

ARTICLE

**IN/EXCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN VOCATIONAL AND HIGHER  
EDUCATION: THE MERITOCRATIC ETHOS<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** This study investigates the in/exclusion of students with disabilities in Vocational Education (VE) and Higher Education (HE) and examines the effects of human capital theory and meritocracy on the practices of in/exclusion experienced by students with disabilities (SWD) in VE and HE. The research is based on a post-critical perspective and is affiliated with the field of Foucauldian Studies, assuming practice as a tool concept for the production and analysis of research materiality. The starting text begins with the row of practices mapped in the students' statements. Based on these, dialogues between practices and the dimensions of knowledge and subjects in the inclusive experience matrix are promoted. The analytical exercise brought to light the SWD's conception of inclusion and disability, as well as a set of coexistence practices guided by human capital theory and meritocratic ethos. The results showed that the subjectivities produced by neoliberal rationality form, in VE and HE, a zone of (dis)comfort, with situations that alternate between a relative state of comfort, mainly due to practices of invisibility, normalization, and naturalization of barriers, and a state of discomfort caused by the presence of SWD and the need to coexist and promote inclusive practices. Competition shapes the practices of coexistence among students, and human capital theory supports the discrediting, of the SWD's potential by teachers. These two converging forces result in practices of negative discrimination.

**Keywords:** In/exclusion, Meritocracy, Human capital theory, Students with disabilities, Vocational and higher education

**IN/EXCLUSÃO DE ESTUDANTES COM DEFICIÊNCIA NA EDUCAÇÃO PROFISSIONAL E SUPERIOR: O  
ETHOS MERITOCRÁTICO**

**RESUMO:** O estudo tem a in/exclusão de estudantes com deficiência na Educação Profissional (EP) e na Educação Superior (ES) como temática investigativa e problematiza os efeitos da teoria do capital humano e da meritocracia nas práticas de in/exclusão experienciadas por estudantes com deficiência

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<sup>1</sup> Article published with funding from the *Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico* - CNPq/Brazil for editing, layout and XML conversion services.

(EcD) na EP e na ES. A pesquisa fundamenta-se na perspectiva pós-crítica e filia-se ao campo dos Estudos Foucaultianos, assumindo a prática como conceito ferramenta para a produção e a análise da materialidade de pesquisa. O ponto de partida do texto são as práticas mapeadas nas falas dos estudantes. A partir delas, promove interlocuções entre as práticas e a dimensão dos saberes e dos sujeitos da matriz de experiência inclusiva. O exercício analítico trouxe à superfície a concepção de inclusão e de deficiência dos EcD e um conjunto de práticas de (con)vivência pautadas pela teoria do capital humano e pelo ethos meritocrático. Mostrou que as subjetividades produzidas pela racionalidade neoliberal conformam, na EP e na ES, uma zona de (des)conforto, com situações que se alternam entre um relativo estado de conforto, efeito principalmente, de práticas de invisibilização, normalização e naturalização das barreiras, e o estado de desconforto causado pela presença dos EcD e pela necessidade de (com)viver e de promover práticas inclusivas. A competição é balizadora das práticas de (con)vivência entre os estudantes e a teoria do capital humano sustenta o descrédito, também por parte dos professores, nas potencialidades dos EcD. Essas duas ordens confluídas resultam em práticas de discriminação negativa.

**Palavras-chave:** In/exclusão, Meritocracia, Teoria do Capital humano, Estudantes com deficiência, Educação Profissional e Superior.

## IN/EXCLUSIÓN DE ESTUDIANTES CON DISCAPACIDAD EN LA EDUCACIÓN PROFESIONAL Y SUPERIOR: EL ETHOS MERITOCRÁTICO

**RESUMEN:** El estudio tiene como tema de investigación la in/exclusión de estudiantes con discapacidad en la Educación Profesional (EP) y la Educación Superior (ES) y problematiza los efectos de la teoría del capital humano y la meritocracia en las prácticas de in/exclusión vividas por los estudiantes con discapacidad (EcD) en EP y ES. La investigación se fundamenta en una perspectiva poscrítica y se inscribe en el campo de los Estudios Foucaultianos, asumiendo la práctica como concepto herramienta para la producción y análisis de la materialidad de la investigación. El punto de partida del texto son las prácticas mapeadas en los discursos de los estudiantes. Desde ellos, promueve diálogos entre las prácticas y la dimensión de saberes y sujetos de la matriz de experiencia inclusiva. El ejercicio analítico trajo a la superficie el concepto de inclusión y discapacidad de la EcD y un conjunto de prácticas de (con)vivencias guiadas por la teoría del capital humano y el ethos meritocrático. Mostró que las subjetividades producidas por la racionalidad neoliberal forman, en EP y ES, una zona de (des)comodidad, con situaciones que alternan entre un estado relativo de comodidad, principalmente como efecto de prácticas de invisibilización, normalización y naturalización de barreras, y el estado de malestar provocado por la presencia de EcD y la necesidad de (con)vivir y de promover prácticas inclusivas. La competencia es una guía para las prácticas de (con)vivencia entre los estudiantes y la teoría del capital humano apoya la incredulidad, también por parte de los docentes, en el potencial de los estudiantes con discapacidad. Estos dos órdenes combinados dan como resultado prácticas de discriminación negativa.

**Palabras clave:** In/exclusión, Meritocracia, Teoría del Capital Humano, Estudiantes con Discapacidad, Educación Profesional y Superior.

## INTRODUCTION

I think the graduation ceremony is the absolute highlight, isn't it? Because it was a moment of immense, truly immense, happiness for him, and evidently for all of us. [...] When he was little, we didn't know if he would ever reach this point; *yet he made it on his own merits, and he did not receive special treatment compared to the other students. He succeeded because of his own merit*, demonstrating that while everyone has their limitations, they also possess unique potential (NSC, 2022, n.p., emphasis added).

