School psychologists' training to support inclusive education in Portugal: Trainers' perspectives of opportunities, challenges, and improvements

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Abstract
School psychologists can support schools in implementing inclusive practices. In Portugal, the Decree-Law 54/2018 has set the country on the path to inclusive education based on whole-school approaches. This policy shift demands a change in school psychologists' practices to be agents for systems change versus traditional roles (such as assessing and counseling students). An e-learning training course was developed and implemented by nine psychologists through a partnership between the Ministry of Education and the Portuguese Psychology Association, focused on the Multi-tiered Systems of Support framework for constructing inclusive schools. The main aim was to empower school psychologists to support adequate, inclusive, and multi-tiered intervention responses in their schools, resourcing a collaborative and supervised approach. From all Portuguese regions, 327 psychologists participated in the training from October 2020 to April 2021. This article focuses on the trainers' experiences of training, collected through a focus group, reflecting on the challenges, opportunities, and necessary improvements for future training in school psychologists in Portugal on this topic. Trainers have identified organizational and pedagogical aspects as critical to the training delivery and quality that should be addressed in future training courses for school psychologists.

Introduction

Inclusive education as a priority: The role of school psychologists

Inclusive education is a goal in many parts of the world and has triggered reform in school systems worldwide. In Portugal, as in other European countries, inclusion, participation, and global development of all students have been among crucial educational priorities (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). School psychologists are essential in supporting schools in using more inclusive practices in their work (Alves et al., 2020; Bartolo, 2010, 2015; Farrell, 2006, 2010; Jimerson et al., 2021). More broadly, they are a critical piece of the puzzle in building inclusive schools, advocating against injustice and discrimination (Shriberg et al., 2021), and promoting change in school organization and functioning to focus more on each student's needs and remove learning barriers. School psychologists can also support teachers and other school adults in establishing and maintaining these inclusive practices (Anderson et al., 2007).

For school psychologists to contribute to sustained change in educational settings, there must be an authentic shift in their vision and practices, with a greater focus on frameworks of inclusion and social justice (Jimerson et al., 2021; Shriberg et al., 2021). This also requires them to move toward whole-school approaches (Webb & Michalopoulou, 2021). However, traditional roles, such as assessment and counseling of students, are still found to consume the majority of Portuguese school psychologists' time (Mendes et al., 2014). This means that there needs to be greater balance of school psychologists' traditional roles and tasks (e.g., assessment; individual interventions) with new and emergent roles and tasks (e.g., consultation/teleconsultation; interdisciplinary collaboration and team participation; leadership roles within whole-school approaches; advocacy; Anderson et al., 2007; Moliner & Fabregat, 2021). Accordingly, the perception of what school psychologists' roles should be is vastly changing, both in research and practice (Altrão & Almeida, 2019; Direção-Geral de Educação, 2018; Mendes, 2019). In Portugal, this change has been incentivized and supported by educational policies, particularly the 2018 Decree-Law 54/2018, which has set the country on the path to inclusive education based on whole-school approaches. Thus, the professional development of school psychologists is of vital importance.

MTSS as a framing model for inclusive education in Portugal

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Universal Design for Learning were the two main frameworks used to create the Decree-Law no. 54/2018 (Alves et al., 2020). In this article, we focus specifically on MTSS. MTSS is an educational model for analyzing school needs (e.g., reading difficulties in a given class) and aligning resources and strategies effectively to support those needs as early as possible (Gamm et al., 2012; Hollman et al., 2021). MTSS is defined by Gamm and colleagues (2012) as "an evidence-based model of education that employs data-based problem-solving techniques to integrate academic and behavioral instruction and intervention" (p. 4). Some of its main characteristics are: (a) a belief that all students are capable of learning; (b) proactive and preventive approaches;

(c) a multi-tiered continuum of learning supports that meets diverse students' needs; (d) the implementation of evidence-based practices in a systematic and intentional manner; (e) decision making based on robust individual and group data (e.g., regarding the specific learning needs of a group of students); (f) differentiated instruction according to students' needs; and (g) collaborative team work to resolve problems (Eagle et al., 2015; Gamm et al., 2012; Hollman et al., 2021; Pereira et al., 2018; Simonsen et al., 2021).

Policymakers in Portugal wanted to focus on an inclusive law that would provide a pedagogical model for schools predicated on the notion that all children can learn "as long as they receive adequate support" (Alves et al., 2020, p. 283). MTSS aligns with this goal by providing a tiered approach to organizing supports and interventions, defined in Portuguese law as follows: (a) universal supports (that target all students and aim to increase their participation in school and learning); (b) selective supports (that target a group of students whose learning needs are not fully met by universal measures); and finally (c) additional supports (that target students with intense and persistent difficulties usually requiring specialized supports such as speech therapy) (Alves et al., 2020). The implementation of MTSS in Portugal is new and challenging (Alves et al., 2020; Carvalho et al., 2019) and can be seen as an innovation in contemporary schooling that offers a potential pathway toward inclusion (Sailor et al., 2021); for this reason, it is being adopted in diverse countries (Ainscow, 2020). Therefore, there is a critical need to prepare professionals with knowledge and skills related to MTSS implementation (Sailor et al., 2021).

