

Research Article

Training and Professional Development of Inclusive School Managers: Evidence from the Experience of UFRN at RENAFOR in Brazil

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the training experience of the Advanced Course in "School Management from the Perspective of Inclusive Special Education," promoted by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN) within the scope of the National Network for Continuing Teacher Education (RENAFOR) in the Brazilian context. The 170-hour course was designed to train public school administrators to contribute to the consolidation of educational inclusion in various contexts and levels of schooling. Adopting a qualitative and descriptive methodological approach, based on documentary research and content analysis of the course's Final Report, the study describes the course structure, pedagogical methodology, support mechanisms, and observed results. The data indicate a pass rate of 80.71% among participants, totaling 306 managers working in 11 Brazilian states and 51 municipalities. Qualitative assessments by participants and tutors highlight the significant expansion of knowledge, the strengthening of reflective practice, and the development of managerial skills related to inclusive policies, curricular adaptations, collaborative leadership, and intersectoral coordination. The analysis examines the role of tutoring, forum mediation, and continuous formative assessment, as well as the relevance of contextualized activities—such as case studies, school projects, and reflective journals—to sustain engagement in virtual environments. Despite challenges, notably dropout and technological barriers, the report points to effective strategies, including differentiated support, timely feedback, and accessibility resources. Ultimately, the study offers evidence-based insights into how continuing distance education can promote more inclusive school management training, directly contributing to the planning and improvement of future educational policies and pedagogical practices aimed at equity, participation, and learning for all. Implications for scalability and regional policy coordination.

Keywords

Inclusive Special Education, School Management, Continuing Professional Development

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Received: 27 October 2025; **Accepted:** 29 December 2025; **Published:** 31 January 2026



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1. Introduction

Inclusive education emerges as one of the fundamental pillars for building an equitable society, requiring a constant rethinking of educational practices and school management. In Brazil, the legal framework, such as the Law of Guidelines and Bases for National Education [1] and, more recently, the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities [2], establishes inclusion as an inalienable right, requiring educational systems to guarantee "specific curricula, methods, techniques, pedagogical resources, and organization to meet their needs." In this scenario, the continuous professional development of educators, especially those in management positions, plays a crucial role in promoting an inclusive culture and ensuring rights in decision-making.

Paulo Freire [3] states that it is in the continuing education of teachers that the fundamental moment for critical reflection on teaching practice occurs. And thinking critically about practice enables the improvement of new practices. This Freirian perspective emphasizes the need for educators to constantly improve and critically reflect on their practice, recognizing education as a continuous process of social intervention, where theoretical discourse, necessary for critical reflection, takes on a concreteness that is almost indistinguishable from practice. In this perspective, according to Pessoa [4], the university plays an important role in this process, especially in the preparation of teacher trainers in the development of initial and continuing training programs and materials and in the dissemination of knowledge through its publications.

The promotion of networking between universities and educational institutions, both in developed and developing countries, is encouraged to strengthen the link between research and training. This debate has been on the agenda in recent years around the world, with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations General Assembly/United Nations (UN) [5]. In this context, the inclusion of people with disabilities in research and training processes is essential to ensure that their needs are fully considered, guaranteeing the legitimacy and relevance of actions. Considering the gradual increase in the number of students enrolled in Inclusive Special Education in regular classrooms in Brazil, which reached 95% in 2023, according to the School Census [6], the training needs of educators, it is imperative to train school managers to combat "any and all ableist attitudes" and ensure access, retention, and academic success with equity.

Given this context, the following research question arises: to what extent did the course offered by UFRN, within the scope of RENAFOR, contribute to strengthening inclusive school management in Brazil?

This article aims to analyze the training experience of the Advanced Course in "School Management from the Perspective of Inclusive Special Education," offered by the

Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN) in the context of the National Teacher Training Network (RENAFOR) funded by the Ministry of Education (MEC) in Brazil. The aim was to understand the contributions of the course offered to strengthening inclusive management in Brazilian schools.