We begin this discussion with a statement from the father of a student with a disability, made to reporters during coverage of World Autism Awareness Day in Chapecó, SC, in 2022. This statement highlights the meritocratic ethos that influences society and, notably, the processes for including students with disabilities, especially at higher levels of education. “The meritocratic idea [is] that economic and social advantages should be tied [...] to the ability, effort, and results, and that these parameters should be measured by success in competition, first in school, and later in the workplace” (Markovits, 2021, p. 39). In this framework, social status is viewed as the direct result of the accumulation of human capital (Schultz, 1973) and hard work. This mindset (re)produces, within the collective consciousness, the idea that failure in any valued area, by those valued by the market, indicates incapacity or inherent uselessness.

Inclusion, immersed in neoliberal rationality, addresses the social agenda regarding the human rights of social minorities, including people with disabilities, while simultaneously acting upon this population to produce human capital for the market. Education, as a social right, is guided by the common good, by the collective, and by the rights of all, in the pursuit of equity. Conversely, neoliberal rationality fosters competition as a principle that shapes the way of life in contemporary society, in which each individual “must be, for himself/herself and for his/her family, in a certain sense, an enterprise” (Foucault, 2008, p. 283). At the confluence of these elements, inclusion has emerged as an imperative of our time (Lopes, 2009), established as an unquestionable truth, a State policy.

Within the context of neoliberal rationality and the imbalance between rights and the production of human capital, this text examines how meritocracy and human capital theory intersect with students' ideas of inclusion and disability. These students share their experiences regarding inclusion and exclusion, as well as the interpersonal relationships they encounter in Vocational and Higher Education. We argue that this intersection of discourses creates a *zone of (dis)comfort* in which students and staff strive to coexist. On one hand, institutions primarily operate within the framework of legality. For students admitted through quota policies, Federal Educational Institutions initially offer a series of inclusive practices designed to protect rights and comply with regulatory mandates. As Thoma, Hillesheim, and Siqueira (2021, p. 92) state, “beyond the protection afforded by law, actions are required that establish inclusion as a lived reality.” Legal mandates alone do not eliminate attitudinal barriers and, therefore, do not ensure a truly inclusive educational system. It is important to recognize that some students with disabilities gain admission without utilizing affirmative action policies. Additionally, there are students who choose not to disclose their disabilities or do not permit their condition to be revealed to peers and professors. As stipulated by the Brazilian Law on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, “a person with a disability is under no obligation to avail themselves of benefits derived from affirmative action” (Brasil, 2025, n.p.). On the other hand, as we will discuss in our analysis, the students who participated in this study, influenced by the ideology of meritocracy, believe that success is an individual responsibility and view disability as a *problem*. Within this framework, their initial instinct is to compete for academic merit. However, as they progress through their academic journey and encounter exclusion while facing the risk of failure, some students proactively demand inclusive academic processes from their institutions.

Based on these brief initial discussions, it is important to state that this text forms part of a larger research project, the general objective of which was to analyze the practices of in/exclusion that constitute inclusion policies within Professional Education (PE) and Higher Education (HE). The

investigative focus was concentrated on three Federal Education Institutions (IFE-*Instituições Federais de Educação*) operating in the Western region of Santa Catarina, offering courses in PE, post-secondary technical education, and/or HE. The study's scope was defined geographically. The investigative locus comprised all IFEs operating in the Western region of Santa Catarina; these institutions represent distinct typologies, consisting of two Federal Institutes of Education (with multiple campuses in the region) and one Federal University (with a single campus in the region). The common characteristic shared by the institutions under investigation is that they are all engaged in professional training. Within this geographical delimitation, we further highlight that few studies have focused their research specifically on the Federal Education Institutions operating in the Western region of Santa Catarina; likewise, there is a limited number of studies that take as their object the inclusion of students with disabilities in Professional and Higher Education; and studies that generate empirical data directly involving students with disabilities are scarce. Against this backdrop, the study that gave rise to this text holds the potential to bring to the surface, as well as to problematize and theorize, the experiences of students with disabilities who, navigating through multiple forms of inequality, chose to invest in professional training, thereby contributing both to the institutions under investigation and to the broader academic debate surrounding this theme.

Within this formative field and given the participants' experiences, it seems productive to examine the concept of **in**/exclusion as developed in the field of Foucaultian Studies. Drawing on these studies, we understand inclusion and exclusion as two facets of the same reality, operating in tandem within a “contemporary logic in which inclusion merges with exclusion” (Veiga-Neto; Lopes, 2011, p. 125). In this framework, the very same practices may simultaneously exclude and include within a given context and moment. It is not a matter of an individual's fixed status, but rather a condition subject to change at any time (Lopes; Fabris, 2020).

Situated within this epistemological framework, this research is grounded in a post-critical perspective and aligns with the field of Foucaultian Studies, adopting “practice” as a conceptual tool for the production and analysis of research materiality. We highlight the dispersed nature of the concept of practice in Foucault's work, noting that the philosopher did not set out to provide it with a precise definition, but rather continuously reshaped it throughout his investigative trajectory. With this in mind, and acknowledging the efforts of those who have already undertaken the task of conceptual systematization, we draw support from the research of Marín-Díaz (2020, p. 52), for whom practice constitutes not merely the act (the doing), but also the conditions that give rise to that doing. “Practical sets” allow one to perceive both the specific modes of the functioning and exercise of power, as well as the conditions that render it possible and actualize it in its occurrence. Practice encompasses two spheres: *telos* and *technique*. According to Marín-Díaz and Parra-León (2019, p. 44), ‘*telos*, or *tele*, refers to the ends, objectives, or state toward which a given reality moves, whereas *technique*, or *technē*, is understood as a product of individual experiences which, having been tested over a prolonged period, evolve into generalizable and teachable knowledge.” Practices are the product of power games; consequently, the effects of a given practice are not strictly predetermined and may, in fact, run counter to the practice's initial objective.

