

SCHOOL INCLUSION AND AUTISM: TEACHERS' FEELINGS AND PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

The school is characterized as an important space for the development of social and cognitive competences of children, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Given this context, this study investigated the teachers' experience regarding the inclusion of students with ASD, contemplating teachers' feelings and practices. It is a qualitative research, exploratory and transverse in nature. Four teachers from early years of elementary school who had a student with ASD enrolled in the class participated. A semi-structured interview was used and the analysis was qualitative, through thematic analysis. It was shown that the first feelings that emerged in teachers were fear and insecurity. After the period of adaptation, these feelings changed, becoming safety in their work. Regarding the pedagogical practice, it was verified that the teachers made pedagogical adjustments according to the characteristics of each student.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder; teacher; inclusion.

Inclusión escolar y autismo: sentimientos y prácticas docentes

RESUMEN

La escuela se caracteriza cómo un importante espacio para el desarrollo de competencias sociales y cognitivas de niños, incluyendo aquellas con Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA). Delante de ese contexto, ese estudio investigó la experiencia de profesores en relación a la inclusión de alumnos con TEA, contemplando sentimientos y prácticas docentes. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, de cuño exploratorio y de carácter transversal. Participaron cuatro profesoras de cursos iniciales de la enseñanza primaria, que poseían un alumno con TEA matriculado en el grupo. Se utilizó de una entrevista semiestructurada y el análisis fue cualitativo, por intermedio del análisis temático. Se evidenció que los primeros sentimientos que emergieron en los profesores fueron el miedo y la inseguridad. Tras el período de adaptación, esos sentimientos se modificaron, transformándose en seguridad en su labor. Con relación a la práctica pedagógica, se verificó que los docentes realizaron adecuaciones pedagógicas de acuerdo con las características de cada alumno.

Palabras clave: Trastorno del Espectro Autista; Profesor; Inclusión.

Inclusão escolar e autismo: sentimentos e práticas docentes

RESUMO

A escola caracteriza-se como um importante espaço para o desenvolvimento de competências sociais e cognitivas de crianças, incluindo aquelas com Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA). Diante desse contexto, este estudo investigou a experiência de professores em relação à inclusão de alunos com TEA, contemplando sentimentos e práticas docentes. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, de cunho exploratório e de caráter transversal. Participaram quatro professoras de anos iniciais do ensino fundamental, que possuíam um aluno com TEA matriculado na turma. Utilizou-se de uma entrevista semiestructurada e a análise foi qualitativa, através da análise temática. Evidenciou-se que os primeiros sentimentos que emergiram nos professores foram o medo e a insegurança. Após o período de adaptação, esses sentimentos modificaram-se, transformando-se em segurança no seu trabalho. Com relação à prática pedagógica, foi verificado que os docentes realizaram adequações pedagógicas de acordo com as características de cada aluno.

Palavras-chave: Transtorno do Espectro Autista; professor; inclusão.

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INTRODUCTION

The world of Education is full of challenges. Performing the role of teacher with quality and competence requires technical (e.g. specialized training) and personal skills (e.g. enthusiasm, adaptability). One of the aspects that justifies this perception refers to inclusion, which poses to schools the challenge of adaptation to the diversity of students. Thus, it is considered that inclusion at school is linked to personalized care and a recognition of the individual characteristics of each student. The principle of inclusion seeks to create and offer opportunities that lead to the integral development of all children (Lemos, Salomão, Aquino, & Agripino-Ramos, 2016).

With the establishment of the inclusion law, there was an increase in the number of special students attending regular schools. Studies conducted by the Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (2014) reveal a considerable increase in the number of children with disabilities enrolled in Brazilian educational institutions, from 23% in 2003 to 81% in 2015. In this process, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) get more access to regular schools. Studies have recognized this practice as being feasible and possible (Lemos et al., 2016; Sanini, Sifuentes, & Bosa, 2013).

