be taken as the driving force of transformation. It is important to say that contradictions are necessary but not sufficient to achieve transformation (Engeström, Sannino, 2010). Transformation, meaning expansive learning, can be seen as a new, expanded object reached by overcoming the contradictions in an activity system. However, this kind of learning is only possible if the participants can acknowledge contradictions and build new tools and patterns of activity – the expanded object – to overcome them – not an easy task.

4. The inclusion as the object in the research data

Usually, researches that are investigating learning processes turn their attention to the changes in the subjects, in their behavior and cognition. When we talk about expansive learning, we talk about collective learning and the changes should be analyzed in the object (Engeström, Sannino, 2010). So, the analysis focused on teachers' concerns regarding inclusion that could be detected in their discourse during the ten intervention sessions.

After analyzing the data, three main categories that show different manifestations of the object – special needs students' inclusion – had been defined. The categories are: 1)

inclusion as learning; 2) inclusion as fallacy; and 3) manifestations of contradictions in inclusion.

The first category includes the idea that there is a possibility of learning on the part of special needs students, in the context of regular classroom, considering some limits. The second includes the idea that simply being physically included in a regular school does not promote students' learning, although the policy imply it does. The third category focused the dilemmas, conflicts, critical conflicts, double binds in the inclusion process – theoretical concepts developed by Engeström and Sannino (2011).

Analyzing session by session it was not possible to establish a tendency of evolution in the object, neither turning points in its construction. The reason for it may be that the discussions during the sessions varied a lot due to the low level of knowledge about inclusion, on the part of the teachers, aspect that led the researcher to lecture the participants on the subject, in order to fill in their conceptual gaps. The sessions' themes can be tentatively summarized as follows,: 1st session – explaining the research project and grasping school's collective perception about inclusion; 2nd session – presenting the Inclusion Policy and correcting misunderstandings about it; 3rd session – discussing school's organization related to inclusion; 4th session – planning an inclusion protocol; 5th session – visiting and exploring the resource room; 6th session – discussing the relations between learning and development (according to Vygotsky's perspective); 7th session – discussing learning from the perspective of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky's concept); 8th session – presenting parents' perceptions on students' learning processes; 9th session – presenting students' perceptions about school; 10th session – giving teachers feedback relative to the previous sessions.

Although data does not show a transformation movement, the frequency of the categories could produce a general view of what happened to the intervention object. In Figure 2, we present the distribution of the number of shifts of speech for each category per session. Later, we will provide some examples of each manifestation of the object.

Inclusion as learning was the less frequent category of object manifestation. This object sense was usually accompanied by remarks on the students' limitations.

T10[3]: [...] She doesn't have the necessary speed for copying or doing exercises, but she does it. Orally, she is able to give the answers, realizes what we have questioned. The other day, she was still copying from the blackboard and her colleagues had already finished doing it. I'd asked them to answer questions about a text. She hadn´t finished copying, but she had read the questions and answered them correctly, orally. (1st session)

T1: She debates, asks.
T5: She participates in class.
T2: And she remembers things from the beginning of the year. Yesterday, I spoke about photosynthesis, something we had discussed at the beginning of the year, and she asked: "What's that?" "Do you remember that we've discussed the process?" and she then said: "Oh yes! And described it (6th session)

T10: I know he can minimally identify the structure of a text. So I know he can understand minimally, but he can't go further. (6th session)

T2: Student1 knows a lot, about Science, she knows a lot about ecology, ecosystems, food. (7th session)