Practices, situated within a specific time and space, constitute a matrix or focal point of experience, “in which are articulated, one upon the other: first, the forms of a possible knowledge;

second, the normative matrices of behavior for individuals; and finally, the virtual modes of existence for possible subjects” (Foucault, 2010, p. 4). These are dimensions that Marín-Díaz and Noguera-Ramírez (2017), drawing upon Foucault, designate as: forms of knowledge, norms, and subjects. The dimension of forms of knowledge is a dimension characterized by tensions between knowledge (in the formal sense) and popular knowledge. The former corresponds to “knowledge that is systematized and/or formalized into theories, concepts, or disciplines” (Marín-Díaz; Noguera-Ramírez, 2017, p. 41), while the latter refers to “the knowledge of the people and common knowledge” (Marín-Díaz; Noguera-Ramírez, 2017, p. 41). The dimension of normative matrices, or forms of normatization, consists of a set of regulations that guide and authorize specific ways of being, as well as specific ways of conducting oneself and interacting with others. “It constitutes a network of norms or rules that serve to define what is acceptable, both within the professional practice of the teacher and in the behavior of the individuals linked to that practice as students” (Marín-Díaz; Noguera-Ramírez, 2017, p. 41). These forms of normatization may be explicit, such as legislation and institutional documents, or implicit, such as non-institutionalized social and professional codes. The dimension of modes of existence, or forms of subjectivation, refers to “the manner in which individuals are led to ascribe meaning and value to their conduct and to their duties” (Marín-Díaz; Noguera-Ramírez, 2017, p. 43).

The analytical data for this study was generated through eleven interviews conducted following the project's approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of *Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul*, under approval opinion number 5,485,768. The interviews involved students with disabilities who held active or suspended enrollments in subsequent technical courses (post-secondary level) or in higher education programs. The interviewees included two students with autism spectrum disorder, three with hearing impairments (one of whom was deaf), four with physical disabilities (presenting various physical impairment conditions), one with an intellectual disability, and one with a visual impairment. Eight of the 11 students had been admitted through affirmative action policies with reserved quotas, and two had suspended their enrollment at the time of the interview. Only two of the study participants were women. We acknowledge that multiple inequalities influence access to and retention within Professional Education and Higher Education, among them gender inequalities. In a misogynistic, chauvinistic, sexist, and patriarchal society, these inequalities manifest as vulnerabilities that impact the presence of women with disabilities in higher levels of education. However, a gender-based analysis is outside the scope of the present study, though it may be the subject of future analyses. To preserve participants' anonymity, they are identified throughout this text by an alphanumeric code that conveys their sex, age, disability, educational level, and academic semester, specifically, whether they were enrolled in post-secondary professional education courses or higher education programs.

The data from the interviews revealed convergence between students' experiences in Vocational Education and those in Higher Education, thereby enabling their narratives to be analyzed jointly. In this article, we focus on one of the thematic clusters emerging from these analyses—a set of practices designated as *Meritocratic Thinking*. Within this empirical material, we mapped practices of inclusion and exclusion permeated by knowledge derived from human capital theory and meritocracy. Thus, the objective of this article is *to problematize the effects of human capital theory and meritocracy on the practices of inclusion and exclusion experienced by students with disabilities in Vocational and Higher Education*. The starting point for our analyses is the practices mapped in the narratives of these students with disabilities. Drawing upon

these narratives, we establish a dialogue between these practices and the dimensions of "knowledge" and "subjects" as defined within the matrix of inclusive experience (Marín-Díaz & Parra-León, 2019; Marín-Díaz & Noguera-Ramírez, 2017).

## **“IT IS NOT A DIRECT EXCLUSION, BUT RATHER INDIRECT”: A ZONE OF (DIS)COMFORT**

I believe that [inclusion] is moving forward; more and more [people] are being included. There are people who still believe that these things [the inclusion of students with disabilities in Higher Education] should not be done, but I think it is moving forward (M30PDHE6).

The student's statement, which serves as the epigraph for this section, embodies a dual movement inherent in the framework of inclusive experience. The first significant outcome is the growing presence of students with disabilities (SwD) within the IFEs, accompanied by an increase in regulations that promote practices to enhance student retention. As the student highlights, one potential consequence is the existence of individuals who remain unaffected by inclusive principles, showing indifference or even opposition to the inclusion of SwD at these educational levels. The academic environment presents a convergence of diverse subjects and forms of knowledge, along with varying conceptions of disability and inclusion, creating a space of (dis)comfort where all participants, including students with disabilities, share, to some degree, a collective responsibility for the practices of inclusion and exclusion. SwD at these educational levels. The academic environment presents a convergence of diverse subjects and forms of knowledge, along with varying conceptions of disability and inclusion, creating a space of (dis)comfort where all participants, including students with disabilities, share, to some degree, a collective responsibility for the practices of inclusion and exclusion.

When interviewed students with disabilities were asked to define inclusion, they conceptualized it based on the fundamental premise of the right of access to mainstream educational institutions, specifically, the right to share school spaces with people without disabilities, as expressed in the following statements: “Inclusion means not keeping us, people with disabilities, of all kinds, separated from others; it means including [People with Disabilities—PwD] alongside those who do not have disabilities” (W20HIHE4, emphasis added); “I tend to understand inclusion primarily in the context of *quotas*” (M40PDHE4, emphasis added). Two students perceived inclusion as extending beyond mere access: “Inclusion means PwD being *together* with others[...] having unrestricted *access to education* and to their *rights*” (M35PDVE2, emphasis added); “For me, inclusion means that, as a deaf person, *I am included alongside hearing people* [...] and this applies to the realm of education as well” (M40HIHE2, emphasis added). These students introduce the dimension of rights, including the right to education. Student M25PDHE7 focused specifically on the participation dimension. Employing a metaphor, he described his understanding of inclusion by stating: “[Inclusion] is just like when we go to play soccer: would we play just among ourselves? No! We’d call her over. [...] We’d invite her to come... to join in and *participate*” (emphasis added). Going beyond the concept of participation, student M55HIHE8 views inclusion as an opportunity for professional development, asserting: “Inclusion is a means of *providing opportunities for people with disabilities*, opportunities to acquire professional skills and to lead a more dignified life” (emphasis added). In contemporary society, work is understood as a prerequisite for a dignified life, a

precept that influences everyone's lives but impacts people with disabilities in a distinct manner, as it intersects with the stigma of incapacity and the societal ideal of autonomy. Thus, for PwD, gaining entry into, and successfully maintaining a position within, the labor market serves as a signifier of personal success.

