

Understanding autistic students' relationships at school: a dialogical perspective on the development of the self^{1 2 3}

Estudantes autistas e suas relações na escola: uma perspectiva dialógica sobre o desenvolvimento do self

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Abstract

This study mainly aimed to investigate how the relationships established at school affect the constitution of the self of autistic subjects. We carried out a multiple case study with children aged from seven to 14 years old enrolled in a public school that featured diverse profiles, with a total of 11 participants, such as teachers, coordinator, special education assistant (all of them women), as well as five autistic children (three boys and two girls) and two non-autistic girls. During the 6-month period, we conducted interviews with the adults, natural observations of school situations, and collaborative dynamics with the participating children. In light of theories from a dialogical-cultural perspective, it was possible to analyze our findings based on an I-positions framework, self positions, for each participant subject. From the convergence of each of the possible positions of all the subjects, we arrived at three axes of relationship: Playing, Helping, and Caring.

Keywords: inclusive education, autism, cultural psychology, dialogical self

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Resumo

Este trabalho teve como principal objetivo investigar como as relações estabelecidas na escola participam da constituição do self dos sujeitos autistas. Fizemos um estudo de caso múltiplo com três crianças autistas de 7 a 14 anos matriculadas em uma escola da rede pública. No total, tivemos onze participantes, duas professoras, uma coordenadora, uma monitora, cinco crianças autistas (três meninos e duas meninas), além de mais duas meninas não autistas. Durante o período de seis meses, foram feitas entrevistas com os adultos, observações naturalísticas das situações escolares (como sala de aula e recreio) e observação direta durante uma dinâmica com todas as crianças participantes. À luz das teorias de uma perspectiva dialógico-cultural, foi possível analisar nossas descobertas com base em uma estrutura de posições-I, posições do self, para cada sujeito participante. A partir da convergência de cada uma das posições possíveis de todos os sujeitos, chegamos a três eixos de relacionamento: brincar, ajudar e cuidar.

Palavras-chave: *educação inclusiva, autismo, psicologia cultural, self dialógico*

On Autism, School, and Inclusion

Special and inclusive education has been widely studied in several fields and, as in many other countries, Brazil still struggles to implement a truly inclusive education nationwide. Although the social movements for special education for children with specific educational needs began as early as 1935 with the foundation of Pestalozzi Society in Brazil (Iacono & Mori, 2004), the legal provisions for inclusive/special education in Brazil have their foundation set by the Federal Constitution of 1988, the so called “Citizenship Constitution”. In addition to ensuring everyone the rights to education, and establishing mandatory schooling for students aged from four to 17 years old, the Statement also guarantees specialized educational services to people with specific educational needs. In 1990, the Child and Adolescent Statute ensures specialized education to all students with disabilities, preferably within the public school system, as well as protective provisions for work and employment.

Soon after, the Salamanca Statement (Organização das Nações Unidas [ONU], 1994) is signed by Brazil, addressing principles, policies, and practices. It represents the first global recognition of *inclusive* education as means for educating the population with disabilities and a variety of learning specificities, demanding measures to reduce inequities. These principles definitely influence the new National Education Policy, established in 1996 as the main legal provision for inclusive education in Brazil. A major reform is made in the public system regarding the access of children with disabilities, providing a restructuring of special education centers, teacher education, and a new financial policy. Moreover, issues regarding discrimination and inclusion were addressed by the 2001 Inter-American Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities and issues regarding the facilities and infrastructure for inclusive schools were addressed by the 2007 Education Development Plan.

A sequence of policies in the following years conveyed and unfolded issues presented by previous statements. The 2008 Special Education National Policy innovates with a new proposal of lifelong teacher education and the new approach to how children with special education needs would participate in regular classes within the school. The inclusion of autistic people⁴ would first be extensively addressed in 2012 by the National Policy on the Protection of the Rights of People with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Grounded on latest research and influenced by international statements on the specific disorder, new terms are presented: the Autistic Spectrum Disorder replaces the “Global Development Disorder”. It also guarantees the support of an individual specialized assistant at school. An extended protection to the rights of people with disabilities was presented by the 2015 Statute on Persons with Disabilities, which granted legal basic provisions, such as transportation, education, and health services.

Despite the specific protection plans and provisions for autistic persons in Brazil, there is a lack of National statistics on autistic students enrolled in the regular or special education system to support an overview on how school is experienced by people in the Spectrum. A similar situation applies to people with disabilities⁵ in general and to gifted and talented students. Such misrepresentation of the educational scenario is probably due to a historical neglect of the

⁴ We chose to use the term “autistic person” instead of “person with autism” because this is the preferred term by autistic activists in Brazil. It is perceived to be an identity rather than something you have.

⁵ Term used by Brazilian Legislation in reference to individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which may obstruct their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with other persons. This term is also used to designate autistic persons in the legal context.

theme (Ministério da Educação, 2014). In addition, our most important indicator on inclusion only measures the number of students enrolled in schools, thus it is not possible to observe failure or age-grade distortion indexes nor infer about details about how autistic population's trajectories in school look like.

We chose to study Autism because of the worldwide increase in diagnoses in recent years (McPartland et al., 2014), as well as a greater appearance in the media (Rios et al., 2015). This increasing proportion since the 1990s is estimated by the greater visibility of autism in the media, by the current breadth of diagnosis (as a spectrum), and by the identification of a greater number of cases that do not present an intellectual deficit, such as Asperger's Syndrome and high-functioning Autism, both currently referred to as a mild level of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). According to data from the only national study on Autism in Brazil, Portrait of Autism (Mello et al., 2013), in 2010 we had an estimate of about 0.62% of the Brazilian population that falls within the diagnosis of ASD, making up about 1.3 million autistic people in the country.

When we observe what type of research has been done in Brazil concerning Autism, there is little research in graduate level academia, but a fair number of articles. However, not many of these publications satisfy our search – inclusion, education, and subjectivity. Most of the research that has been done, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, is focused on genetic, neurological, and developmental aspects (McPartland et al., 2014), with only few specific applications in the school environment.

This and the heterogeneous manifestation of the spectrum makes Autism an opportune and rich field to research and understand how inclusive practices at school can affect the way autistic students develop relationships and themselves.