School psychologists' training and supervision

As MTSS implementation moves forward, more professional training is needed. Scaling up training opportunities and audiences is necessary to ensure quality implementation of MTSS (Sailor et al., 2021). In Portugal, school psychologists are expected to assume a role both in educational policy implementation and in other professionals' training and consultation (Direção-Geral de Educação, 2018).

Adequate in-service training opportunities are necessary for school psychologists' professional development, including their acquisition of new competencies and knowledge (Johnson & Zwiers, 2016; Nkoma & Hay, 2019). Additionally, school psychologists' training and supervision can contribute to overall school improvement and student success (National Association of School Psychologists, 2018). In line with policies of other national and international associations (American Psychological Association, 2014; National Association of School Psychologists, 2018), the Code of Ethics of the Portuguese Psychology Association (Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses, 2021) has long recognized professional development and supervision as an ethical imperative for psychologists. In Portugal, supervision is a recommended practice for all psychologists and a requirement for professional access (Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses, 2022).

In a recent study by Nkoma (2018), supervised training coupled with informal support from colleagues were desired by educational psychologists to improve their work in inclusive education. However, there is limited school psychology-specific research on

professional training and supervision in regard to inclusion (Kennedy et al., 2018), particularly in Portugal. In a study with 477 school psychologists in Portugal, Mendes et al. (2014) observed that the absence of supervision was a frequent reality among professionals, with only 14% of participants reporting receiving some supervision after graduation. Most of these professionals claimed to use supervision services in private clinics (54%), usually developed in an individual format and focused on discussing problem cases. A smaller number of professionals mentioned receiving supervision in higher education institutions (26%) and in their workplace (20%), especially in group format where participants contemplated different dimensions of professional practice. Coelho et al. (2016) corroborated these findings, as they reported that only 9% of a sample of 803 Portuguese psychologists working in educational psychology received professional supervision.

Although there is a need for more research regarding school psychologists' training and supervision in Portugal, new opportunities for school psychologists' professional development have been offered recently by national public and private organizations (e.g., General Directorate of Education). In particular, online training and supervision opportunities have expanded. Training through technology offers significant advantages such as accessibility, networking, and the opportunity to experiment with technological innovations in practice (Fischer et al., 2017; McDaniel & Bloomfield, 2020). Additionally, one of the main reasons for the rise of online and e-learning professional development opportunities is the flexibility it allows in terms of time and space as well as the autonomy it affords trainees in regulating their learning process (Pölzl-Stefanec, 2021; Teräs & Kartoglu, 2017). Participants may enjoy the opportunity for self-directed learning and the possibility of tailoring it to their professional growth needs (Bonk & Lee, 2017). However, a number of barriers to online learning have been identified in the literature. For instance, Mungania (2003, cited in Alshwiah, 2021, p. 214), identified seven types of barriers, namely: (a) "situational barriers"—any life situation of the trainees that can compromise their involvement; (b) "content suitability barriers," related to the quality and adequacy of the content and assessment process; (c) "technological barriers," such as internet connection problems; (d) "instructional barriers," related to the training's instructional design (e.g., unclear instructions, too much information, few opportunities for trainer–trainees interaction, or inadequate feedback); (e) "learning style"; (f) "organizational barriers"; and (g) "personal barriers" (e.g., attitudes to e-learning).

For online training courses to be effective and contribute to trainees' learning transfer, some strategies are suggested. For instance, trainings may leverage the unique affordances of online technologies (e.g., Moodle): assume a trainee-centered approach; provide autonomous learning resources; promote reflection on trainees' own practices and experiences; support trainees in identifying how they can apply learning content in their work; encourage trainees to connect new knowledge with previous knowledge; and conduct activities that promote collaboration within the online learning environment (Fauth & González-Martínez, 2021). Overall, despite their advantages, online training, and supervision are challenging for trainees and trainers and must address barriers that undermine their impact. Based on these considerations, research on training and supervision in different modalities and for different school contexts (e.g., schools grappling with

poverty, discrimination and exclusion) is needed to better address educational and societal changes through school psychologists' practices. Perspectives of both trainers and trainees are relevant for informing recommended practices for school psychologists training and supervision in face-to-face and online formats.