When conceptualizing inclusion, four students, referred to the relationships of coexistence formed within the academic dynamic, specifically regarding the way others (people without disabilities) treat persons with disabilities (PwD), as can be observed in the following statements: “[Inclusion] means *placing me on the same level as the other students*, without being, how can I explain it?, [discriminated against?] Yes” (W20VDHE1, emphasis added); “Inclusion would mean *not being excluded [...] or ignored*” (M20ASDHE5, emphasis added); “Inclusion is [...] more than simply accepting a person as they are or how they act; it is about *living alongside them*” (M30PDHE6, emphasis added); “Inclusion, I think that is what [the IFE] did for me, because ever since I arrived here, *I have always been treated very well*” (M25ASDHE2, emphasis added). For these four students, inclusion means not being discriminated against, excluded, or ignored; rather, it means being accepted, being treated well, and being part of the relationships established within the academic environment. Each student with a disability understands inclusion through their experiences; collectively, the participants in this study highlight various dimensions of inclusion: access, participation, rights, instruction, professional training, and interpersonal relationships.

The understanding that students with disabilities have about inclusion and exclusion is influenced by the societal concept of disability, ultimately internalized by each individual. Despite the insights offered by the social model of disability, which differentiates between impairment and disability and views disability as “not a natural inequality, but as an oppression exerted upon the disabled body” (Diniz, 2012, p. 19), many still face a societal framework that privileges an idealized human standard. This framework fosters experiences of inequality and exclusion for those identified as people with disabilities. Four students articulated a conception of disability rooted in the medical model during their interviews, reflecting a view that is socioculturally constructed and has been internalized by them.

I was born with this *problem* (M30PDHE6, emphasis added).

I discovered this *problem* with my arm [...] I would put it this way: it's not that you aren't normal. You are a person just like everyone else, *except that you have a distinct classification* (M40PDVE4, emphasis added).

Everyone sees me as a normal person, *despite my limitations* (M55HIHE8, emphasis added).

[The online classes] *were very difficult for me, having this problem* (M20IDVE2, emphasis added).

According to the medical model, disability is regarded as a “natural consequence of an injury to the body, and the disabled individual must be the subject of biomedical care” (Diniz, 2012, p. 15). These students perceive disability as an abnormality or a problem. Foucault (2001, p. 71) describes the abnormal as “at bottom, an everyday monster, a banalized monster”; among these abnormal figures is the individual in need of correction. Foucault further notes (2001, p. 72) that “the individual to be corrected is a very frequent figure, as he is immediately proximate to the rule.” When disability is understood as an abnormality, it is seen as a condition that can be corrected.

Actually, the one who is to be corrected presents himself as requiring correction insofar as all the techniques, all the procedures, and all the familial and commonplace educational investment, through which one may have attempted to correct him, have failed. What defines the individual to be corrected, therefore, is that he is incorrigible (Foucault, 2001, p. 73).

Educational institutions are spaces of correction. Students, once they perceive disability as a problem, accept and submit to the normalizing practices promoted by these institutions. A web of knowledge traverses the conception of disability held by students with disabilities, converging toward an understanding of disability as a problem; among these forms of knowledge are medical discourses, knowledge produced within the framework of neoliberal political rationality, and the knowledge and techniques generated by human capital theory and meritocracy. Some individuals with disabilities, whose subjectivities have been shaped throughout their lives by these forms of knowledge, perceive and experience disability as an individual problem, an abnormality, and undertake efforts to overcome the social barriers that engender experiences of inequality.

Human capital theory is based on the idea that each individual constitutes their capital: “no person can separate from the human capital which he possesses” (Schultz, 1973, p. 53). Thus, throughout their lives, first families and subsequently individuals make investments to increase and enhance their human capital, as well as to minimize signs of abnormality. According to Gadelha (2013, p. 238), “human capital [...] refers to a set of capabilities, skills, and proficiencies created, developed, refined, and accumulated by individuals over the course of their lives.”

Contemporary society weaves together: a) subjectivities empowered by neoliberal rationality: individualization, individual freedom, productivity, and competition; b) the idea that every individual constitutes a form of capital, and, within this framework, investments in education aim to expand this capital, with a view toward financial returns and personal fulfillment; and c) the meritocratic discourse, which is grounded in the “rhetoric of rising, the promise that people who work hard and play by the rules deserve to rise as far as their talents and dreams will take them” (Sandel, 2021, p. 94)—and promotes the notion that (un)success is an individual responsibility. This constellation of knowledge and subjectivities, often hostile toward difference, generates a counter-movement: on the one hand, it erects barriers to inclusion; on the other, it encourages people with disabilities to internalize and embody these very precepts.

Some individuals with disabilities, influenced by these principles, perceive their disability as a personal challenge. This mindset leads them to attempt to overcome and downplay the difficulties resulting from insufficient investment in accessibility. They often believe that the hardships they encounter are solely products of their disability rather than being shaped by their environment. Consequently, drawn in by the promise of meritocracy and the accolades associated with upward mobility, they abandon the pursuit of their rights. Instead, they engage in the merit race to prove their capabilities.

Meritocracy speaks in terms and positions so consistent that they amount to a specialized language, repeated across diverse contexts, time and again, a way of life known to every citizen of the era. This endows meritocracy with a powerfully potent charm (Markovits, 2021, p. 21).

Meritocratic discourse colonizes individual thought and produces subjectivities that reinforce this logic, a logic that manifests from the very moment of choosing a field of study, as can be observed in the

areas of concentration selected by the students with disabilities participating in this study: three in the Industrial sector, three in the Health sector, three in Engineering, and two in Education. One can discern a greater demand for programs that enjoy social prestige or offer high employability, particularly for courses geared toward the industrial sector. These programs hold the promise of economic mobility, especially for those in the fields of Engineering and Health. According to Sandel (2021, p. 223), “higher education has become a sorting machine that promises mobility based on merit but protects privilege and promotes behaviors oriented toward success that undermine commonality.”