Theoretical perspectives on persons with disabilities

The Cultural Psychology (Valsiner et al., 2016) is developed based on Lev S. Vygotsky's approach by understanding the individual as a social being, immersed in human culture and history. Our main focus will be the implications of his ideas on human cultural developmental within schooling and formal education. Vygotsky's great theory, highly influenced by Spinoza and Marx, is that human beings are constituted by their relationships with the world and with other human beings. The biological development happens at the same time as cultural

development. And it is the latter that enables the development of high cognitive skills, in which meaning-making is central. Cultural development, therefore, although based on biological development, becomes the main factor in the constitution and regulation of the human mind and higher psychological processes, becoming even a means of expanding our innate biological assets (Bruner, 2008; van der Veer & Valsiner, 2014; Vigotski, 2003; Vygotsky, 2006).

We are born within a cultural system that mediates our own development. Here, we define culture as the set of meanings emerging from the relationships between various otherness (objects, institutions, explicit and implicit rules, other individuals) in a given space (virtual or physical) in a certain period of time, acting as the organizing principle of the human mind (Bandlamudi, 1994; Flusser, 2007; Valsiner & Han, 2008). By mediating artifacts and language, we create new mutual meanings from relationships, generating a consciousness that is necessarily collective. The individual mind is social (van der Veer & Valsiner, 2014) and development takes place over time both in relation to culture and the individual's own biographical narrative (McAdams, 2001). This creates a chain of stimuli and interactions with the world that affect each other in an eternal dialogue.

From the experience in culture, one acquires language and becomes able to communicate with others, scaffolding one's development. By placing language (speech, word) as a cultural tool, one expands one's meaning-making and experiences, being able to understand the surrounding reality and to become aware of oneself and the world. This process of cultural development occurs with neurotypical individuals and people with no disabilities, since the available cultural tools, i.e., shared codes and signs, are adequate and accessible to them. Nevertheless, when an individual is affected by any biological limitation, they may not gain access to the possible affordances of such cultural tools. By being deprived from the internalization of cultural tools, they may not be able to engage in social relations and, therefore, become culturally isolated. We will use a deaf person as an example: if there is no tool that replaces speech, this individual cannot communicate. We know, however, that there is a substitute for the spoken word, the sign language. Therefore, even if there is a limitation caused by a biological condition, once one acquires a tool that is accessible, one manages to meet their social development and is able to relate to the world (van der Veer & Valsiner, 2014; Vygotsky, 1997).

Disability is seen by Vygotsky as the social assessment of an atypical physiological condition, not necessarily implying a dysfunction. What leads to the perception of dysfunction is the cultural reality that lacks appropriate instruments for these individuals. He also makes a distinction from primary defects (biological, such as deafness and blindness) and secondary defects (sociocultural dysfunctions). This distinction is helpful to understand non-typical development. By creating proper mediation tools, one may enable the creation of alternative and equivalent ways for their cultural development to take place. From there, we could reach an inclusive society, where defects would be seen as mere characteristics, and it would be possible to manipulate our tools to suit whoever needs it (Rodina, 2006).

The Dialogical Self

After contextualizing how we understand the role of social relations within culture and psychological development, we will focus on the autistic person. We present an approach that helps us explain the phenomena of subjectivity in a holistic and systemic way, which also complements Vygotsky's view. These are the Dialogical Theories, and we will focus on their implications for the constitution of the self. Dialogism emerges as a scientific paradigm, bringing a perspective of continuous feedback between person and world, conceiving this world as cultural, material and also of other people. Within this approach, we can work with a micro and mesogenetic perspective, to understand the whole system in which autistic individuals develop themselves and their relationships. It is important to emphasize that although much of the research on dialogical theories is focused on semiotics, we stress dialogism mainly as an epistemological and ontological concept, interpreting all situations from multiple determinations and focusing on how individuals create meaning about themselves and the world around them by a continuous exchange of utterances (Hermans, 2001b; Linell, 2009).

Dialogism can be seen as an ontological category, where the concept of otherness (the other) is generalized in an ethical, religious, and metaphysical sense – dialogism explains the functioning of the world in a macro sense. This is one of the premises of this study. In categorizing dialogism as epistemology, we understand that the basis of the construction of knowledge and meaning of humanity is through dialogue, that is, through a relationship between two or more people that negotiate different points of view that are in search of a consensus, a

creation of mutual understandable meaning. The tensions between the relations of the self and the other are exactly what causes movement and changes, for it is the lack of and seek for consensus that maintains the relation between participants.

When we establish a self that emerges in a dialogical sense, this self is embedded in culture and reciprocal constitution, that is, this self affects and is also affected by the other. This dialogical self embraces the multiplicity of relationships and, within a single unit, positions itself in different ways according to the context in which it finds itself and what relationship is established (Hermans, 2001b; Marková, 2003; Valsiner & Han, 2008). Thinking about human development in this perspective, we realize that it is not a linear process and cannot be studied only from isolated variables. To understand one's development, we must understand that there is a dynamic coexistence of various factors (external and internal) that are potentially conflicting with each other. This fusion of processes causes transformations throughout one's life and, in a sociological sense, leads the history of humanity. The development is much closer to a spiral (Bibace & Kharlamov, 2013) than to a stairway, where each transformation has a rearrangement of skills and competences from the differentiation, articulation with the other skills, and hierarchical integration within the system.

The relationship of the self to the “not-self” is one of the starting points for understanding the concept of the dialogical self as a complex of positions situated in space and time. First, the recognition of the social others as part of identity emergence in a paradox of denial: to understand that the “social other” is not “I,” and that “I” is therefore not the social other. Insofar that it is possible to access a visible, comprehensible, and assimilable “other,” there is also an “other” that is inaccessible, incomprehensible, and unassimilable, for this aspect of otherness is infinitely distant from the self (Freire, 2016). One cannot understand the other completely (Sklar, 2001, 2003). By one hand, if it is not possible to understand the other (even if generalized) completely, it would not be possible to agree on dialogue, since the creation of meaning would never be the same for the individuals themselves – despite the search for consensus. The dialogical self is continuously constituted by a relationship to otherness that needs to be negotiated, because it is from that relation that new meanings emerge in the form of voices and personal positions.

If the self is this multitude of relations, a polyphony, how do we make sense of this structure considering contradictions and different contexts? One way of understanding this is

by the concept of I-positions. This polyphony of social voices causes the self to relate in different ways depending on its interlocutor and the living situation, being represented by several positions. For instance, I as a teacher emerges in relation to my student as a social other. Such relational experience is situated in time and space, where self qualifications are mutually negotiated. The I-position(s) I may incorporate as a teacher may dialogue with the I-position as a black woman and the I-position as a religious person. The inner interactions among these several positions comprises a semiotic affective field that may take part in the self meaning processes negotiated between I and my student in school. The dialogical self, therefore, is a set of possible positions of the self in relation to the possible others, or I-positions, which dynamically relate to each other in complementary or contradictory ways (Freire & Branco, 2016; Salgado & Hermans, 2005). The self is a semiotic system that is constituted of a field of several social voices and positionings that coexist with each other in different layers of interactions. There is a multiplicity of I-positions as many as there is of interlocutors or meaningful others that are engaged within a given time and space. When the interlocutor changes positions, perspectives, and subjective references, one's self will also reposition the self meaning system (Freire & Branco, 2016; Hermans, 2001a; Salgado & Hermans, 2005). From this, we confirm that subjectivity also develops within this set of social frames and the interlocutors with which the self relates.