ASD is a disorder that has, as characteristic symptoms, difficulties in socio-communicative skills (communication and social interaction), and behaviors associated with restrictive patterns of interests or activities (APA, 2013). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-5 (APA, 2013) these symptoms appear in early childhood and impair or limit the functions of individuals with this disorder. Regarding research on its prevalence, Schmidt et al. (2016) reveal that there is a rise on the number of diagnosed cases of autism. American studies indicate that for every 68 children born, one has ASD (Centers For Disease Control and Prevention) (CDCP, 2012). Furthermore, in Brazil, there are studies that indicate that about 600,000 people have ASD, corresponding to approximately 0.3% of its total population (Paula, Ribeiro, Fombonne, & Mercadante, 2011). The authors believe that this estimate may be even higher, considering undiagnosed cases, which are off the record.

In this context, the school emerges as a new means of stimulation for children with autism. It is a place for these children to begin to broaden their own contexts of social interactions, which will help them in their personal development. The process of school inclusion has also been advocated by professionals from several areas, as they verified the importance of stimulating children's abilities early, as well as promoting the children's social interaction (Lemos et al., 2016).

Because it is a spectrum, the behavioral and cognitive pattern of children with ASD can display a great variety of conditions. That is a situation which imposes specific challenges to teachers in their interaction with students with ASD and with the other students in the classroom. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the experience of teachers when it comes to the inclusion of students with ASD, while paying special attention to teachers' feelings and practices.

School inclusion: historical and legal aspects

The act of including students with disabilities in a regular school cannot be seen as a mere mandatory act. It must be a practice supported by an educational paradigm aimed at the defense of diversity and human rights. It is a complex social process that results from actions carried out by different agents directly or indirectly involved with the teaching-learning process (Benitez & Domeniconi, 2015). The term inclusion is linked to human and democratic rights, under local, global, ideological, economic, social, and cultural influences (Nozu, Bruno, & Cabral, 2018). Historically, people with disabilities and their families have fought for their rights all over the world by means of the establishment of agreements and declarations. In Brazil, the Federal Constitution (Brazil, 1988) postulates, in article 208, educational care for people with disabilities, preferably in the regular school system. This right is also guaranteed by the Education Law (Brazil, 1996) and the Statute for People with Disabilities (Brazil, 2015). Furthermore, the National Policy of Special Education in the Perspective of Inclusive Education (Brazil, 2008) guarantees specialized educational care (ESA) and a series of possibilities/resources so that everyone has access to quality education, considering the diversity of students present in the classroom.

Thus, in view of the creation of these public policies, Garcia, Bacarin and Leonardo (2018) point out that the school has a commitment to the protection of human diversity. Thus, it is necessary to adapt to the individual needs of students and not exclude those seen as "different", which reflects on teaching-learning and interpersonal relationships established in the school context. This paradigmatic change, in turn, causes the construction and deconstruction of common concepts regarding disabilities and their possibilities and limitations. Beliefs are constructed by experience and seem to bear influence on the teaching-learning process, since they refer to judgments and values related to education, which are consciously or unconsciously passed by the teacher (Sanini & Bosa, 2015). Thus, the teacher plays a fundamental role in this process for students with disabilities as well as for students without disabilities.

The teacher and student with ASD

Despite the existence of public inclusion policies,

which guarantee the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the regular school system, it is believed that there are other difficulties undermining this process (Schmidt et al., 2016). These difficulties, related to the presence of children with autism in the classroom, are evidenced in some Brazilian studies conducted with teachers (Alves, 2005; Camargo & Bosa, 2009; Gomes & Mendes, 2010; Martins, 2007; Pimentel & Fernandes, 2014; Rodrigues, Moreira, & Lerner, 2012; Salgado, 2012). Thus, even though most teachers believe that inclusion is beneficial to teaching, many still consider it unfeasible (Schmidt et al., 2016).