The current study: School psychologists trainers' perspectives about an e-course

The current study explored trainers' experiences and perspectives in regard to designing and implementing a school psychologists' e-course on "Applied Approaches for the Construction of Inclusive Schools." In particular, it aimed to capture trainers' reflections on the challenges, opportunities, and necessary improvements for future training in Portugal. The following research questions were proposed:

- What opportunities do trainers report in regard to implementing a training course on whole-school approaches to inclusion for school psychologists?
- What challenges do trainers report in regard to implementing this training course for school psychologists?
- What suggestions do trainers have for future training opportunities in this area?

The results of this study can provide important insights and considerations for further school psychology training in Portugal as well as in other countries where inclusive education and whole-school approaches are gaining relevance. Listening to trainers' voices and acknowledging their subjective experiences can provide a frame for better understanding challenges and opportunities as well as recommendations for future practice. Therefore, we adopted a constructivist theoretical position.

Method

Context and setting

Recognizing the need to provide adequate training to school psychologists on applied approaches to building inclusive schools, the Portuguese Psychology Association and the Ministry of Education organized the development and implementation of an online training course. This course was designed specifically for school psychologists to acquire knowledge of inclusive education and relevant theoretical and applied approaches. All school psychologists in public and private schools in continental Portugal were invited to register. Participation in the training was voluntary. Three hundred and twenty-seven psychologists from all Portuguese regions agreed to participate in the training and were divided into 12 groups, with 23 to 30 participants in each group. Group assignments were random, but there was an effort by the entities to combine participants from the same region in the same groups. The reason for this was to encourage networking among psychologists in the same region.

Nine psychologists, recognized for their experience and knowledge about inclusive education and whole-school approaches, designed, and implemented the training.

Almost all nine trainers selected, organized, and prepared the training content. Two trainers were chosen after the course preparation and did not participate in the preparation phase. Each of the nine trainers was responsible for one or two groups of trainees. The timeframe for implementation was October 2020 to April 2021 (with each group of trainees starting on different dates between October 2020 and January 2021). Synchronous training sessions were provided weekly across 12 sessions online (i.e., 3 months) followed by five sessions of supervision across approximately 2.5 months. The complete training took around 5 months for each group. A more detailed description of the training is provided below.

Study participants

Participants in this study were six of the nine psychologist trainers. (Three trainers were unavailable for data collection for personal reasons.) All participants were female, with an age range of 40 to 55 years. Each had more than 15 years of experience in school psychology. Three had a doctorate in Educational Psychology, and the other three had a master's degree in Psychology. At the time of the focus group, four participants worked in schools as school psychologists, and two worked in academia as Psychology professors but with experience in the field. The six participants were involved in administering the training as well as in developing its contents and training strategies. No other demographic information is reported to protect participants' identities.

Description of training

The main goal of this training was to empower school psychologists to support adequate, inclusive, and preventive intervention responses in their schools to improve pupils' socio-emotional, behavioral, and learning development. The conceptual frameworks of the training represented whole-school approaches, with an emphasis on MTSS and its application to learning, socioemotional, and behavioral issues (Alves, 2019; Mendes, 2019). MTSS guided the majority of the theoretical concepts and the practical strategies analyzed and discussed throughout the training course. As noted previously, the course was organized, prepared, and implemented by nine trainers who had theoretical knowledge about MTSS as well as experience in using the framework, supporting schools with its application and implementation, collaborating with schools through research and consultation, and/or providing supervision to schools within this approach, even before the implementation of the Decree-Law no. 54/2018.

The course was delivered in an online format via LMS (Moodle) and involved 25 h of synchronous learning, 25 h of asynchronous activities, and 10 h of synchronous supervision. Training addressed a wide variety of topics, including learning, behavior and socioemotional development, inclusive education, MTSS frameworks (e.g., Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)), and school psychologists' practices and roles. Legal (e.g., the Decree-Law no. 54/2018), theoretical, and scientific frameworks (e.g., screening, universal intervention for the learning process and socioemotional and behavior development) were presented and discussed during synchronous sessions of 2h each.

Simultaneously, the trainees completed assignments during asynchronous course time. Specifically, they designed/planned or improved whole-school projects to be implemented in their schools during or after the course, which were also supported by the trainers. Trainers supported these activities through providing feedback on written reflections, answering email questions, videoconferencing individual meetings, revising written projects, and suggesting literature for trainees to review to support their projects (e.g., mathematics learning, socioemotional learning).

Supervision was one of the components of this training course to support school psychologists in designing and implementing interventions related to the course topic. During the supervision sessions, which were structured as small group discussions, tutorial support, or project presentation and discussion with the whole group, trainers provided guidance. These sessions provide reflective moments for each part of the project (e.g., needs assessments, aims, intervention plan, and intervention assessment) and assumed a collaborative approach between trainers and trainees. Supervision sessions (5 sessions across 2.5 months) followed the training sessions about the legal and theoretical frameworks. Between each supervision session, at least 2 weeks were provided during which trainees completed asynchronous course hours to continue improving their school projects. Between each supervision session, support from trainers continued and a guideline with tasks for trainees was provided so they could prepare for the next session.