Autistic persons and their relationships

Given that cultural development is essential for human development, we propose a reflection on inclusion and exclusion in culture. Although it is not possible to be completely isolated from culture, it is important to understand that social participation does not occur homogeneously. Minority groups have historically been systematically excluded from certain social practices, thus being deprived from establishing meaningful dialogue and expressing their voice and position in the community that surrounds them (Luengo, 2010; Skliar, 2001). When we study the school context as a community that also has its culture and shared practices, values, and tools, we can also understand how it affects the behavior and attitudes of the individuals that are inserted in it, as well as the positions they manifest.

The main implication of the dialogical self in schools is understanding that school culture comes not only from content transmission, but from the various meaning-making practices shared in the classroom, at playtime, and in relationships across all types of participants. If we want to understand the inclusion process of autistic persons at school through the dialogical self framework, we need first to capture whom the autistic student relates to, what are the possible positions, and how they can express their voice. In this study, we explore how the dialogical approach to the self development through the analysis of I-positions can help assess school relationships and make improvements in school culture. Our study design involved an immersion experience in the research field for approximately 6 months, with a diverse group of participants in an inclusive school, as it is detailed in the next section.

Methods

Context

The school chosen for this study is located in a populated urban region of middle and upper classes; however, the students come from very different economical backgrounds. It is a public primary school from grade 1 to 5 that offers full-time activities and is a reference regarding inclusion of autistic students. Special education students can stay in the school up to 15 years old. At the time of this research, the school had 221 students, including 40 autistic students in both regular and special education classrooms. In total, there are 12 regular classrooms and 8 special education classrooms. Autistic students can take part in either regular or special classroom, or both, which is part of a transition plan for such students, guided by the school policies. The map in Figure 1 shows how the school is physically organized and where the classes observed for this study are located.

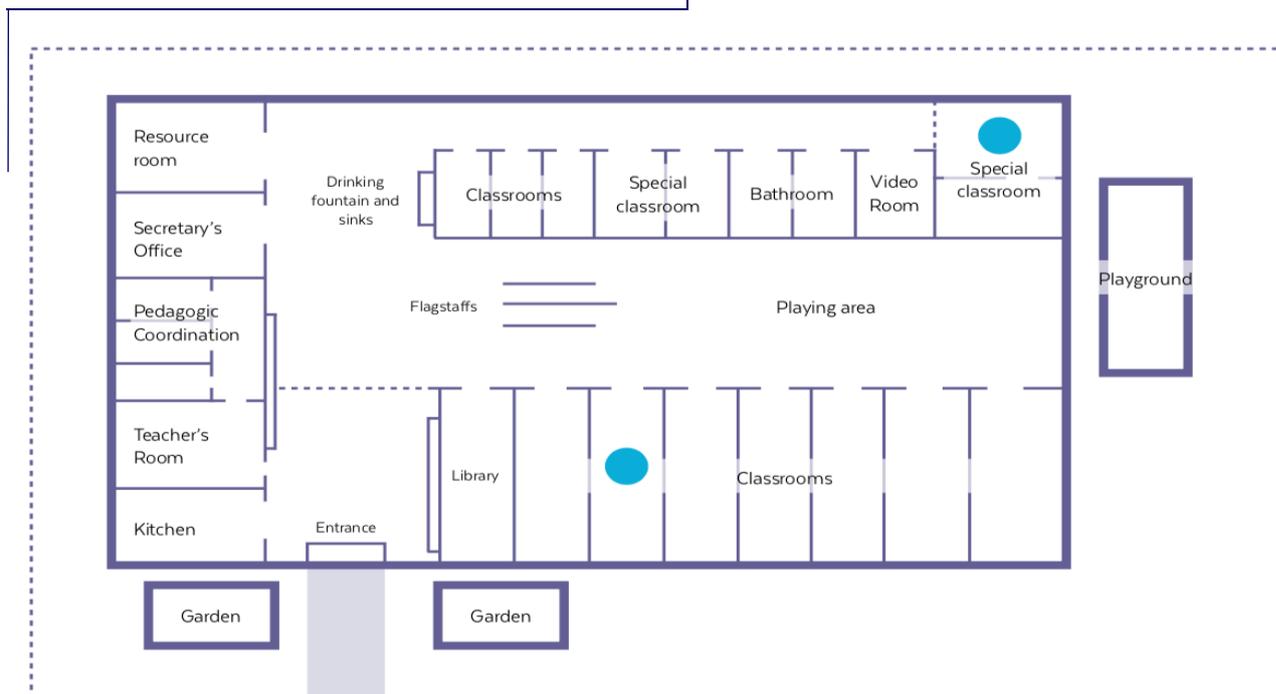


Figure 1 – School map

Note. The blue dots represent the two observed classrooms

As seen in Figure 1, the special education section is in a reserved corridor. At the far left is the special education resource room, which is temporarily out of service since 2018. Activities were paused when the specialized teacher went on leave and there was no one to replace her. The far right corner has a classroom that attend autistic students with more severe sensitivity to noise and movement and who require a more guided learning assistance. It is interesting to note that the room was not originally an actual classroom, but the end of a hallway. This improvised space underwent some modifications and minor renovations to allocate a new class after the beginning of the school term.

Thus, to overcome the apparent limited contact of the special education section with the rest of the school, shared activities such as parties and outings are carried out together whenever possible, aiming to help students socialize. During recess, all students have access to the same patio and have the opportunity to interact within the same space.

There are differences in the dynamics of special education classes and the regular classes in which autistic students are included. In the special education classes, there are two teachers to four students, therefore, each teacher closely manages leaning on only two students. Teaching

and learning practices are more focused on creating autonomy within the school and have a more personalized approach.

When an autistic student is included in a regular classroom, there is a reduction in the number of students and often the support of a tutor, a teacher assistant, or a social educator, to help the student follow the class. Curricular activities are adapted and students' development is closely observed by the pedagogical team, according to the individual plan of this student.