In this perspective, some factors such as the lack of knowledge about ASD, as well as the beliefs created around it, seem to interfere in the pedagogical practice of teachers, since many teachers present distorted ideas regarding the disorder, especially in relation to the communication of these students (Schmidt et al., 2016; Alves, 2005; Camargo & Bosa, 2009; Martins, 2007). Many teachers associate school space only with the socialization of the included with the other students, a fact that ends up restricting teaching and learning practices (Gomes & Mendes, 2010; Martins, 2007). For other educators, the inclusion process reflects on the learning of functional skills, not on formal content. As a result, many students fall behind at school (Schmidt et al., 2016).

The teaching of children with ASD becomes complex with the peculiar difficulties imposed by the Spectrum, which involves deficits in the areas of behavior, socialization, and communication (Pimentel & Fernandes, 2014). On the other hand, it is emphasized that, even when presenting unsatisfactory development in these areas, these children are able to extract from the linguistic environment some clues and internalize them in order to use them in a contextualized way in their social lives (Pimentel & Fernandes, 2014).

Despite the complexity of inclusion nowadays, it is possible to verify that, in some way, this process contributes both to the development of children with disabilities and of their classmates (Hehir et al., 2016.) Nevertheless, teachers and school employees, especially in the public education system, get plenty of criticism from different social sectors, precisely due to the unpreparedness of some of these professionals regarding students with this type of disability (Pimentel & Fernandes, 2014).

In this context, the inclusion of students with ASD implies, first of all, the need for teachers to get to know students and build a connection with them. It is also vitally important to understand the relationships and interactions among students in order to be able to design effective teaching strategies for the benefit of all students in the classroom. These strategies

should essentially stimulate collaboration and mutually beneficial interactions among students (Favoretto & Laônica, 2014).

Research indicates that the differentiated strategies used by teachers favor the learning of students with ASD (Aporta & Lacerda, 2018; Favoretto & Latonic, 2014). On the other hand, there are also indicators that the participation of these students in classes is still scarce, with little evolution in learning and interaction among classmates (Favoretto & Laônica, 2014).

Teachers of students with ASD commonly create certain social representations in order to draw a profile of these students, their diagnosis, their development, and their learning. According to Favoretto and Laônica (2014) these representations are created in order to understand the internal logic of popular theories. They are based on the theoretical search, mostly involving repertoires from areas such as neurosciences and psychoanalysis. It is advisable that teachers seek to update their own knowledge concerning the ASD subject, which they can easily do on the Internet. Furthermore, Pimentel and Fernandes (2014) consider it essential that these teachers receive support from an interdisciplinary team, in order to deal with their internal issues, as well as aspects related to the education of these students.

The collaboration of regular teachers, auxiliary teachers, and special educators (for students with autism) is something that contributes to the students' learning process. A study conducted in the 5th year of a school in Santa Catarina demonstrates that the work of the auxiliary teacher requires different attentions (Alves, 2016). The process of providing care for children with ASD requires effective planning and integration of the activities to be performed. It must be based on teacher cooperation. This integrated process usually has positive repercussions for students with ASD.

In contrast, a study conducted by Kubaski (2014) with four classes of initial grades in the Municipal School Network of Santa Maria – RS that had students with ASD, revealed problems in the care provided by special educators. Researchers found out that the function of these special educators did not consist of helping teachers in the classroom. Instead, the educators were merely supposed to remove the troublesome students from the room at the moments of conflict. Thus, it is observed that in this environment, professionals do not play the role of providers of assistance to students with ASD or to other students in the classroom, but rather, they fail to offer any beneficial contributions to these environments.

Pedagogical actions seem to be influenced by the conceptions of the people involved in the process and by the planning developed by schools. Alves (2016) reveals

that the teachers' conceptions regarding inclusion, as well as the construction of connections between teachers, schools, and students also demonstrate the importance of this process. The literature emphasizes that the teamwork of classroom teachers with special educators benefits the teaching-learning process of children with ASD (Giardinetto, 2009).

Concerning the pedagogical practices of teachers for students with ASD, it is verified in some studies that there are difficulties. For example, in the study conducted by Cruz (2009), in the public school system of São Paulo, teachers reveal that the activities they proposed for their students ended up as summarized copies of materials, in which they performed infantilized and often repetitive tasks.