Selection and data collection procedures

Trainers were recruited through direct contact, and information was provided about the study. Once all the trainers agreed to participate, the focus group date and agenda was fixed (as mentioned, three trainers were ultimately unavailable on the specified date). Participants were not offered any incentives, participated voluntarily, and gave their informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The entities responsible for the training approved the study. The current study followed the recommendations from the ethics committee of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa. The Universidade Católica Portuguesa has an Ethical Committee for Technology, Social Sciences and Humanities since 2022. When this study went on, we did not have a committee to ask for approval. As recommended, we asked for oral agreement from the institutions involved and written informed consent from participants in the study (all of them integrating one or both institutions involved as trainers, as school psychologists or as associated members). We proceeded as required by the Portuguese law and University recommendations related to ethical issues.

The focus group interview was conducted in March 2021 to explore trainers' experiences regarding the training of school psychologists. The focus group was conducted remotely, in Portuguese, lasted 90 min, and was video recorded. It was conducted by a researcher with knowledge and experience in the training course's content. A script to guide the focus group interview was used. Considering the specific framework of inclusive education, three core themes related to school psychologists' training in Portugal were created as prompts: (a) opportunities (examples of questions asked: *What were the benefits of these e-course for the trainees?; What are the opportunities that you find in school psychologists training?*); (b) challenges (examples of questions asked:

What were the difficulties that you found in the implementation of this e-course?); and (c) necessary improvements for future training in school psychologists in Portugal (examples of questions asked: *Considering your experience with this e-course, what are the recommendations that must be addressed in the future training of school psychologists?*).

Data transcription, coding, and analysis procedures

The recordings of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim in the original language— Portuguese (the quotes used in this article were translated into English by the researchers). A code was arbitrarily assigned for each trainer including the letter T (Training) plus a number (1–6). Thus, for example, the code T1 refers to the participant which was arbitrarily assigned number 1.

The responses were analyzed using a thematic approach to analysis (Creswell, 2014) that started with familiarization with the data and searching and reviewing transcripts in regard to the primary foci of the research questions: opportunities, challenges, and future directions. A deductive approach to coding the data was adopted, and the themes were coded using Nvivo 12. Searching and reviewing codes and themes entailed analyzing and identifying the relationship between the codes in organizing themes. Data analysis and interpretation were at the latent level, as we sought to identify underlying ideas and concepts that characterized the process of school psychologists' training. The first coding and analysis were initially developed by one of the researchers and discussed with two other team members. Next, these two researchers continued the coding and analysis independently and discussed later to reach agreement.

Study quality and trustworthiness were ensured through various measures. First, ethical procedures were considered, such as obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality to facilitate authentic dialogue among participants. Second, we have provided information about the research procedures (e.g., participant characteristics, context, and interview questions), acknowledging the study's constructivist theoretical orientation, which shaped the research questions and guided the selection of methods (e.g., exploring trainers' voices and experiences, conducting focus groups, and employing thematic analysis). Moreover, to account for and minimize researcher bias, three different authors were involved in the data analyses at different stages as described in the previous section. Finally, the authors enriched their findings by incorporating quotes from the data, effectively grounding their conclusions in real-life examples. This practice added depth and context to the research, enhancing the credibility and applicability of the study. As a form of member checking, results were also shared with participants to confirm that the themes reflected the general sentiments they wanted to convey during the focus group.

Results

In this section, results are presented and organized into three core themes: (1) opportunities for school psychologists' training, (2) challenges for school psychologists' training, and (3) suggestions for improvements in school psychologists' training. A description of the themes and their categories is presented and supported by participants' voices.

Opportunities for school psychologists' training

This theme represented the perspectives of trainers regarding assets, successes, and relevant issues for the quality of the e-course. The trainers presented opportunities related to the training content, organization, and outcomes as well as pedagogical strategy. As such, opportunities identified were organized into four main categories: (1) training organization, (2) pedagogical strategy, (3) training contents, and (4) training outcomes.

Training organization

Participants identified aspects of the training organization that facilitated the training itself. One relevant aspect was the number of trainers per group ($n = 1$ or 2). It allowed a closer relationship with trainees and a more profound knowledge of trainees' learning needs and their projects (a relevant aspect for supervision), as mentioned by trainer 1:

> Interestingly, an aspect raises some doubts: we were two [trainers], and we were very close. Despite everything, I felt it was possible to establish this relationship with the group. I do not know if a more significant number of trainers per group would also lead to establishing this relationship with each of the trainees, which is very important for monitoring in asynchronous sessions and later in the supervision itself. (T1)

Despite the coordination of each group including only one or two trainers, all nine trainers participated in training preparation, implementation, and evaluation, which was considered a relevant source of support to trainers, especially when facing difficulties. Additionally, different trainers participated in specific sessions of other groups to provide more profound and specialized knowledge in their core area of interest or experience, as their experiences were diverse.