1.1. Inclusive Education

Inclusive education transcends mere integration, aiming to transform educational systems to welcome and cater to the diversity of all students. To this end, it is necessary to offer Specialized Educational Services (AEE), accessibility resources, assistive technology, pedagogical practices based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and professional qualification of educators through continuing education. The Salamanca Statement [7] and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [8], as international milestones, affirm that "all children have the right to education" and that "schools must welcome all children." They recognize that persons with disabilities have the same rights as other persons and that their freedoms and dignity must be respected and guaranteed. These milestones were fundamental to the reorientation of Brazilian educational policies, culminating in LDB 9.394/96, in its Article 59, in the enactment of the Brazilian Law on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, and more recently in the publication of Decree 12.773 of December 8, 2025, which establishes the National Policy for Inclusive Special Education and the National Network for Inclusive Special Education [9].

These regulations consolidate the educational rights of persons with disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and high abilities/giftedness, who are the target audience of Inclusive Special Education in Brazil, through the provision of AEE services, case studies, the Specialized Educational Assistance Plan (PAEE), the Individualized Educational Plan (PEI), and the National Network for Inclusive Special Education.

The National Network for Inclusive Special Education has the function of expanding and consolidating the continuing education of educators in Brazil through intersectoral coordination, the production of accessible material, and the provision of courses for professionals in public education networks in the national context. Within the scope of the training process, we highlight the training of managers as agents for strengthening an inclusive culture and combating ableism.

Inclusive school management should promote a culture of acceptance, recognizing differences as a constitutive element of the educational process and not as an obstacle to learning [10]. From this perspective, inclusive school management is an ethical and political imperative, requiring that the school curriculum adopt a stance aligned with the principles of Inclusive Special Education for all. It opposes ableist attitudes,

seeking to humanize public educational institutions to meet the demands of all who access public schools.

Pessoa [11] emphasizes the importance of democratic and participatory management for the effectiveness of inclusion, reinforcing that the inclusive manager goes beyond compliance with standards, acting as an agent of cultural transformation that promotes equity and respect for diversity in the school environment.

1.2. Continuous Professional Development

Continuing Professional Development for Educators and the Role of the University: Continuing professional development is seen not as a complement, but as an intrinsic element of teaching and management practice. Paulo Freire emphasizes that we are "unfinished beings, aware of our incompleteness, open to inquiry, curious," exercising our capacity to learn and teach. With regard to the continuous professional development of school managers, it should be understood as a permanent process of updating and deepening knowledge, essential for facing the challenges of democratic and inclusive management.

According to the National Policy for the Training of Basic Education Professionals [12], training is a right and a necessity, insofar as it supports the construction of a democratic, inclusive, and socially equitable school. The university, as a locus of knowledge production and extension, and with its undeniable social relevance, plays a fundamental role in offering training programs, such as the course in question, contributing to "building bridges with educational institutions, for the development of the theory-practice relationship in the school context." RENAFOR, in turn, acts as a crucial mechanism for the capillarity and reach of these training actions at the national level, ensuring that the knowledge generated in academia reaches the front line of basic education.

2. Methodology

This is a qualitative, descriptive, documentary research study. The main source of data was the Final Report of the Course "School Management from the Perspective of Inclusive Special Education," 2024 edition, conducted in distance learning mode [13]. The document includes structural data, curriculum matrix, pedagogical organization, student participation, and qualitative assessments.

The 170-hour course was structured around three axes, nine modules, an inaugural class, a bonus class, and a closing class, developed between August and December 2024, through the virtual learning environment of the Pro-Rectorate for Extension of UFRN (AVA PROEX/UFRN) and institutional YouTube. A total of 306 managers from 11 states and 51 municipalities participated, distributed across 12 classes, resulting in 247 passing, 17 failing, and 60 dropping out.