Despite the existence of some negative aspects related to the inclusion of students with ASD, as well as pedagogical practices related to this process, it is verified that there are potentialities inherent to the inclusive process. Kubaski (2014) demonstrates that most of the pedagogical strategies used by teachers of students with ASD seem to favor some aspect of these students, whether in learning, socioemotional development, or in any other aspect. For Faria, Teixeira, Carreiro, Amoroso and Paula (2018), it is essential that the teacher has knowledge about the characteristics of the spectrum in order to favor his pedagogical practice.

The literature review shows that school inclusion, especially in the context of ASD, is a current and controversial theme, which touches on various social sectors and areas of knowledge. With the increasing number of diagnoses and registrations of children with ASD at regular schools, it also seems to increase the practical knowledge of teachers on the education of the included children. Thus, it is important to investigate the experience of teachers regarding the inclusion of students with ASD while contemplating feelings and teaching practices.

METHOD

The present study is part of a larger research that aimed to investigate the development of socio-emotional skills, especially empathy, in children who have or do not have classmates with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This is a qualitative, exploratory, and cross-sectional research (Gil, 2008; Sampieri, Collado, & Lucio, 2013).

Participants

Four teachers of students from the 1st to 3rd year of public elementary schools in a municipality in the northwest region of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, who had students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), agreed to participate in the study. The Municipal Education Department, in which the data collection took place, recommended the teachers to be invited to take

part in the study.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview with teachers about their feelings and conceptions concerning the inclusion of children with ASD: Developed specifically for the larger research to which the present study is linked. The interview includes a fact sheet with personal and professional information of teachers, followed by 10 open questions that aimed to investigate teachers' feelings and perceptions about the inclusion of a student with ASD, difficulties encountered, strategies developed and evaluation of risks and benefits of inclusion for children without special needs. The following questions were used: How was the entry of the student with ASD into his class? How did you feel? Have you changed/ adapted anything from your practice to meet your student's needs with ASD? What is it? How did it go?

Ethical and data collection procedures

The project was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Passo Fundo (UPF), under decision n° 2,252,087, in accordance with Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council (CNS). Thus, initially, the researcher contacted the Municipal Departments of Education in the northwestern region of the State of Rio Grande do Sul for authorization and indication of schools attended by students with ASD. Then, the project was presented to the school board and teachers. Participants were provided with information and further explanations, and a Free Informed Consent Form was signed. After obtaining approval by the school and the acceptance of the teachers, interviews were scheduled and conducted. They took place in the school context according to the availability of everyone involved.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded in audio and transcribed in full to be examined by means of theme-based analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which recommends the following steps: 1) transcription, reading and rereading of data; 2) coding of material; 3) identification of themes; 4) analysis of the inclusions in each theme regarding definition; and 6) final analysis. The codification of the material and the identification of the themes were performed by two judges, where an agreement index between them was calculated, obtaining 89% of agreement as a result, an index considered excellent by Robson (1995). The themes were: 1) Teachers' feelings; 2) Pedagogical practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the experience of teachers regarding the inclusion of students with ASD while contemplating teachers' feelings and practices. In order to do that, by means of the theme-based analysis, two themes were established, which will be

independently but interrelatedly presented below: 1) Teachers' feelings; 2) Pedagogical practice. The four participants of the study were identified as: Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, and Teacher 4 in order to preserve their identities.

Regarding the teachers' feelings about the inclusion of students with ASD, it is observed that the initial impact caused, at first, insecurity and fear in teachers, as mentioned in the following statements: *"Well, the first impact was very difficult"* (Teacher 1); *"So when I was told about it I was like terrified, because, you see, I had no training. Nothing to work with them."* (Teacher 3); *"When I came to school in 2015, I had never worked with an autistic student before, so when I learned that I would have an autistic student that year, I felt really apprehensive ..."* (Teacher 4).