Meritocracy is grounded in the idea that success results from an individual's own actions; thus, anyone can rise through effort, talent, and hard work (Sandel, 2021; Markovits, 2021). Within this framework, individuals who manage to overcome inequalities, barriers, and difficult circumstances are deemed worthy of merit and serve as exemplars of meritocratic success. According to Markovits (2021, p. 50), “meritocracy lives through experience rather than logic, thereby capturing the imagination.” Occasionally, a success story is publicized; such media exposure serves as a means for federal higher education institutions (IFEs) to project an inclusive image within the public sphere. It also functions as a practice of subjectivation, as various individuals, hailing from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and possessing distinct experiences with disability, are exposed to a success story (while other instances of failure remain unpublicized) and come to believe that they, too, could become the next example of triumph over adversity. The prospect of becoming the next success story constitutes a crucial starting point for the meritocratic race. In contrast to this logic, Markovits (2021, p. 114) observes that “merit is not a natural or universal virtue, but rather a consequence of pre-existing inequalities. Merit is an artificial construct, erected to valorize the exploitation of human capital.”

The process of subjectivation toward meritocracy, the idea that (in)success is an individual responsibility, has repercussions for both Federal Higher Education Institutions (IFEs) and students with disabilities. On the one hand, the institutions—and the individuals who comprise them—predominantly engage in practices characterized by inaccessibility, normalization, and the placing of responsibility on students. On the other hand, students with disabilities, immersed in this meritocratic logic, perceive the academic environment and practices of inclusion and exclusion through the lens of meritocracy, as can be observed in the statements of the students presented in the table below.

Table 1 – Meritocratic Ethos

Students with disabilities *need to study more* in order to *keep up with the class* (M55HIHE8, emphasis added).

But what frustrates me is that *I attend all the theoretical and practical classes, yet afterward I fail the exams* (M55HIHE8, emphasis added).

The [Reference Center for Support to Students with Disabilities] helped me; they offered me everything I could possibly take advantage of [all my rights], but *I tried to take advantage of as little as possible* (M25PDHE7, emphasis added).

*I am a very individualistic person. [...] I avoid asking for help*, as much as possible, absolutely as much as possible, because I am independent (M25PDHE7, emphasis added).

Whenever *I have a question, I approach the professor* outside of the classroom (M20ASDHE5, emphasis added).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on empirical data. (2022).

The “universalization of the norm of competition extends far beyond the confines of the state, directly influencing individuals in their personal relationships” (Dardot; Laval, 2016, p. 378). Students, shaped by this competitive environment, experience a profound fear of failure. For some students with disabilities, the need for assistance is perceived as a weakness, a mark of failure in the meritocratic race. As a result, those who require extra support, whether in the form of specialized services or resources, often carry the heavy burden of stigma associated with incapacity, viewing their needs as an imposition. This sentiment is illustrated by the statement from student M20ASDHE5 in the table above.

Under the guise of meritocracy, the belief that each individual is solely responsible for their (in)success becomes increasingly pervasive. As a result, individuals must navigate and overcome various barriers, processes, and time constraints on their own. In this environment, some students with disabilities view their academic challenges as a direct result of their disability, leading them to refrain from questioning teaching methods or the practices surrounding inclusion and exclusion. This dynamic reinforces the sentiment expressed by student M55HIHE8, that students with disabilities must exert greater effort and dedication to keep up with their peers. The class predominantly consists of students without disabilities, who represent the norm and benefit from teaching processes designed for non-disabled individuals. Such beliefs can foster feelings of frustration and self-doubt among students with disabilities regarding their learning capabilities and the potential of their own human capital. As Markovits (2021, p. 103) notes, even those who do not reap the rewards of meritocracy “remain susceptible to its allure. They develop an admiration for competence and effort, as well as the meritocratic belief linking hard work to honor, yet this often results in a direct assault on their self-esteem.”

“Expansive notions of personal responsibility are a clue that meritocratic assumptions are at work” (Sandel, 2021, p. 95). The remarks made by student M25PDHE7 exemplify how the exacerbation of personal responsibility, the practice of self-imposing responsibility, affects the relationship of students with disabilities to processes of inclusion and exclusion. “These individuals refrain from taking actions that might make their presence and needs visible, and they also avoid questioning themselves regarding concrete steps they could take to address the difficulties they face” (Oliveira, 2013, p. 982). Within a meritocratic order, receiving specialized support is perceived as a demerit in one’s academic trajectory. Consequently, some students do not seek to learn about their rights. Among the eleven students interviewed, six were unfamiliar with federal-level inclusion policies, and eight reported being unaware of the institutional documents at their institutions that address the inclusion of students with disabilities. To claim one’s rights, one must, first and foremost, know what those rights are; yet, within an order where disability is viewed as a problem, claiming rights on the basis of being a person with a disability entails exposing oneself as a person with a disability.

Given that a portion of students with disabilities do not assert their rights, nor seek or demand inclusive practices, and that IFEs operate primarily within the framework of legal compliance, a pattern of in/exclusive coexistence emerges within the academic community that is deemed acceptable by all. “The academic community and university culture enter a *comfort zone* in which the presence of the

‘different’ goes unnoticed. Consequently, there is no recognition of the challenge that must be confronted and overcome” (Oliveira, 2013, p. 982, original emphasis). With the aim of broadening our understanding of this zone of (dis)comfort, in the following section we analyze the effects of human capital theory and meritocracy on the coexistence practices experienced by students with disabilities within the institutions under study.

## “Really discrimination, of exclusion!? I don’t think so”: Practices of (Co)existence

*Have you ever felt excluded or discriminated against in any space or situation here within the institution? Ten students answered no, and one answered yes (Research Materials, 2023).*

*Here at the IFE, do people hold attitudes favorable toward inclusion? Eight students answered yes, and three answered that there are people with both favorable and unfavorable attitudes (Research Materials, 2023).*

Although the majority of students described barriers as well as discriminatory and/or exclusionary practices during interviews, it is evident that students with disabilities normalize these practices to the point of not perceiving them as exclusionary. This normalization of barriers is shaped by the prevailing conception of disability and by a meritocratic ethos; given that disability is viewed as a problem inherent to the individual and that it is incumbent upon each person to succeed in life through their own efforts, these barriers become an integral part of the meritocratic race.