The quantitative data were treated by simple descriptive analysis. The qualitative data were submitted to thematic content analysis, according to Bardin [14], including pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and interpretation. Criteria of documentary reliability, traceability, and interpretive consistency were respected. This is a study based on a validated institutional document, without direct collection from participants.

All course activities (web classes, discussion forums, assessment, teaching materials), as well as certification for students who obtained a grade of 7.00 or higher, were made available online.

During the course, each class of students was accompanied by a tutor, selected through the public notice, who was able to answer questions and establish a direct line of communication with the teachers teaching the modules.

The methodology employed was that of the flipped classroom, i.e., one in which the content is studied in advance. Each module was developed over a period of one week, with the following sequence of activities:

1. Advance reading of the base text (at the discretion of the student)
2. Open web class (YouTube)
3. Reading of in-depth texts
4. Discussion forum
5. Assessment activity

Course participants had access to the following on the AVA PROEX Platform, per module:

1. 01 open web class – also available on the YouTube channel of the Education Center/UFRN
2. Course plan for each module
3. Discussion forum: with one statement or thought-provoking question and/or video (accompanied by guidance)
4. One base text for prior reading
5. Two supplementary texts for further reading
6. Web class slides
7. Videos, podcasts, and films used during the web class
8. 01 content systematization activity, consisting of 5 multiple-choice questions.

Data analysis was performed using: Descriptive analysis: For quantitative data (approval, dropout, geographic reach), tables and percentages were used to present the results in a clear and objective manner. Qualitative content analysis: The sections of the report containing open feedback from participants and tutors (qualitative evaluation of participants in the closing class chat, qualitative evaluation of participants in the application form, Qualitative evaluation of the course by tutors) were subjected to content analysis, following the steps proposed by Bardin: pre-analysis (with floating reading and corpus constitution), exploration of the material (with definition of recording units and contextual and thematic categorization), and treatment, inference, and interpretation of the results.

Special attention was given to "Impressions of the course in one word" and the reasons for dropping out, as well as the tutors' suggestions for improvement. It is important to note that the research is limited to the analysis of data already compiled and interpreted in the Final Course Report, not involving the direct collection of data from participants, but emphasizing aspects of the documents and the evaluation carried out by them.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the "FINAL REPORT," the following points stand out: Scope and Relevance of Distance Learning - The course demonstrated remarkable geographical reach, training educators in 11 states and 51 Brazilian municipalities. This reinforces the potential of distance learning to provide qualified training to different regions, overcoming geographical and temporal barriers. The widespread participation demonstrates the demand for this type of training, especially for managers who often face difficulties in accessing face-to-face training.

In this sense, RENAFOR's capillarity proves to be an effective tool for democratizing access to knowledge and professional development in an area as strategic as inclusive education. This geographical reach not only validates distance learning as a tool for disseminating knowledge, but also underlines the urgency of training in inclusive management in different regional contexts of the country, in line with the guidelines of the Salamanca Declaration on expanding access to education for all and with SDG 4. This SDG aims at Quality Education, with a commitment to "ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

Effectiveness of methodology and content - The course curriculum, with its three pillars and nine modules, addresses essential topics such as legal frameworks, collaborative management, AEE, and the Pedagogical Political Project (PPP). The "flipped classroom" methodology, combined with web-based classes, forums, and assessment activities, appears to have been effective, with 85.2% of participants rating communication as "totally" satisfactory and 88.7% rating the virtual environment as "totally" adequate. The choice of the flipped classroom, by promoting the participant's protagonism in their learning process, is in line with contemporary pedagogical approaches that value autonomy and the active construction of knowledge. The participants' positive perception of the methodology and the virtual environment suggests that the course structure was adequate to mediate the training process, contributing to the development of the skills necessary for inclusive management, as advocated by the LDB and the LBI.

Positive impact on professional practice - The majority of participants (96.5%) "totally" agree that the course "contributed to enriching existing knowledge and to the formation of new skills and abilities." Testimonials such as

"the course was of great importance in my professional training, expanding my knowledge about the process of educational inclusion" indicate a direct impact on the qualification of managers for more inclusive action. These data converge with what Freire argues about educational praxis, in which continuous improvement is intrinsic to transformative action.