Participants

This research included five autistic students (from seven to 14 years-old), two non-autistic students (from nine to 11 years-old), two teachers and one assistant teacher, as shown in Figure 1. We observed these participants in the classroom and in the playground, interviewed the adults, and conducted activities with the children. Participants took part in all empirical activities and have an important role in the three case studies selected for this article.

Camila, Gustavo, and Max were selected because of their different characteristics from each other, and because they were in different environments: Camila was in the special class, and Gustavo and Max were already included in the regular class. They also had very different ways of interacting with the school community, by their individual subjective qualities and by their different verbal capacities. Because we aim to understand the dynamics of their social relationships, we focused on situations of interpersonal interactions. All subjects participated in naturalistic observations in the class and during breaks, in the playground (Table 1).

Table 1 – Participants

Case	Participants	Description	Activity
Camila, Gustavo, and Max	Elza	Coordinator	Interview Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess
	Camila	Autistic student Special class 7 years old	Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess Direct observation in group activity with other children
Camila	Mônica	Teacher Special class	Interview Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess
	Mateus	Autistic student Camilla's colleague Special class 7 years old	Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess Direct observation in group activity with other children
Gustavo & Max	Gustavo	Autistic student Regular class 13 years old	Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess Direct observation in group activity with other children
	Max	Autistic student Regular class 14 years old	Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess Direct observation in group activity with other children
	Joana	Teacher Regular Class 5th grade	Interview Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess
	Yasmin	Autistic student Max's and Gustavo's colleague Regular class 14 years old	Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess
	Maíra	Gustavo's friend from 3rd grade 9 years old	Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess Direct observation in group activity with other children
	Jade	Gustavo's and Max's colleague Regular class 11 years old	Naturalistic Observation in the classroom and recess Direct observation in group activity with other children
	Max	Amanda	5th grade pedagogical assistant Special Ed. Assistant Max and Yasmin

Educators (fellows, teachers, and coordinator) were interviewed and part of the children also participated in a group activity, where they were observed directly. Coordinator Elza was established as a participant in all the case studies, since she contacted all the subjects chosen for the case. Teacher Joana and students Yasmin, Jade, and Maíra were established as participants in the Gustavo and Max cases, as they were classmates. Jade and Maíra were also invited to participate later, since we realized that they interacted at different times with the students being observed. Joana is a teacher of inclusive classrooms and has three autistic students: Gustavo, Max, and Yasmin, and the two latter also have support from an assistant teacher. Gustavo is 13 years old, therefore, two years older than the rest of his neurotypical peers, and Yasmin and Max are 14 years-old, three years older than the rest of the classroom (Figura 2).

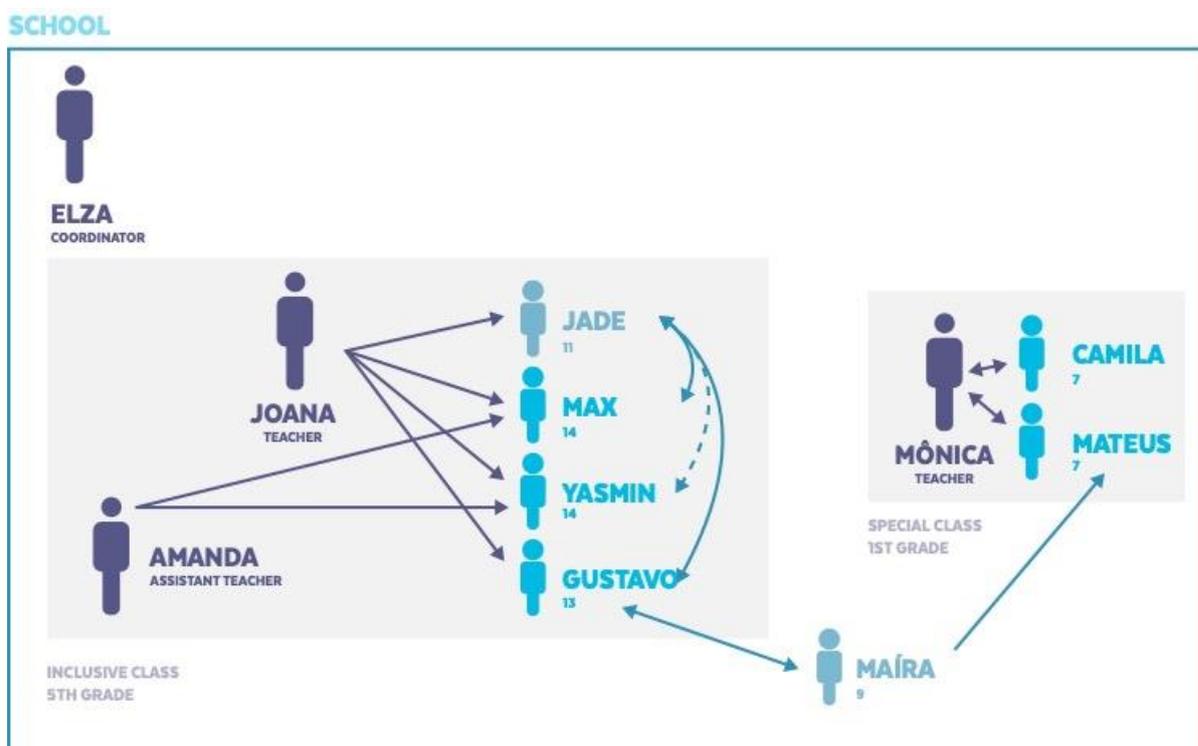


Figure 2 – Diagram of the research participants relationship webs

Procedures and instruments

The empirical information was analyzed from its content and discourse, seeking to understand the categories that repeat themselves and decipher their hidden meanings (Bardin, 1977). For Bardin, everything that is communicated can be interpreted beyond mere words. Each speech has a polysemy of meanings beyond what is immediately perceived. Every word

that was written or spoken during this research was carefully classified, organized, and interpreted with the goal of understanding the foundation of this school's culture. The constructed empirical information has been compared among all the participants of the research, so that it was possible to consolidate a broad view of the situation, understanding what is given of the context and what is particular to each of the subjects (Flick, 2009). The Table 2 helps to understand the process and procedures used.