The teachers' statements showed that their feelings were especially connected to a lack of knowledge on the theme. This thought is ratified in the literature when Sousa (2015) states that many teachers show insecurity because they do not have enough knowledge to work with students who have ASD.

After the period in which students with ASD adapted to the school environment, the teachers report that their feelings of insecurity, fear and helplessness disappeared with the establishment of relationships of mutual confidence and affection: *"So I was not afraid, I did not hesitate, but I confess that I still do not know everything I need to know, or that I should know if I want to offer more things to him in the common room"* (Teacher 2); *"Although they are very quiet, I'm learning from them"* (Teacher 3); *"I took a vacation and studied a lot about it... I feel much more at ease nowadays because nearly every year there are some autistic students in the classrooms"* (Teacher 4);

"We fall in love with them, dearest things... I never thought I would feel so happy about working with autistic people." (Teacher 3).

In this sense, Alves (2016) reveals that teachers and their conceptions regarding inclusion, as well as the construction of bonds of affection between schools and students, also recognize the great importance of this process. Only in this way, teachers' initial ideas regarding these students can be modified as these students spend more time with teachers and other classmates.

There are some aspects that may favor the pedagogical practice of teachers with ASD students. To Faria et al. (2018), knowing the diagnostic characteristics of the disorder is a factor that has been shown to be essential for understanding the behavior of these children. It is known that the damage caused by the disorder is essentially related to social interaction, communication, and stereotyped, repetitive behaviors. However, in such aspects there are variations in

intensity, topography, and frequency. Thus, it is essential that teachers have knowledge on the characteristics of autism in order to sharpen their pedagogical skills.

Regarding the theme of Pedagogical Practice, teachers reported that the inclusion of students with ASD did not interfere in the dynamics of the classroom activities because, whether having some difficulty or not, students are individuals and, therefore, have their own subjectivities and particular ways of learning. Thus, the planning of classes must take into account the students' differences and individualities: *"It is normal, because we always have different children. No child is the same, so we always have to have a plan, you can never plan something and carry it out exactly the way we planned with everyone so, in this sense, it's all right. No sweat."* (Teacher 1); *"If we think about it, every child needs special attention from teachers. Sometimes teachers complain "ah, some of these kids will not learn a thing even though they don't have any disabilities". What I say is that they just need a different approach, another direction, because the issue of disability is just like that, it's all about the direction you're going to give those children while employing the right resources, but you have to be willing to do it, if you're not willing to do something you will accomplish nothing"* (Teacher 2).

In agreement with the teachers' statements, Favoretto and Laônica (2014) highlight that the teachers of classrooms with included students must first understand their relationship with their students, as well as the students' relationships among themselves so that it will be possible to come up with teaching strategies for the benefit of the whole class. These strategies should essentially stimulate collaboration and interaction among students while taking into consideration the peculiarities of each individual. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the teachers in their statements did not describe or explain the methodologies used for educating students with ASD. That might be due to the lack of training on specific methodologies (structured teaching), as they reported them during the interview, or it might be due to the fact that they did not think it necessary to provide such description. The interview contemplated this aspect, nevertheless. Thus, the most important advancements seem to be connected to the daily practice in the classroom. Aporta and Lacerda (2018) when analyzing the strategies used by a teacher of a student with ASD evidenced that when teachers really know their students, they can create a strategy to develop new skills. Such strategy does not need to be previously programmed. It can be a work in progress, a daily task.

In this sense, teachers reveal their lack of support and knowledge about pedagogical practices for children with ASD, as illustrated below: *"The feeling I had was that, I was there, the teacher, but I did not have any support*

in the sense of knowing what activities to do with this child..." (Teacher 1); *"I had never worked with an autistic student, so imagine when I learned that I would have an autistic student that year..."*. (Teacher 4). Sousa (2015) highlights the teachers' feelings of unpreparedness, as well as a lack of better understanding of the proposals of school inclusion, of better conceptual/technical training, and of more appropriate working conditions. Undoubtedly, these are great challenges teachers must face when it comes to inclusive education.