Another relevant aspect conveyed by trainers was the training modality adopted, e-learning (synchronous and asynchronous), and the online tools used to support training (e.g., Moodle, Zoom breakout rooms, Padlet, and Videos). First, it was an opportunity to reach more psychologists from different areas of the country with fewer training offers. Second, it provides a more flexible approach for trainees and trainers, more adaptable to psychologists' work schedules, with no waste of time for traveling, particularly for those who live or work in distant or isolated areas. It also facilitated changes in timeline whenever needed and opportunities for work to be done between sessions with trainers' support or follow up. Third, it was also an opportunity to build a network of school psychologists from different geographic areas. For instance, trainer 2 described the experience of using online tools to connect with trainees and to connect sessions:

> I can start with this practical part. One of the challenges I tried to create moments for them [trainees] to listen to themselves. Because the experience of each one is enriching – we learned from each other. I started to appreciate the breakout rooms' work and the summary and sharing of the work done. I think this was something that, even online, was possible and that I found very useful. And then, what I always did, before starting a

concept, I did that "canvas" thing where we can all do it simultaneously. Thus, we shared the same link for everyone, and we were building, sharing our opinions, seeing the constellation to be created, and discussing this constellation. And we did this to start each new theme to understand the concepts they brought and have a voice. It was very important to withdraw from the experiences that each one had already had. (T2)

Pedagogical strategy

Pedagogical aspects of the course training were also mentioned as opportunities. Valuable components included the requirement of project elaboration, planning, and implementation by the trainees in their respective educational contexts. It was an opportunity to experiment with specific guidelines and content in the course, reflect with trainers and colleagues about their practices and work contexts, and challenge and improves professional practices in a protective and supportive learning environment.

The possibility to share experiences planned and incentivized by trainers was an important opportunity throughout the training. Trainers and trainees exchanged experiences about their professional practice and career, work context and projects, specific barriers and difficulties, and solution strategies. Also, they shared ideas about their projects in the organization. The discussion of practical cases was also identified as highly relevant. This type of sharing is referred to below by trainer 4:

I think people needed to talk and share the constraints, difficulties, what they thought did not work so well, and what they thought worked. However, a network was effectively created here that goes beyond training. This will make a difference in their practice. (T4)

Training contents

The opportunity to collectively design the course was identified as relevant due to the varied experiences, knowledge, expertise, and needs of the trainers. The training contents were diverse, but all content was considered necessary (e.g., learning, behavior, and socio-emotional development; inclusive education; MTSS, Response to Intervention (RTI), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; school psychologists' practice and roles). This content presented an opportunity to challenge more traditional roles of school psychologists, develop knowledge on critical topics such as critical MTSS characteristics, and experiment with other ways of providing services. As an example, trainer 3 mentioned:

(…) what I realized in both classes is that the way most school psychologists work is still very centered on the clinical model. And that's why I think the focus on that module, module 2 I think, which was what talked about in the paradigm shift – I think it's really relevant. (T3)

Training outcomes

Trainers participating in the focus group also reported specific outcomes for school psychologists participating in the course. The perceived outcomes were identified from the

evaluation tools used during the training (e.g., final assessment report that each partici-
pant in the training provided) and from the informal observation of the trainees by
each trainer. First, trainees gained more knowledge on relevant topics in the
Portuguese educational system. Second, school psychologists challenged their clinical
focus and traditional practices. They exchanged perspectives regarding obstacles to
implementing more contextual and systemic practices and improving school preventive
practices. Third, trainees felt more comfortable sharing experiences and difficulties,
which created opportunities for them to expand their network and professional
support, especially in the context of the pandemic. Finally, trainers reported that
school psychologists discussed the need to pursue professional development on an
ongoing basis, as mentioned by trainer 3:

> Starting from one of the things that I felt was very important, I cannot say that it happened
> with all the trainees. Still, with a large part, I think that the awareness of the need, as psy-
> chologists, to have this constant professional development. Constantly realizing what we
> know and need to know to improve our practices and do more autonomously or using
> others. (T3)

Challenges to school psychologists' training

This theme included references related to the difficulties or barriers perceived by the trai-
ners during the course that may have impacted course quality. The trainers referred to chal-
lenges related to the training organization, to individual aspects of the trainees and of the
trainers, and to the supervision. The challenges identified were organized into four main
categories: (1) training organization, (2) supervision, (3) trainers, and (4) trainees.