Table 2 – Methods and Procedures According to Specific Research Objectives

Specific Objective	Method	Procedure
Describing schooling processes at the field research site with a focus on inclusive practices	Institutional mapping; Document analysis; Interviews; Naturalistic observations	Thematic analysis of public policies that interfere with the schooling of autistic people and the political and pedagogical project of the chosen school; Identifying teaching and schooling practices with focus on autistic persons
Investigating the educators' meanings about the subjectivity of their autistic students and their interactions with their colleagues and with the school community	Semi-structured interviews	Content analysis; Identification of I-positions
Analyzing how the dynamics of positioning of each subject occurs in relation to school practices	Semi-structured interviews; Direct observations of group dynamics; Naturalistic Observations	Establishing relations between observed practices and identified I-positions

By bringing several subjects into the research and using different methods for building information, we have a richer and more assertive research, being able to compare the studied literature and the empirical reality with greater clarity. For each of the categories analyzed in the various methods, we will see which results complement each other and which results contradict each other, interpreting from this our findings.

To understand the self-meanings of the students and the educators, the analysis considered the positioning dynamics' indicators in all the material constructed (Freire & Branco, 2016; Hermans, 2001a). The approach made it possible to emphasize the socio-affective

relationships of the autistic subjects with their peers, teachers, and others. Thus, from the comparison of all the information collected, we can understand what are the main relationships established and what are the possible positions in these relationships.

Initially, we used different types of coding, working on the integration of discourse analysis in the examination of content within the available materials. The codes were all handled by software, called MAXQDA. Therefore, they were all grouped together and could be filtered and reorganized as needed.

This analysis was carried out in three main steps, not necessarily in a linear way, according to Figure 3:

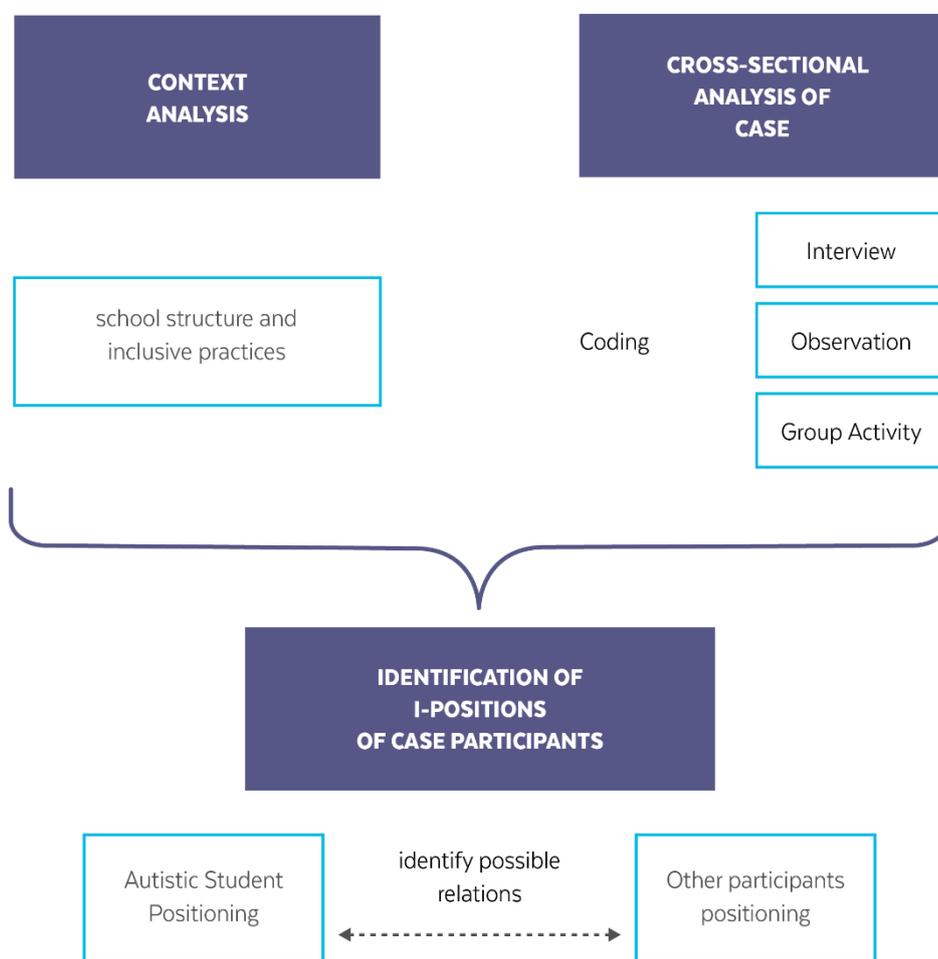


Figure 3 – Analysis framework

1. Context analysis: from the interviews and from the School's Political-Pedagogical Project, we were able to have a holistic view of elements of the current school culture, with a focus on inclusion and perception of autistic students. At this stage, we had some categories of codes to help us understand this scenario:
 - a) School practices: what teachers and instructors actually do;
 - b) School structure: which are the school processes and how their physical structure contributes to it;
 - c) Perception about inclusion: how the school community defines what is inclusion and what they perceive to be actually happening in school;
2. Autistic Student Perception: what are the traits they see, as well as what is common and individual among the students they accompany;
 - d) Relationship with the family of students, especially autistic ones: how the family's role within the school is seen and how the school community relates to it;
 - e) Relationship with students: how they relate to students, autistic and non-autistic;
3. Perception of relationship among children: what they observe on a daily basis among children, especially among autistic and non-autistic children, both in the regular class and in the special class.
4. Cross-sectional analysis of the selected case: this step involved the codification and interpretation of all the material linked to a single child, to better understand the relationships focused on it, using the same categories of the context analysis stage. From this it was possible understand how the interview, observation, and dynamics information would relate to each other. The interview helps us to explain the thoughts and perceptions of the school community, the observation in the classroom and other moments show us what happens in fact (even without an interpretation of the participants), and the dynamics act as an opportunity to see relationships among children in a more controlled environment with a specific activity.
5. Identification of dynamic self-positioning for each case: from all this information we were able to extract the external positions of each participant, and our focus here was to divide the positions into groups focused on Gustavo, Max, and Camila, the cases that

will be presented below. The objective of this step is to find possible correlations between the positions that can be analyzed in the light of our theoretical material.

Results

To understand school culture and school practices, one must access what are the meanings created by all the participants and what they perceive about the school and its students. In the first item of these results, we bring the educators' meanings about the school, inclusive practices, autism and autistic persons, and, lastly, inclusion. This information was constructed during the interviews, with four participants: a teacher from the special classroom, a teacher from the regular classroom, a pedagogical coordinator, and a special education assistant.