One of the teachers, commenting on pedagogical practices and analyzing her own performance highlighted her feelings of guilt, as follows: *"I know it was never really difficult, but today I can even say to you that I could have done more things. This limitation that I feel is not all about students with special needs. It is in the planning of lessons, even though we do plenty of planning and organizing sometimes, I feel that more different things could be done for these children. They deserve it and they can do it."* (Teacher 2); *"Sometimes I even joke, 'oh, today I'm feeling like half professional', then they say to me 'what do you mean?' I say 'Because I have done half as much as could have.' So, it's not like sometimes we don't feel like doing things. It is just the way the system works"* (Teacher 2).

When talking about the role that teachers should play or in their responsibilities concerning students with ASD, there are divergences. Teacher 2's testimony demonstrates a degree of self-criticism that triggered a feeling of limitation in relation to her pedagogical practice, in which she recognizes that she did not do everything she could have done for the student with ASD. It is worth observing that feelings of guilt and anguish are also reported by parents of children diagnosed with ASD (Silva & Oliveira, 2017). These patterns of feelings and reactions regarding the diagnosis of a disability or the limitations of actions with these children can be compared to the five stages of grief, as described by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1998): denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Thus, it is understood that the teachers' feelings can be at the service of their own elaboration process on the real condition of students with ASD, as well as their own conditions (and limitations) to handle such process. In this context, it is understood that expectations regarding aspects of the development of children with ASD, while determining how much effort professionals must put out, can also generate frustrations, guilt and anguish in teachers. That justifies the importance of understanding the characteristics of the diagnosis. Barbosa, Zacarias, Medeiros and Nogueira (2013) argue that teachers are not mere transmitters of knowledge. Teachers are mentors. They stimulate development and learning by means of interactions with the class. This is a path to be trodden together. Technical and personal

skills are essential tools to overcome obstacles, make practices more flexible and (re)build beliefs. Thus, we must recognize the importance of the interrelationship between the feelings and practices of the investigated teachers.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

39The aim of this study was to investigate the experience of teachers when it comes to the inclusion of students with ASD while contemplating teachers' feelings and practices. Based on the results found, it was possible to verify that, primarily, the feelings that prevailed among the teachers, after receiving a student with ASD in their class, was fear and insecurity. However, after a period of adaptation and the establishment of bonds of friendship, these negative feelings were gradually replaced by positive affections and pedagogical practices based on respect to individuality.

Regarding pedagogical practice, it was verified that teachers are beginning to feel more engaged with the quality of their special students' education, which leads to ASD students' full engagement with the routine of the class and with its integral development. Thus, regarding school inclusion, it was found that students with ASD were welcomed by their teachers and classmates and that there were no prejudiced attitudes. Despite some difficulties reported by teachers, the study showed a context of achievable and possible inclusion, corroborating other studies conducted on children with ASD (Lemos et al., 2016; Sanini et al., 2013).

The present study, besides contributing to the production of knowledge in the area, allows for greater understanding of the inclusion of students with ASD at regular schools. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a relevant theme nowadays. It is considered that studies that raise awareness and promote dialogue on the theme are vital for reflection on pedagogical practices that can contribute to the development of these children and to the consolidation of educational inclusion. Inclusion is inherent to humanity, that is, it is a fundamental human right. According to Bassalobre (2008), for inclusion to happen in fact, it is considered important to reduce the conditions that make it impossible or prevent individuals from fully participating in society, and nurture environments in which they can fully exercise their citizenship. Thus, it is believed that the results of the research contribute to the advancement of reflection on inclusive practices based on the full comprehension of teachers' feelings and practices. After all, teachers are the main actors in the process.

During the study, it was verified the existence of some limitations, such as the effect of social desirability bias, which can influence the nature of data when research participants speak what they imagine the

researcher would like to hear. Nevertheless, it is believed that results provide us with a perspective on how the inclusion of ASD students is understood today. Thus, it is suggested that more studies focus on this theme with the investigation of different age groups and behavior levels, as well as the application of several other instruments.

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