Relationships of coexistence extend beyond the scope of legislation, delving instead into the realm of subjectivity and how individuals perceive and connect with one another. More broadly, this issue touches on how institutions recognize and accommodate human diversity. As Oliveira (2013, p. 977) notes, “it is [...] within the domain of the unlegislated that the attitude of accepting differences and the sentiment of solidarity emerge [...]. Culture can establish itself, and indeed often does, as a dual space of both inclusion and exclusion, of both acceptance and rejection of those who are different” (original emphasis). Building on these concepts, this section will analyze statements that highlight attitudinal barriers, as well as discriminatory and exclusionary practices occurring within Vocational and Higher Education contexts.

Meritocratic discourse and human capital theory (Foucault, 2008) exert influence on the academic community's conception of disability and permeate the relationships of coexistence established within the academic environment, as can be observed in the table below, which illustrates practices of negative discrimination among peers, specifically, between students without disabilities and students with disabilities.

Table 2 – Practices of (Co)existence: Among Peers

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>The professor asks us to do a group project, and <i>he noticed that I wasn't talking to anyone about forming a group. So, he forces a group to form</i> (M20ASDHE5, emphasis added).</p> <p>I've had situations where I was the <i>only one in the class left without a group</i> [to complete an assignment] (M25ASDHE2, emphasis added).</p> <p>In the past, <i>I felt quite excluded, quite isolated</i>. Even when it came to team projects, my classmates were fully aware of my hearing difficulties—because, at the time, hearing aids weren't very good—so I didn't</p> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

really have the opportunity to participate in team projects. *Today, I've moved past that phase.* Now, for every team project, my classmates seek me out to join them; that wasn't the case before. Back then, all the teams would form, and I'd be left doing the work all by myself (M55HIHE8, emphasis added).

Once my classmates, the staff members, and the professors *found out that I am a person with a disability, I began to be treated with a great deal of respect and dignity* (M55HIHE8, emphasis added).

In front of other people, *in public, I can say that my classmates are inclusive.* But in private, *in more personal interactions, I'd have to say they aren't.* For example, if I speak to a professor about difficulties I'm having with an exam, right there in the classroom, everyone will say, Oh, that's just a matter of accessibility. But among their closest friends, they'll say things like: *Just because he has autism, he expects special treatment, or He's looking for an unfair advantage,* along with other comments of that nature (M25ASDHE2, emphasis added).

Because my disability isn't visible, *some of my classmates assume I'm just trying to get out of taking notes.* I use PDFs instead of constantly copying down the professor's notes, since I'm physically unable to keep up with the writing. *I think there's a bit of a lack of common sense involved;* I'd say it's really important to address this issue with the class as a whole (M40PDVE4, emphasis added).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on empirical data. (2022).

Neoliberalism, as articulated by Dardot and Laval (2016, p. 16, original emphasis), “produces certain types of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities.” One of the key subjectivities it fosters is individualization, which is further reinforced by meritocratic discourse. This lifestyle has detrimental effects on relationships of inclusion and exclusion among peers. The most apparent consequence is a lack of collaboration, as indicated by students M20ASDHE5, M25ASDHE2, and M55HIHE8, who recount experiences of being left without a group to complete academic assignments, an outcome that reflects negative discrimination associated with disability. Motivated by competition, non-disabled students tend to form groups with those they perceive as possessing superior human capital, exercising their freedom not to engage in academic collaborations with colleagues they view as having lesser capabilities. “Freedom, torn from the social, becomes not only boundless but legitimately exercised without regard for context or social consequences, without restraint, civility, or care for society as a whole or for the individuals within it” (Brown, 2021, pp. 53–54). Student M25ASDHE2 recounts their experience of being excluded from a group for an assignment: “I got in through the quota system [considering public school background, per capita income, and disability status], which is one of the lowest-tier categories [...], so that stigma immediately sets in: ‘Everyone here got high grades, but he didn’t; maybe he [...] isn’t good enough to be part of our group.’” Admission through a quota is perceived as indicative of low human capital, given that students accepted through affirmative action policies are considered on factors beyond human capital.

“Neoliberalism defines a certain norm of life [...]. This norm imposes upon each of us the requirement to live within a universe of generalized competition” (Dardot; Laval; 2016, p. 16), a competition that extends even to the period of academic formation. This perpetual competition among peers leads to the selection of human capital, determining which colleagues are best positioned to contribute to the work at hand. The stigma of incapacity attached to people with disabilities, amplified by ableism, which manifests as “a prejudiced stance that hierarchizes individuals based on the degree to which their bodies conform to corporeal normativity [...] [and] defines the way in which people with

disabilities are generally treated as incapable (incapable of producing, working, learning, loving, caring, feeling [...])” (Mello, 2016, p. 3272), colonizes the collective imagination; consequently, students with disabilities are often not even considered as potential partners for teamwork. This stigma of incapacity, coupled with the competitive ethos, leads students without disabilities to believe that having a colleague with a disability in their group will hinder their performance, effectively slowing them down in the race.

In the words of student M55HIHE8, specifically when he states, “*Today I have overcome this phase*” (emphasis added), we can perceive his assumption of personal responsibility (the idea that “my success or failure is my responsibility”) regarding the process of exclusion he experienced. He attributes the shift in his classmates' behavior to the replacement of his hearing aid. However, it is important to reflect that, regardless of the hearing aid, the student continues to have hearing limitations; perhaps, then, the change was actually catalyzed by the fact that, over time, the student proved himself capable of learning and producing work. Or perhaps it was due to his decision to make his diagnosis public, as he mentions in his statement. A paradox surrounds the diagnosis of a disability: on one hand, it affixes labels and stigmas; on the other, it alerts the collective that the individual in question possesses rights guaranteed by specific regulations, and that neglecting those rights is politically incorrect.

Student M40PDHE4, who experiences a disability condition not visible at first glance, and student M25ASDHE2, who experiences a disability condition lacking a physical marker, reported that some peers question whether they actually require accessibility measures, or if they are, in some way, being unfairly advantaged by virtue of being students with disabilities. This competitiveness leads some students to question whether a peer is receiving preferential treatment. Meritocracy “seeks to vindicate the belief that if competition is truly fair, success will align with virtue; those who work hard and follow the rules will earn the rewards they deserve” (Sandel, 2021, p. 184). Merit is the result of hard work and overcoming inequalities, rather than equity. According to Markovits (2021, p. 75), in a mature meritocracy, “where both income and status are rooted in human capital, competition takes on a more immediate and inevitably personal character. The meritocratic tournament dominates the culture, serving as the backdrop for both the external environment and one’s inner life (hopes and fears).”