Inclusive educational practices

This school has a very particular policy: Autistic students and neurotypical students share the same physical space and activities. The space is very organic, with all classrooms connected by a central common indoor patio. The practices aim to include students from special classes in school activities as a whole. For instance, students enrolled in regular classes become aware of what autism is and learn to interact with autistic children. The special class teacher observed in her years of experience that it is very important that all students have opportunities (provided by the curriculum) of being able to relate to other children and learn from them. Nevertheless, even with the school's pioneer role in inclusion, there are teachers who have the perception that the special class is closed off to the rest of the school.

In the special class, the teacher is mainly concerned with developing autonomy. However, the understanding of autonomy is relative for each student. In some cases, it means literacy achievement and moving to a regular class. In other cases, it means being able to go to the bathroom alone. The education can be much more individualized, based on each child's development plan, combining the needs of content, adequate expression, and behavior. With years of experience, projects that go far beyond content have also emerged.

In the regular class, there are often three positions for instructors: teacher, special education assistant, and social educator (which is a voluntary role). The teacher's view within

this context is closer to integrating the autistic student into the rest of the class, making adaptations to activities when necessary. For example, Gustavo's teacher, Joana, uses base ten building blocks to work with mathematics. Gustavo, like other students who are in a mild area of the spectrum, usually needs much more adaptations of form or time of activity to learn different contents in the classroom. This profile presents much more difficulties in the social aspect than in the content. There are also students such as Max, who is even included in a regular class, but has very different activities from his colleagues, because his cognitive development was different. In this situation, the role of the special education assistant is most relevant, as they will accompany the student in a more attentive and individualized way, doing with them activities programmed by the teacher and creating strategies to help this student when necessary. In most cases, the special education assistant is not only responsible for the pedagogical accompaniment, but also for helping students when they do not have total autonomy to carry out their daily activities (such as going to the bathroom or washing their hands).

There is also support from professionals outside the school, since there are children who are accompanied by psychiatrists, psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and so on. The school community as a whole is open to this partnership, with the aim of offering better education to its students. In practice, however, the teachers in the special class have the greatest contact with these professionals, while teachers in the regular class seek greater support from professionals already in the special classes, mainly because regular teachers have no specific inclusion training whatsoever.

Educators' perspectives on autism and inclusion

"Autism is cruel" - this sentence was spoken in many ways throughout the interviews with educators. Even with an excellent relationship with the children, educators understand that the diagnosis brings with it several difficulties. Autism is seen as a complex condition that often does not come alone, affecting children and their relationship with the world in several aspects. Obtaining a diagnosis often becomes a burden for the child and the family, especially for those individuals who are in a more severe area of the spectrum. Even with this view, the educators of this school live everyday with children on the spectrum. This enables them to have a deeper perception of these individuals than most educators in the regular system – and that goes beyond a diagnosis or an acronym that comes before the student name in their records. In a school

where more than 40 autistic children are enrolled, it is impossible not to notice their similarities and differences. Each educator, however, signifies their experiences differently.

We observed that those who work more closely with autistic students, such as the special class teacher and the special education assistant, have more technical knowledge and also use a more precise vocabulary to describe certain situations. Words like “stimming” or “echolalia,” nevertheless, are already present in the common vocabulary of all educators.

As a characterization, educators do observe that most autistic people have auditory hypersensitivity, some with other sensory integration issues as well. But within the school reality, it is quite common to see children with earmuffs, inside or outside the classroom. Due to the amount of stimuli, the school is often seen as an aversive environment for these students. The teacher, then, needs to learn to deal with the sensory peculiarities of each child, in addition to making their colleagues aware to be more cautious around them. Another striking feature for all educators is the difficulties of expression. Especially for educators present in regular classes, accessing the child who has not developed verbal speech is a daily challenge that brings a lot of insecurity. Amanda, the special education assistant, explains that most of her students’ reactions are very subtle and, because of that, she needs to be more attentive to understand their needs, often opting for trial and error strategies and observing their changes in behavior.

Isolation and socialization difficulties are also seen as characteristics of these autistic subjects, nonetheless, educators feel the school is able to help more in this area. There are divergent views between the teacher of the special class, Mônica, and other educators. For her, isolation is not something negative, but something necessary for a moment of sensorial reorganization. Thus, there are times when the autistic child needs to be alone and away from peers so that they can self-regulate (often with the use of a reinforcer or through stimming). Some educators note that proximity to peers seems to be important for autistic students, even though they have difficulty in socializing and need isolation at times. They see, however, the difficulty of autistic people to participate in play, especially when there is more abstract and symbolic language.

There is also a challenge regarding the conditions of the autistic spectrum: there are limitations that cannot be overcome. Some children will not respond to demands of formal education and will have to take an alternative route. The issue of career and education is seen as sensitive by educators, who also observe this in all families. Educators and families alike

understand the difficulty of this pedagogical gain throughout the school trajectory for some subjects, so they feel happy to see the students' progress, no matter how small it may seem to others. And this observed progress goes beyond the content: participating in a game, learning to express oneself in another way, having the autonomy to wash one's hands... All of these are also achievements to be celebrated.

Even with this diversity of meanings, educators believe that the autistic child is simply a child and each one of them is different. It is therefore important for each educator to learn what is relevant to their students, respecting them and helping them develop what makes sense within their reality.

Although this school is a reference in inclusion, there is always room for improvement. And even now, inclusion is not seen as something that has already been resolved. As mentioned earlier, the interviewed educators see that inclusion is still far behind in the pedagogical part, but very good in terms of socialization. Often, autistic students included in regular classes do not study the same content as their colleagues, and, for this reason end up not participating in all classroom routines. Inclusion in the regular class turns out to be mostly physical, with no perception of true belonging. To truly include, human and material resources are still needed. There are educators who feel that the school's discourse and actions are inconsistent at different times. "Often our inclusion excludes, because we still separate the 'included student' from the 'regular student'" - Elza, the school's pedagogical coordinator, talks about how the autistic students are treated differently, precisely because they are labeled as 'included students,' sometimes being seen as intruders or merely observers in classroom.

Regarding the educational system itself, even with the difficulties, they see the work as satisfactory until the fifth grade. But upon reaching the next level of education in another school, the autistic child no longer has the same individualized support, since inclusion mechanisms such as the individual development plan only exist until the fifth grade. However, an autistic person remains autistic for the rest of their life. This challenge is systemic, not only at this school. The perception that remains, nevertheless, is that when leaving this safe space, however good it may be, the child will have to face difficulties in a world that is not prepared to deal with them.

When asked what these educators believe inclusion is, they all mentioned that true inclusion is normal. In a way, it is invisible, natural. Inclusion comes to be seen not only as a result, but as a cultural characteristic.