Training organization

Participants identified challenges related to the training organization. One challenge was
related to the training contents. Trainers recognized the diversity and range of content.
However, they considered that the hours of training were insufficient to address them
at the desired level of complexity and depth. For instance, trainer 1 noted that:

> We ended up having a very diversified course in terms of content. Still, the number of hours
> is insufficient to go deep to the degree necessary for people to mobilize that knowledge after-
> wards. (T1)

Notably, this course occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly during the
second confinement in Portugal. The trainers mentioned that this condition did not
help participants fully invest in the course.

The timeline and timing of the course were also mentioned as a challenge. The con-
densed schedule of synchronous sessions was a challenge to the organization, leading
to a heavy workload for trainees and trainers between each session. Moreover, the

sessions coincided with the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which represented an added challenge for the psychologists in training related to the complexity of tasks and workload. Trainer 2 commented on the difficulties related to the confinements due to pandemic:

> It may have added concerning the scheduling and even not only to the scheduling but also to the timing of the sessions. In particular, this period of confinement had some implications here for the work dynamics of different psychologists, and therefore the heterogeneity of functions they had meant that some were overwhelmed with tasks, maybe even more than if we were without confinement, which made the investment and participation in training a little different. (T2)

One other relevant challenge mentioned was the online training. Despite the opportunities discussed above, this training modality was also perceived as a barrier to all trainees' participation. Trainers needed to be attentive to trainee differences in regard to participation and involvement, providing opportunities and stimulating dialogue to share experiences.

The composition of the trainees' groups (number of participants per group and heterogeneity of trainees) was mentioned by trainers as a challenge, as described by trainer 2:

> And yet the number of trainees is another critical factor for the effectiveness and even follow-up in the asynchronous sessions. Because the important thing was that they were building their project, and we could give feedback. (T2)

The number of trainees per group was considered an obstacle to the supervision process, namely providing more individualized support and feedback. It also made it difficult for all trainees to participate actively. Moreover, the trainees had diverse knowledge regarding the training contents (e.g., MTSS), the school context, and various experiences in school psychology. Finally, it was also challenging to ensure that all groups had access to technical information in all contents.

Supervision

Some challenges were related to the supervision process. One challenge identified by the trainers was the different investments of trainees in the course between sessions due to those sessions being too close in time and lacking time to invest in the project. Psychologists in training shared difficulties in reviewing research and literature and identifying applications to their project. Another challenge was how to provide individual feedback during session time and discuss each project intensely due to time restraints and the number of trainees per group. Trainer 1 mentioned time restraints:

> I allowed them to give feedback in writing, and then I did it with everyone. Still, in the session, I missed having more time and maybe rethinking the dynamics of each session so that everyone had the opportunity to share and that I had there was also some feedback from me. (T1)

Additionally, psychologists with less experience needed more support than others as noted by trainer 4:

> From the point of view of supervision, it is problematic to follow up because those who have been there [working in schools] for less time need much more help understanding the contents. From this point of view, it brought many challenges in supervision and providing training. (T4)

When training groups chose the same area for the intervention project (learning, behavior, and socioemotional), it facilitated the supervision process. However, it was recognized as a less diverse learning opportunity.

Trainers

Trainers have different theoretical and practical knowledge of all content. The training content was highly diverse, complex and challenging to discuss, and the trainers felt they needed to be more comfortable with the array of topics. For example, trainer 6 referred to some constraints:

> Some constraints we later felt during training. However, in any case, the complexity of precisely what we wanted to address in more detail, and even the fact that the trainees themselves can recognize in the figure of the trainer someone with in-depth technical domain in all areas - being in a solo teaching register made it all more complicated. None of us, at least I did not feel equally comfortable with all the topics covered. (T6)

Thus, they considered it relevant to include other trainers with greater specialization in some areas. Trainers also reported that more knowledge on one topic (e.g., learning) might lead trainees to focus more on that same topic in the intervention project.

Trainees

Trainers also mentioned challenges related to trainees. First, ensuring that a change in practices occurs after training implies a continued investment in professional development. Second, the project's design involved regular investment from trainees in reading literature, discussing the project, asking questions, and receiving feedback to improve it. If this happened for many trainees, others could not do so, which was noted in the project's outcome. This was even more evident during the school closure because psychologists were involved in multiple complex tasks. Third, trainees' previous knowledge and experience were diverse. As the training hours were limited, sometimes theoretical models had to be studied by the trainees on their own using the bibliography provided. Trainer 4 comment aspects related to the trainees below:

> More than how many trainees we had in the class is their background. In the class where I have more trainees than in other classes, I have an astronomical disparity of experience.