Student M40PDHE4 suggests a potential way to mitigate attitudinal barriers among peers regarding accessibility practices: “*it is important to work with the class*” (emphasis added). In other words, it is essential to implement classroom practices that foster an inclusive culture. It is necessary to disseminate inclusive knowledge, promote respect for individuality, cultivate peer collaboration, and champion the concept of the “common” as a political principle (Dardot; Laval, 2017). The classroom serves as a privileged space for learning, not merely professional learning, but also human and social learning.

The social is the site where citizens of widely unequal origins and resources are potentially brought together and conceived as a collective. It is the site where we are admitted as citizens with political rights [...] and brought together politically (not merely cared for) through the provision of public goods, and where historically produced inequalities manifest as differentiated political access, voice, and treatment, as well as the site where these inequalities may be partially redressed (Brown, 2021, p. 38).

The classroom constitutes a microcosm of an unequal and competitive society. Conventionally, it is also a space for human diversity, interaction, coexistence, and getting to know the “other”, a place to grasp disability as a form of human existence, just like so many other differences. It is a space for

fostering inclusive subjectivities. Student M40PDHE4 highlights the need to normalize the presence of people with disabilities across various social spaces when stating: “*I believe it is important for us to speak up and show what we have. Even though ‘normal’ people still don’t understand it, don’t have a clue*” (emphasis added). The normalization of differences can prevent or mitigate situations such as the one recounted by student M25PDHE7: “*She [the person without a disability] is prejudiced precisely because she is trying [not to be]; one simply has to act normally*” (emphasis added). It is important to clarify that the experiences recounted by the students in this study do not reflect the entirety of the interactions they encounter, nor may they represent the unique experiences of other students with disabilities; nevertheless, this type of interaction is frequent. It is therefore essential to bring these instances to the surface and scrutinize these practices so that, by rendering them visible, we are prompted to reflect and to foster the conditions that drive us to cultivate alternative forms of interaction.

In the classroom context, it falls to the teacher to facilitate mediation and guide inclusive coexistence practices. The educator acts as a facilitator and constitutes an integral part of these practices, as can be observed in the statement by student M20ASDHE5: “so he [the teacher] forces a group to form” (emphasis added). Beyond relationships of coexistence, attitudinal barriers, specifically, practices of negative discrimination, also trigger instances of pedagogical inaccessibility. This text focuses on the effects of meritocracy and human capital theory on the coexistence relationships between teachers and students with disabilities in Vocational and Higher Education. Two students reported instances of negative discrimination by teachers, as presented in the table below.

Table 3 – Practices of Coexistence: Teachers and Students with Disabilities

One professor, for example, *didn’t email me directly*. He sent it to the interpreter to read and subsequently forward to me. The interpreter immediately told him No! He needed to send it directly to me. He said *he hadn’t known; he thought that perhaps a deaf student wouldn’t be able to read*, so he considered it better to send it to the interpreter instead (M40HIHE2, emphasis added).

They [the professors] know that they have a student, one whom they must treat differently, in the sense that this student faces more barriers than the others. [...] But *many of them don’t know what autism is*, so [...] they don’t know how to proceed. *They know they need to do something, but they don’t know how to improve the situation*. So, the end result is that, because they lack the knowledge and often *fail to do any research or ask*, [...] they end up not taking [actions conducive to inclusion]. Even if they have the desire to do so, and even if they think they are doing so, they actually aren’t (M25ASDHE2, emphasis added).

After I visited the [Reference Center for Students with Disabilities], the center sent an email to the professors explaining my condition and advising them to come and speak with me. However, *there are more than ten professors in total, and only four of them actually came to talk to me* (M25ASDHE2, emphasis added).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on empirical data. (2022).

It is possible to observe that some teachers manifest ableism (Mello, 2016), a lack of belief in the potential of people with disabilities, in their practices, as can be seen in the statements of student M40HIHE2. When a teacher assumes that, simply because a student is deaf, they lack knowledge or would struggle to read, they concretize their skepticism regarding that individual. It is important to bear in mind that students enrolled in post-secondary Vocational Education and Higher Education have already successfully completed their Basic Education. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that a student who has not developed reading proficiency would gain access to Higher Education. Frequently, individuals

living with a disability are not perceived by teachers or by IFEs as potential producers. According to Schultz (1973, p. 57), investments in human capital within the field of education entail three distinct aspects:

- (1) education for current, ongoing consumption; (2) education for future, long-term consumption, constituting an investment in a durable asset for the consumer, which is undoubtedly of considerable importance; and (3) education aimed at acquiring skills and knowledge useful to economic endeavors, and, as such, an investment in future earnings.

Students with disabilities perceive themselves as potential success stories of meritocracy; to this end, through educational training, they invest in their human capital. This investment primarily targets future financial earnings from professional practice, as reflected in the statements of the three interviewed students. When asked, “What motivated you to study at this IFEs?” student M20IDVE2 replied, “*to find a profession, a job*” (emphasis added). When asked, “Why did you choose this program?” student M20ASDHE5 replied that the motivation was “*to work in an area that interests me*, to be able to build something [...] that will be used frequently, that will be useful” (emphasis added). In assessing the inclusion of people with disabilities in Vocational and Higher Education, student M55HIHE8 articulated the relationship between investing in human capital, professionalization, and future satisfaction, specifically, a life of dignity, as evidenced in the excerpt: “I believe it was a triumph for students with disabilities to make it this far, *to gain access to information, to acquire professional skills, and to secure a future with greater dignity*” (emphasis added). In these statements, one can identify the expectation that investments in Vocational and Higher Education will, in the future, generate financial returns derived from gainful employment. However, there is a discrepancy in expectations regarding the educational and professional trajectories of students with disabilities: while students seek to become efficient human capital, some instructors view them as “consumptive human capital”, as permanent consumers rather than future producers. This disconnect is reflected in investment patterns and in practices of inclusion and exclusion; given that, within a market-driven context, greater investment is directed toward those capable of production, rather than the reverse. To compensate, those who are not favored by these investments or teaching practices must redouble their efforts to overcome the disadvantages created by this market-driven, meritocratic environment.