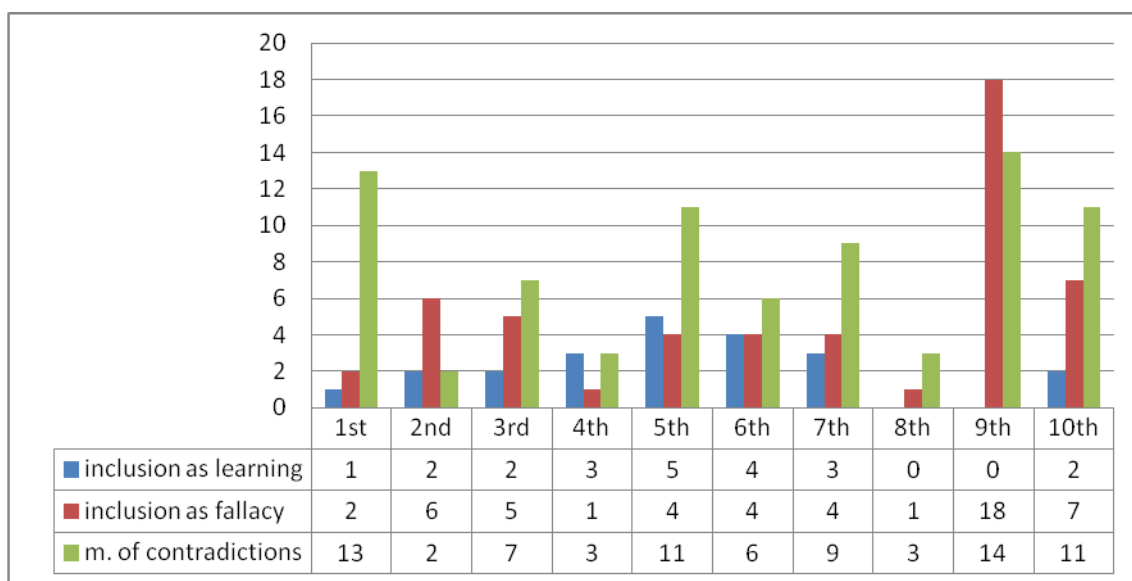|	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th
■ inclusion as learning	1	2	2	3	5	4	3	0	0	2
■ inclusion as fallacy	2	6	5	1	4	4	4	1	18	7
■ m. of contradictions	13	2	7	3	11	6	9	3	14	11

Fig. 2. Manifestations of the object (inclusion) during the intervention sessions

The understanding of inclusion as a fallacy was present in all the sessions, being higher in the 9th session. As we said earlier, in the description of this category, it appears in different forms in the subjects' discourses, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

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[3] T1, T2, T3… are the teachers.

RRT is the resource room teacher.

PC is the pedagogical coordinator.

T13: [...] It is an inclusion that doesn't work. The student does not progress, or progresses very little. And the Government disclaims the need to provide psychological care; it doesn't mind the teacher – this teacher, who has no expertise in special education, being perhaps interested in other fields. And now, these students were thrown in regular classrooms and the teachers have to deal with them. (1st session)

T4: I don't care about their [the students's] *evaluation. Because they don't learn the contents at all.*
Researcher: So, how do you evaluate them?
T4: We write: he has evolved; he is apt. (5th session)

T4: I see it like this: he gets along with his colleagues, he participates in all activities, and he doesn't learn! (7th session)

T10: We care about their learning and we realize that it is not being effective. They are simply attending school. As teachers, we care about every student's learning. But it seems they are just promoted to the next grade year after year.
T3: Inclusion is a fallacy. (9th session)

RRT: Student1 doesn't realize, but her colleagues mock her a lot.
T10: She is in class, just this. (9th session)

T3: We will keep doing this: promoting them to the next grades without teaching them. And everybody pretends they are learning, and pretend they are teaching. And everyone will be happy. Because managers, the government, they don't care about it. (9th session)

T3: A sheet of paper accepts everything. I can use a lot of methodological, theoretical, pedagogical writing's resources that people love, they get excited when we write in a detailed manner. It will be very cute. But in practice, in reality, it is not like that (10th session)

The manifestation of contradictions related to inclusion was the most frequent category. We talk about manifestation because contradictions cannot be identified directly, they are historical phenomena that become recognized when practitioners articulate them in word and actions (Engeström, Sannino, 2011).