I have people who have just started working at school and barely know the school, and they hardly see the school's needs. I did not have time between synchronous and asynchronous. Besides, they were not very comfortable initially, which is notorious because it is a large class for them to share. It was not easy. It happens more when they feel that there are colleagues who have much experience and a good command of these multilevel models, especially in some domains such as learning. However, they do not feel comfortable facing initial doubts like everyone else. (T4)

Improvements in school psychologists' courses training

Trainers referred to improvements for future training of school psychologists in four main areas: (1) training organization, (2) pedagogical strategy, (3) trainers, and (4) evaluation and sustainability.

Training organization

Trainers reported improvement areas related to the training organization; for example, they expressed that more content needs to be discussed and deepened in the synchronous sessions and that more time is needed for exchange about psychologists' practices in school the connection between approaches (e.g., RTI and PBIS). This requires more hours for training and rethinking the timeline, especially the timing of the supervision sessions, as described by trainer 2:

> We should have more time to explore learning, behaviour, and socio-emotional development issues because we could not go deep into the theoretical models. We have approached some theoretical models, and some colleagues needed more references and more time to explore. (T2)

Furthermore, allowing trainees to implement their projects during the training and to receive feedback (follow-up sessions) was relevant for transferring the knowledge to practice, as suggested by trainer 2:

> Regarding supervision, the same thing. With more time for us to discuss the projects, we could have a common thread that would be more integrative. We ended up talking about each project and maybe what was familiar to the different projects and common concerns, but very quickly and very superficially. (T2)

Pedagogical strategy

Pedagogical aspects of the training were identified for improvement. One aspect concerned the increased time spent in evidence-based practices applied to each topic (second-level training possibly). Another relevant aspect mentioned was the need to support psychologists in literature research review and using it as part of evidence-based practices. Psychologists shared difficulties accessing existing and relevant literature, as mentioned by trainer 3:

There is a difficulty that I identified and that remains to be overcome (I do not know if this was the place either). However, it is a challenge for the OPP [Portuguese Psychology Association] and not only as we guarantee that colleagues have access to scientific literature and can read and disassemble it. We are here saying that you have to substantiate all your practices, but then, on the one hand, there is a great difficulty in accessing the database so that you have access to current and relevant information. And then there are also difficulties for our colleagues to find, read, and dismantle this information. It is a question that I am not sure how can be resolved. We are not going to solve it, but it has to be thought about because it is a weakness that can penalize the impact of the work we have already done and other work that may be done. (T3)

Trainers also suggested involving other school agents in this training (not just psychologists) since MTSS/contextual and collaborative approaches for inclusive education require all school staff's involvement (e.g., leadership).

Trainers

To improve the training, all trainers need to be involved in the conception of the training. Moreover, trainers underscored the need to rethink assigning only one trainer per group, as groups with two trainers worked better and, assigning less content per trainer allowed deeper content investment. Some trainers also felt the need to support others in some content. For example, trainer 5 described task division:

[Other trainer] and I had a very particular situation because we were two [two trainers per group]. I think the fact that we are the two and could do some division in terms of content made our work easier. On the other hand, we are now still in the supervision phase, and the trainees are now in the almost finished phase. Even in this supervision phase, we divided the projects according to what had been under the responsibility of each of us. And then, we even managed to direct more towards one or more towards the other regarding this supervision. On the one hand, being two decreased the number of trainees each has in charge. On the other hand, in terms of dedication and deepening, it made this deepening possible for each of us. (T5)

Evaluation and sustainability

Trainers recognized the need to develop a second level of the course to deepen content in each area (e.g., Response to Intervention for learning, writing, mathematics). For example, trainer 6 commented:

Initially, I remember reflecting on this issue when we selected the contents we addressed. We assumed that later practice came to show us that maybe it was not that much, but it was a direction that we decided to give training at the time. We should seriously work on the multi-level approach from a methodological point of view. It would be more relevant than detailing

and deepening the theoretical concepts of the different areas of Intervention. I think that, really, maybe the only solution is the solution that [other trainer] is now pointing to— include a second module here in which a multilevel approach applied to a particular area works in-depth. (T6)

Trainers also suggested doing a pilot of new training versions. Including follow-up supervision sessions during the implementation of projects was another aspect highlighted by participants to enable implementation and evaluation of the projects and allow discussion and feedback. It was mentioned as a methodology to increase the practical impact of the training. For instance, trainer 1 commented on this:

All the projects presented in my group had already been started, sometimes in pilot projects or something like that, but most of these projects are to be implemented in the next school year. So, I was supervising the design of a project, and despite everything, design supervision is an important issue - of course, it is. However, now there will be many challenges in the implementation that it was essential to discuss with them, and I think that would be the supervision that could bring learning gains and skills—I think it would be very important from my point of view. (T1)

Discussion

School psychologists are essential in supporting schools' improvement on the path to inclusive education based on whole-school approaches, such as the MTSS framework. Political strategic vision and collaboration for action are needed to support psychologists in this primary goal. One core element is school psychologists' training on emergent topics related to societal challenges and changes (Johnson & Zwiers, 2016; National Association of School Psychologists, 2020; Nkoma & Hay, 2019; Ormiston et al., 2022). This was the case with the training experience presented. Changes in Portuguese educational policies (e.g., Decree-Law no. 54/2018 about inclusive education) and new guidelines about school psychologists' roles within whole-school approaches, preventive interventions, and consultation (Directorate General of Education, 2018; Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses, 2018) created new training needs for these professionals. Thus, the course described in this article was designed to empower school psychologists with knowledge and skills in designing, implementing, and evaluating preventive interventions grounded in whole-school approaches to address socioemotional, behavioral, and learning development.