In addition, two words appear a lot when asking about inclusion: equality and normality. Inclusion is, therefore, seen as a comparative phenomenon of one and the society one lives in, who will judge this person as normal or not. If nobody is equal to anyone, inclusion is what makes us feel equal even with our differences. Some see that the path to inclusion is precisely to take the focus away from differences, reinforcing what makes us equal. In the same line of reasoning, there are those who seek the maxim “everyone is normal,” where no one will be treated differently from anyone. Normality and equality are seen as objectives to be achieved, not necessarily by changing the individual, but by changing the attitude of the collectivity. Despite this, we also have discourses that abhor normality: “normality is unhappiness”. This discourse focuses on individual characteristics and not on comparison with the collective. Instead of the search for normality, it promotes a search for the acceptance of differences and respect for human beings, with all their uniqueness, thus having a school for everyone and for each one.

Analysis framework: The three axes of relationships

From all this empirical information, we were able to categorize all interactions observed in three axes of relationships that coexist in the context and observed situations: *Playing*, *Helping*, and *Caring*. Each axis was defined based on the quality of interactions. The dynamics of self positionings were mutually attributed and negotiated in a plural way among children and between adults and children. From the interviews, we were able to observe the positionings dynamics between adult and children in a more tangible way. According to their understanding of children’s development, pedagogical approach, and social interaction personal style, adults would engage with children based on two main motives: or oriented to establishing a deep affective connection with the child or moved by their sense of professional responsibility. Thus, the axes “caring” and “helping” arise, respectively. We chose not to use an “educate” or “learn-teach” label for this last axis, since only covering pedagogical activities would not be enough to describe this relationship. With the observations in the classroom, this became even clearer. When the other students established relationships based on this responsibility towards the

autistic people (which comes from a configuration of the school culture), their support was not pedagogical, but global. Pedagogical activity was the shared practice that united them. They helped the autistic subject with whatever was necessary, in the activity, accompanying the classroom exit, and handling objects, being attentive to provide the conditions that were necessary for the smooth running of the activities in a given situation. The “playing” axis also arises from observations of autistic subjects’ interactions with other children at times where this responsibility to help or the desire to care is secondary. That is, we observed that play was an end in itself.

Playing

From the dictionary, playing means: having fun, entertaining oneself with objects or play activities or simulating real-life situations. But what best helps us to understand this axis is the definition by Vygotsky (1991): playing is also part of child development, creating imaginary situations that supply needs in the child that cannot be realized immediately; in a playful relationship, both children immerse themselves in this unexpected reality of the moment. Therefore, we characterize this axis as the relationship where both people see themselves as equals (there is not necessarily a relationship of responsibility towards the other) and interact with each other to have fun from this imaginary situation (a game, a joke). This relationship axis is the most common among children, especially non-autistic children matriculated at school, but it is not limited to them alone. Some adults may also take positions within this axis. When we observe this type of relationship between autistic and non-autistic people, we have seen that there are some contexts in which this is favored. This axis manifests itself very often among someone who did not live in the classroom with them. This non-autistic person did not have the responsibility to help them with the daily activities, which helped form this bond to play with.

Situation 1 – Jumping rope

Max and girls

Max was at recess.

He was near the educator that accompanies him, playing in circles with a rope.

As in many other days, he was alone and was not interacting with other children around him.

Sometimes he would stop and observe, but just as quickly he would go back to his activity.

Until a younger girl came close to him and started playing. She suggested that he kept spinning, then she would stay in the same place and jump when the rope got near her. While they were playing, a few other girls had arrived and made a circle around Max.

They continued playing for the next few minutes, laughing and hugging.

Helping

From the dictionary, helping means: giving help or assistance to someone; facilitating, favoring, propitiating. As the axis of relationship, we define it as an objective help and support. This axis of relationship is most seen in teachers, special education assistants, and school professionals in general, and features a command-based communication. Sometimes, however, other children take on this role. When there are no special education assistants or social educators to help autistic children, many times their colleagues take on this job. They help with daily activities and chores (such as getting something in another classroom or going to the bathroom), sometimes by teacher's order and sometimes alone.

Situation 2 – Getting the ear muffler

Gustavo and Jade

The school was very noisy that day. The reforms were happening just beside Gustavo's class.

Because of his noise sensibility, he was quite agitated and verbalized a few times "what noise is this?".

His peers understand his disturbance when it happens and try to help.

Thus, they suggest to the teacher that someone should go out to Miss Monica's classroom to get the ear muffler.

Today, Jade went there with Gustavo.

When both returned to the class, Gustavo starts wearing the ear muffler and is immediately calmer.

Caring

From the dictionary, caring means: to treat with care; and care is defined as: way of acting with concern, attention that is dedicated to someone or activity that requires zeal. This relationship comes mainly from affection, from the sense that you should help someone who is more vulnerable than you. This relationship is more common among younger girls and autistic children (between 6 and 7 years old).

Situation 3 – Eye on the Ice Cream Yasmin and Camila

It was recess.

Camila often has ice cream during recess, because a teacher brings a few to the school to sell.

Yasmin was keeping an eye on the other kids, as usual. Because she's older, she presents herself in a role of responsibility. On this day, she saw Camila disturbed with her ice cream and went to see what was happening.

She went to Camila, who expressed that she didn't want the ice cream anymore. Yasmin takes the ice cream and comes to talk to Mônica, telling her that Camila no longer wanted the ice cream and that she would throw it away.

The positions categorized in each axis are as followed (Table 3):

Table 3 – Participants and the 3 Axes of Relationships

	Caring	Helping	Playing
Teacher	Loving the students; Seeing students developing as a passion; Being affectionate with the students (mostly hugging)	Helping with going to the bathroom and other hygiene needs; Giving positive reinforcement for a job well done	Telling jokes and stories to the students; Being a “rebel” with the students
Special Ed Assistant	Loving the students; Getting affected by the students' well-being	Helping with going to the bathroom and other hygiene needs; Helping to tie shoe; Helping with class activities; Teaching the students how to take care of their needs; Giving positive reinforcement for a job well done	Telling jokes and stories to the students

Peer / Friend	Loving the students; Holding hands; Hugging; Being responsible for the autistic child during recess; Asking permission for the teacher to be with the autistic child in recess	Being responsible for getting the ear muffler; Being responsible for taking a student on a walk; Helping with class activities	Teaching how to play a game; Calling others to play with them
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It is important to note that, despite this division, there are times when these axes overlap, creating more complex relationships. For example, it is very common for Mônica to establish moments where she helps and cares at the same time, washing Camila’s hands and speaking words of affection while helping her. In situation 4, we illustrate a situation where all three axes are present. **Playing**, by the established playful situation (teaching and helping to play), **Helping**, by the perception of vulnerability and affection (the embraces and the manifestation of zeal), and **Caring**, by the established responsibility relationship (being responsible for Mateus in the hour of recess). Each of these relationships can encompass various I-positions and various positioning possibilities, which vary according to the interlocutor or situation in which those involved are.