In the statement presented in Table 3, student M25ASDHE2 describes a lack of investment on the part of certain teachers and the IFEs, which could otherwise promote specific training for its faculty in the production of knowledge regarding autism. This account provides evidence that in-service training is insufficient regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities; it also reveals a lack of initiative among some teachers in seeking out relevant knowledge and in establishing dialogue with students who experience a disability. Within teaching and learning contexts, particularly in Vocational and Higher Education, students themselves can serve as a source of knowledge about their own disabilities and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, given that they have already navigated other levels of education and experienced various instances of inclusion and exclusion. However, as reported by the same student, few teachers are willing to engage in conversation about inclusion. Even with specific guidance from the Reference Center for Students with Disabilities, fewer than half of the teachers reached out to the student to discuss pedagogical accessibility. Some faculty members effectively render students with disabilities

invisible. This act of rendering students' invisible functions as a shield, enabling teachers to evade responsibility for making their pedagogical practices accessible while simultaneously placing the onus for their own inclusion or exclusion on students with disabilities themselves. In the statement presented in Table 3, student M25ASDHE2 describes a lack of investment on the part of certain teachers and the IFEs, which could otherwise promote specific training for its faculty in the production of knowledge regarding autism. This account provides evidence that in-service training is insufficient regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities; it also reveals a lack of initiative among some teachers in seeking out relevant knowledge and in establishing dialogue with students who experience a disability. Within teaching and learning contexts, particularly in Vocational and Higher Education, students themselves can serve as a source of knowledge about their own disabilities and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, given that they have already navigated other levels of education and experienced various instances of inclusion and exclusion. However, as reported by the same student, few teachers are willing to engage in conversation about inclusion. Even with specific guidance from the Reference Center for Students with Disabilities, fewer than half of the teachers reached out to the student to discuss pedagogical accessibility. Some faculty members effectively render students with disabilities invisible. This act of rendering students' invisible functions as a shield, enabling teachers to evade responsibility for making their pedagogical practices accessible while simultaneously placing the onus for their own inclusion or exclusion on students with disabilities themselves.

The rendering of differences as invisible is normalized, even by students with disabilities themselves, since, in the meritocratic race, the only welcome form of differentiation is that of merit and achievement. In this context, presenting oneself as a person with a disability is, in most cases, not considered advantageous. "Individuals adopt the discourse that there is no need for differential treatment in their sociocultural and academic experiences, thereby absolving the social context of responsibility for their isolation and assuming full responsibility for it themselves" (Oliveira, 2013, pp. 981–982).

According to Markovits (2021, p. 336), one way to reverse meritocratic inequality is to foster open and inclusive education. In his view, "admission should become less competitive, and qualification less absolute." Fittingly, meritocracy erodes inclusive education; competition exists not only at the point of entry but also within the relationships established inside educational institutions. Exacerbated individualism renders collaboration unfeasible, or at least undermines it, and undermines the creation of shared spaces for debate. Students with disabilities are almost invariably the only ones in their class or group; at times, they do not even know other students within the institution who also experience a disability, as is the case with student M25PDHE7, who describes: "*The only inclusion I see is me, the one with a disability, because there is no one else here who has a physical disability*" (emphasis added). Students with disabilities are alone, attempting to suppress the markers of their disability (which is perceived as a problem) and to prove their competence in the unequal meritocratic race. The IFEs surveyed, rather than fostering shared spaces for discussion that would enable these individuals to interact with their peers and recognize common agendas, disseminate a meritocratic discourse that places the responsibility for inclusion or exclusion squarely on the student, while encouraging generalized competition.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article is part of a broader research project. In this text, we aim *to problematize the effects of human capital theory and meritocracy on the practices of inclusion and exclusion experienced by students with disabilities in Vocational and Higher Education*. Without presuming to bring this discussion to a close, we acknowledge that there are other avenues to explore and aspects that warrant further investigation, such as the impact of human capital theory and meritocracy on pedagogical (in)accessibility practices. To this end, we have established the connections made possible by the empirical data and the theoretical framework that underpinned our analyses.

Initially, we identified the students' conceptions regarding inclusion and disability. Subsequently, we established connections between these student conceptions and the knowledge produced by human capital theory and meritocracy. Finally, we mapped the practices that materialize the influence of human capital theory and the meritocratic ethos, particularly practices of coexistence, to understand the effect of this knowledge on the subjects.

The analytical exercise revealed that students with disabilities, subjectified by medical discourses, meritocracy, and human capital theory, perceive disability as a problem; consequently, they undertake individual efforts to overcome the inequalities present within the academic environment. We sought to demonstrate how the subjectivities produced by neoliberal rationality, from which the meritocratic ethos and human capital theory emerge, constitute a zone of (dis)comfort. This zone involves situations alternating between a relative state of comfort, resulting primarily from practices that render barriers invisible, normalized, and naturalized, and a state of discomfort, triggered by the very presence of students with disabilities and the attendant need to coexist with them and to foster inclusive practices. Subjectified by meritocracy, students with disabilities sometimes, rather than asserting their rights, join the meritocratic race in an effort to prove their capabilities.

The surveyed IFEs (re)produce meritocratic discourses that, permeated by human capital theory, foster a lack of confidence among teachers and competition among peers. Competition serves as the guiding principle for practices of coexistence among students, while human capital theory underpins a lack of belief in the potential of students with disabilities. The convergence of these two orders predominantly results in practices of negative discrimination.

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**Submitted on:** 04/14/2025

**Preprint:** 12/11/2024

**Approved:** 01/08/2026

**Editor de seção:** Josiane Pereira Torres

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the Programa de Bolsa Universitária de Santa Catarina (UNIEDU).

## DECLARATION OF DATA AVAILABILITY

The data underlying the research text are contained within the manuscript.

## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 – research execution, conceptualization, production, and analysis of materiality, manuscript drafting.

Author 2 – research supervision, theoretical guidance, manuscript revision, and refinement.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the present article.