Organizational and pedagogical aspects were considered in preparing the training course (e.g., modality, timeline, trainers, and groups). The modality adopted (online) was chosen to afford flexibility and encourage a wide range of psychologists from different regions to participate, especially those from those more isolated areas (Bonk & Lee, 2017). Moreover, the e-learning modality allowed school psychologists to adapt the course content to the trainees' needs; thus, if a trainee were more interested in the content related to behavioral development, for instance, they could spend more time devoted to learning about that content (through self-directed learning and working on

extra materials provided by the trainers). The background and experience of the trainers were also relevant, as they were considered specialists in educational and school psychology as well as knowledgeable and/or experienced in the specific contents of the course. Nonetheless, some challenges were identified during the course, and it is relevant to identify specific improvements for future training courses for school psychologists in Portugal.

This study analyzed trainers' perspectives on opportunities, challenges and improvements in regard to a specific school psychology training course. Trainers identified various organizational and pedagogical aspects as critical to the training delivery and quality. The course design and preparation were led by the trainers, supported by administrative staff, and supervised by institutional coordinators from both organizations involved. This collaboration made it more responsive to the school psychologists' needs (as the trainers were also school psychologists or specialists in the field). Such collaboration also made it easier for the trainers to prepare relevant and well-rounded pedagogical materials and contents, identify weaknesses in their own knowledge, and involve other trainers as needed to enrich training. As an e-learning course, the training afforded flexibility in regarding to timing, availability of trainers, costs, and the development of trainer–trainee relationships and trainee networks. Despite these unique opportunities, some barriers were also noted. One situational barrier relates to trainees' availability and involvement. Despite their reported interest and participation, trainees struggled to balance their work duties, training requirements, and personal lives, especially due to COVID-19 confinements. Because training requirements involved independent study and preparation of evidence-based intervention plans for their school, some structural barriers emerged, such as inaccessibility of scholarly databases and limited working hours to study and learn.

The inclusion of supervision as part of the training was designed to be an asset to the professional development of trainees and, ultimately, the quality of services provided to students, families, and schools (Newman et al., 2019). However, supervision was often brief, conducted in a group format, and delivered in a distance modality. Although supervision is a critical element of school psychologists' professional development (National Association of School Psychologists, 2018; Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses, 2022), it was also identified as one of the most challenging aspects of the course, primarily due to the large number of trainees per trainer, short intervals between sessions, and trainees' difficulties in work-training-personal life balance. The challenge related to the large number of participants seems to point to the need to reduce the group size, yet further research is needed to identify the optimal group size for large-scale training initiatives. Nevertheless, supervision was a relevant core aspect of this training for supporting psychologists in applying content learning to their applied projects and practices. Supervision in groups allowed school psychologists to share practices, ideas, and experiences and present projects they could implement in their schools. Aligned with Nkoma (2018), this strategy allowed trainers to build a network of informal support among trainees.

These results support the investment in training opportunities for school psychologists, especially those involving supervision. The course is an example of institutional

efforts to support school psychologists through a collaborative partnership of national organizations that concern psychological service delivery in schools (i.e., the Ministry of Education and the Professional Association of Psychologists).

Limitations and recommendations for future studies

Some limitations must be considered in this study. The trainers' perspectives were the only ones included; however, it is important to consider multiple perspectives, including trainees' voices. Future studies may assess trainees' perspectives on the e-course. Additionally, it would be helpful to evaluate the impact of the training on school psychologists' knowledge and skills and their practice, in regard to both short-term and somewhat longer-term outcomes.

The focus group interview was carried out before all group training concluded. At least one of the training groups was still taking place when data collection occurred. This may have impacted participants' experiences and perspectives; however, it should be noted that all participants had finished at least one group training.

Participants in the focus group were selected on a volunteer basis, and not all nine trainers were represented. Trainers who were unable to participate could have added relevant information and perspectives, especially given the differences in their prior knowledge and experiences. Despite these limitations, findings underscore the importance of investing in comprehensive training programs and collaborative partnerships to empower school psychologists in enhancing children's educational outcomes and promoting inclusive and supportive school environments for all students.

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