Based on an individual positioning map, we observed that most of the self positionings lie within the *Helping* relationship. It is interesting to note many positions of denial, such as “not knowing” or “not being a specialist,” mainly coming from the teacher and the regular teacher. Most of these positions are connected with a sense of lack of support, lack of knowledge, and insecurity.

Among the educators observed and interviewed, most of their positions are in the *Helping* axis, followed by *Caring* and lastly, with much less possible positions, *Playing*. The axis with less observed positions in students-educator relationships was the *Playing* axis. This result was expected in view of the proportion of educators to children in the research (there were four educators to two children). In addition, there were also positions that emerged by the semi-structured interview (in which only the educators were present), expressing the beliefs of the school community, such as “grateful” and “teacher and therapists”. During the observations, however, there were some emerging positions that we have identified as “informal” and “spontaneous,” which show us that there are intersubjective moments based on a more fluid interaction with the children. A few examples for the educators are “flexible” or even “caring”.

Among the other children, the number of positions observed in each axis of relationship was fairly balanced regarding the possible positions.

Culture canalization of self positionings within school

Culture is the organizing principle of the human mind, often invisible and constantly changing (Branco et al., 2008; Christensen, 2017; Valsiner & Han, 2008). When it comes to analyzing human relationships, they take place within a set of possible positions concerning the individuals that participate in them. As seen in Figure 3, each individual has a set of possible *I-positions* (here we are framing this relationship in the school context). This does not mean that each position has a directly related position within the interlocutor, but when one of the persons positions him/herself in a dialogue, the other person's positioning is a response to that first positioning. There is a negotiation, even with the absence of verbal discourse. That is how cultural messages get across the community, fostering specific ways of meaning-making. This phenomenon is analogous to another ontological phenomenon called *canalization* (Boulanger, 2017; Branco et al., 2008).

Culture canalization works by the activation of multiple strategies used to attune the DSS [the dialogical self system] to the context's constraints and demands, while maintaining the system with a sense of self continuity along ontogenesis. The more affect-laden cultural messages are, the more effective the internalization process. (Branco, 2016, p. 234)

Canalization is often described as the force cultural structures exert on individuals, influencing the shape of their self system. Nevertheless, in human culture, meaning-making is always a bidirectional process (Valsiner & Han, 2008), in which individual and society are part of the same process of construction of reality. Within such perspective, we understand the development and changing of one's own self through a systemic view. To investigate the role of social relationship dynamics in the ontogenic development, one has also to deepen the analysis of the context through cultural canalization within and in between the individuals. These processes "canalization processes take place at institutions and specific contexts, such as family and school" (Branco, 2016).

When we understand the school context as a microculture that is mostly constituted of relationships between individuals, we can also interpret the way these relationships affect each

participant role within the culture canalization process. When specific meanings are made available and mediated through specific affective-semiotic actions, certain features of meaning-making emerge as a response within persons' positionings. One does not restrict the latter, but offers a base for a response. This phenomenon, then, gains scale through school practices carried out by the whole community (Boulanger, 2017; Branco et al., 2008).

For instance, when a teacher positions her/himself as a “the one who has the knowledge about math and wants to teach it,” some students might position themselves in response as “someone who hates math,” “someone who loves math,” “someone who doesn’t want to learn math,” “someone who wants to learn math,” “someone who doesn’t care about math,” or even “someone who doesn’t want to learn anything, including math”. When the students position themselves, the teacher also creates another position based on them. And this phenomenon happens all the time, in a continuous cycle, which might feedback or feedforward according the relationship dynamics.

Cultural canalization, however, does not mean that subjects' actions are determined by culture, but that the psychological mechanisms of decision-making and action of the individuals are immersed in a sociocultural context (of which they can rebel), and not isolated. In addition to the human relations that can be part of canalization, other forces must also be included: social representations, symbols, beliefs, and institutions' dynamics and values. All these factors contribute to the creation of shared cultural meanings (Boulanger, 2017; Branco et al., 2008; Freire, 2018; Linell, 2009). From the moment the phenomenon of cultural canalization is understood, at least in part, and becomes conscious, it is possible that subjects can intervene in reality. The conscious action of its impact allows subjects – be they educators or apprentices – to intentionally modify their school culture and create new meanings, moving towards more inclusive practices that also allow greater participation of autistic subjects (Hjörne et al., 2012; Linell, 2009).

Final remarks

If we consider that the emergence and development of the self is a higher psychological function that is semiotically mediated by active internalization of social interactions (Iannaccone et al., 2012), then this study may lay some understanding on the process of how autistic students

may develop the meaning of the self. The three main types of relationships that children and adults establish with autistic children are inherently dialogical in the sense that they consist of mutual responses that may be communicated by speech, gestures, artifacts, and other sign making tools. In any case, there is a semiotic-affective exchange of signs in these relationships. Each type of relationship, *playing*, *caring*, and *helping*, involve a complex articulation of meanings that are formed of voices and practices, which are related to self positionings that constitute oneself.

The interviews with a variety of educators provided very rich descriptions of schooling and learning practices, and they offered different voices and views about autistic children, inclusion, and learning. However, in our methodology, the greatest challenge was to communicate with non-verbal subjects. Despite the effort to adapt within the classrooms, the researcher and the assistant felt they were not with the children long enough to develop alternative ways of communication, thus lacking opportunities for expression. Therefore, a longitudinal design research is very desirable for a study such as this. Gustavo and Yasmin were able to communicate well, because both expressed themselves well verbally. But with Max, Camila, and Mateus, it was necessary to create other means to understand their nuances – we knew when it was uncomfortable because it was expressed in the form of crying or stimming, but our perception of meaning came from the observation and interaction we had with them, interpreted in light of teacher experience (who knew them the longest). We see that for upcoming research, it may be interesting to use *design-based strategies*, developing communication tools in a longer time with the children involved so that they can express themselves in other ways. Furthermore, this study aims to inspire other investigative possibilities to support the construction of interpretative tools and knowledge to meet the development needs of all.

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