The ability to articulate new knowledge with managers' previous experiences, as demonstrated by the course, is a crucial indicator of the relevance of training for professional development, allowing them to adopt more proactive stances and combat discriminatory attitudes in their school contexts.

Theoretical and practical contribution - One of the relevant educational products pointed out by course participants and tutors was the development of an e-book on "Management in Inclusive Special Education: a guide for school managers" [15], consolidating the knowledge acquired and offering a practical tool for schools. The guide helps school managers promote collaborative practices that transform schools into accessible and inclusive spaces, with reference to the National Education Plan [16] and the State Education Plan of Rio Grande do Norte [17].

The result suggests that the training was not merely theoretical, but resonated with the participants' perception of practical applicability, which is essential for effective inclusion. The crucial role of tutoring - Although dropout was a challenge (19.60%), mainly justified by "lack of time due to work as a manager/teacher/coordinator" (71.4%), the report highlights the fundamental role of tutors in supporting and monitoring participants.

One participant's statement, "I have never been able to complete a distance learning course. The tutor played a key role in this achievement! Thank you very much!", highlights the importance of human mediation in distance learning courses, especially in contexts of high professional demand. This finding reinforces the literature on the importance of pedagogical and affective presence in virtual learning environments, where tutoring is a pillar for student retention and success, mitigating the challenges inherent in distance learning and the overload of education professionals.

The role of tutors, therefore, is an important success factor for continuing professional development programs, as coordination in the process is essential for participants to complete the course effectively. Suggestions for improvement - Feedback from tutors offers valuable insights for future editions, such as the possibility of transforming the course into a postgraduate program, increasing the number of students per class, or improving the dynamics and technical support of the VLE and the qualitative evaluation of the course by tutors. These suggestions can inform the planning of new RENAFOR initiatives, allowing the offering to adapt and further qualify to meet the needs of participants, addressing challenges such as dropout rates and maximizing the impact of training. The systematization and continuous analysis of this feedback are essential for the continuous improvement cycle of training

programs, ensuring that future editions can optimize resources and further strengthen the quality of the training offered.

4. Final Considerations

The training experience of the course "School Management from the Perspective of Inclusive Special Education" in the context of RENAFOR represents a significant model of how continuous professional development can positively impact the qualification of managers to work towards more inclusive schools. By thoroughly analyzing this initiative, this study offers important insights and validates the relevance of investments in training that combines theory and practice in the field of inclusive management.

The results show a strengthening of skills, expansion of knowledge, and engagement of participants. They demonstrate the relevance of the course in promoting a school culture guided by the principles of equity and respect for diversity. In addition to celebrating the successes achieved, this study also points to ways to overcome the challenges inherent in distance learning, such as dropout rates, and to continuously improve methodologies and pedagogical support.

The contribution of UFRN and the RENAFOR network to inclusive education managers is undeniable, strengthening the bridge between academic theory and educational practice, and reinforces the need to create a culture of inclusion that permeates all levels of school management, from planning to the execution of pedagogical actions.

As researchers in the field of Inclusive Special Education, we highlight the vitality of initiatives such as this one for the construction of a truly equitable educational system. Longitudinal studies are recommended to assess practical impacts in schools and comparisons with other RENAFOR training programs. The continuity and expansion of proposals such as this one are essential for the consolidation of an inclusive educational system in Brazil.

Abbreviations

UFRN	Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte
RENAFOR	National Network for Continuing Teacher Education
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
MEC	Ministry of Education
AEE	Specialized Educational Services
DUA	Universal Design for Learning
PAEE	Specialized Educational Services Plan
PEI	Individualized Education Plan
AVA	Virtual Learning Environment
PROEX	Pro-Rectorate for Extension
PPP	Pedagogical Policy Project

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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