The highest frequency in the category of manifestation of contradictions indicates the tensions trigged by the inclusion in the school. Although at first they may be seen just as problems, the tensions carried by the contradiction may mobilize the subjects towards the changes they consider necessary. In addition to the idea of inclusion being a fallacy, because failure to effectively include students is inevitable, the contradictions reveal concerns, oppositions and questionings indicating a dynamic in which there are movements that carry potential for changes, since tension implies movement, as there are different forces at play.

In the next examples of the manifestation of contradictions, that illustrate this category, the participants themselves made the highlights:

T1: When there are courses [for the teachers] *available, they take place at times when you can´t take them. Because the teacher's workload is 40 hours, 60 hours a week. Ok, there are courses, but there is no way we can take them (1st session)*

T3: The system forces us to do things. There is a series of things that sum up: from the noise in the yard while you are teaching, to the screams next your door. I think that the looser is always the student. [...] I wonder, how can I, for example, demand students to be quiet and pay attention? I can't demand it from them.
T10: And how many times I have said "guys, be quiet!", and then I realized the noise was not from my classroom, it was from the street. How many times!
 [Most of the teachers agree]
T3: It is a series of small things that add up and turn into a big hole.
T4: During my classes at 6C there are always kids playing in the playground. Always! It's hell, kids knocking on the door or screaming by the window.
T3: Sometimes it seems that teachers are conformed with the situation of education "Oh no, we can't". But it is very difficult! (5th session)

T8: Force the ones [the students] *that know how to teach to teach the ones that don't know.*
T3: Well, but they don't have the obligation of teaching.
T8: But they may help. A little interactivity.
T3: They don't have this obligation.
T4: They even do some things.
T8: Cooperation.
T4: But then, eventually, you say "let's sit in pairs, choose the one you want to sit with". Do you expect that a good student is going to pick a bad one? (5th session)

T4: But if he were in a classroom with 5, 6 colleagues, he would learn much more than in a classroom with 26 students [...]
T7: The classrooms are very crowded. (7th session)

*T3: Another issue: I teach 20 hours a week; I need several hours to plan my lessons in the traditional way. How many hours should I work at home, without being paid for it? So, in reality, teacher will not do [*meaning: they will not prepare different classes for special students]. *I'm honest with you.*
T5: He's being realistic. (9th session)

T3: If we're not solving the problem of the so-called normal students, how would we solve their problems? (10th session)

5. Trying to make sense of the data – some considerations

During the intervention, we have tried to discuss the experiences of the teachers with the special students, the Inclusion Policy and learning as a potential mean of development of the children with special needs; we also tried to develop and implement new tools to achieve a

new configuration of inclusion in their school. However, this attempt to bring learning to the center of the inclusion process was not very successful.

As data showed, inclusion – the activity object – was understood, by the teachers, as simply placing the special need students in regular schools. The subjects referred to it as a fallacy or highlighted the manifestations of the contradictions in its process, since they did not see the mere placement of students in their school as inclusion. There were only a few references to inclusion as learning, happening in the school. This perception, on the part of the teacher, seemed to limit the impact of the intervention on the changing of the object of the activity system, thus preventing the transformation of the object, as a result of expansive learning, on the part of teachers, who remained focused on the problems and difficulties brought about by the inclusion process (contradictions).

The research findings showed that although the intervention did not promote change in the object of activity, it promoted the awareness and discussions of the several contradictions implied in the inclusion process in the school. The existing of contradictions were not enough to promote modifications in a system's object. However, as explained by Cultural-Historical Activity Theory authors (Vygotsky, 1998; Leontiev, 1978; Engeström, 1987, 2010; Engeström, Sannino, 2010), they are driving forces of change if aggravated, in an activity system, causing its subjects to develop awareness of them and question the present configuration of that system. Such awareness can be developed and shared among participants, turning into a deliberate collective change effort (Engeström, 2010). It is important to note that contradictions are not always obvious and can, sometimes, be seen so great that the participants of a given activity system feel they are not strong enough to face them, thus leading to avoidance. It is hoped that this process develops in the school, as times goes by and they are faced with increasing numbers of included students. Unfortunately, it seems that the length of the intervention was not enough to go beyond the mere recognition of contradictions.

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