

Pedagogical work with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: considerations of Early Childhood Education teachers

ARTICLE

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the difficulties encountered by Early Childhood Education teachers in relation to the pedagogical practice developed with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The research, of a qualitative nature, had the participation of 23 teachers from a city in the interior of Paraná, southern Brazil. A sociodemographic questionnaire, a semi-structured interview script and an observation script were used as data collection instruments. The research results reveal that the difficulties presented by the teachers are linked to a lack of theoretical-methodological knowledge, which prevents the pedagogical work from meeting the needs that the children have at that stage of development. We conclude that it is important to invest in the initial and continuing training of teachers, so that they understand the characteristics of ASD and can develop their work based on solid theoretical foundations.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder. Early Childhood Education. Historical-Cultural Psychology.

Trabalho pedagógico com crianças com transtorno do espectro autista: considerações dos professores da educação infantil

Resumo

Este estudo tem como objetivo investigar as dificuldades encontradas por professores da Educação Infantil em relação à prática pedagógica desenvolvida com crianças com Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA). A pesquisa, de cunho qualitativo, contou com a participação de 23 professoras de um município do interior do Paraná, região Sul do Brasil. Como instrumentos de coleta de dados, foram utilizados um questionário sociodemográfico, um roteiro de entrevista semiestruturada e um roteiro de observação. Os resultados da pesquisa revelam que as dificuldades apresentadas pelas professoras estão vinculadas à falta de conhecimento teórico-metodológico, o que impede que o trabalho pedagógico supra as necessidades que as crianças apresentam para aquele estágio do

desenvolvimento. Concluimos que é importante o investimento na formação inicial e continuada dos professores, a fim de que compreendam as características do TEA e possam desenvolver o seu trabalho alicerçado em bases teóricas sólidas.

Palavras-chave: Transtorno do Espectro Autista. Educação Infantil. Psicologia Histórico-Cultural.

2

1 Introduction

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are, by law, part of the target group for Specialized Educational Assistance (Atendimento Educacional Especializado - AEE). These students exhibit deficits in social communication and social interactions, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities (Brito, 2017).

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), children with ASD have deficits in engaging in persistent relationships and difficulty participating in imaginative play (APA, 2022). From an early age, they show signs of developmental delay that vary in intensity, represented by atypical and inappropriate behaviors (Oliveira; Sertié, 2017).

Gaiato and Teixeira (2018, p. 13) define ASD as "a behavioral condition in which individuals present impairments and/or basic alterations in behavior and social interaction," with limitations in communication, acquisition of verbal and non-verbal language, lack of socialization, and restrictive and repetitive behaviors.

The DSM-V TR establishes three levels of support for the disorder in question, related to individuals' autonomy, where level one is considered the mildest and level three the most severe (APA, 2022). According to Rosa (2022, p. 24), "the level of support is measured according to the individual's need for autonomy in their basic tasks, such as mobility, eating, and physical well-being."

Regarding the education of children with ASD, a significant portion of the difficulties they face in the school environment are related to characteristics stemming from the spectrum, such as language, stereotypy, and restricted interests (Costa, 2015; Batista,

2021). These characteristics, according to Lemos et al. (2016), contribute to students with ASD being stigmatized within schools.

For Batista (2021), beyond the difficulties related to including children with ASD, it is necessary to consider the complexity of the Brazilian educational landscape, which involves historical, cultural, and social issues that contribute to the failure to implement inclusive practices in educational institutions.

The researcher explains that social issues are linked to laws, decrees, and guidelines, which are the responsibility of the Public Authority, which has "the duty to guarantee and implement public policies for access, inclusion, and support of this population segment in the basic education network" (Batista, 2021, p. 76). Moreira (2014) states that, for these regulations to succeed, inclusion must be effectively carried out.

Batista (2021) points out that the right to inclusion of people with ASD in our country is protected by various legal instruments, including Law No. 12,764 (Brasil, 2012) and Law No. 13,146 (Brasil, 2015).

Law No. 12,764, of December 27, 2012, known as the Berenice Piana Law, established the National Policy for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Brasil, 2012). This regulation granted autistic individuals the right to early diagnosis and necessary treatments, such as therapies and medications. Additionally, it ensured social protection, education, access to work, and tasks that guarantee equal entry into social systems (Batista, 2021).

Law No. 12,764/2012 brought significant achievements for people with ASD; the most notable was certainly the right for autistic children to have a specialized aide in school, as stated in the sole paragraph of Article 3: "In cases of proven need, the person with ASD included in regular education classes, under the terms of item IV of Article 2, will have the right to a specialized aide" (Brasil, 2012, online).

It is relevant to highlight that the aforementioned law was regulated at the end of 2014 through Decree No. 8,368/2014 (Brasil, 2014), eliminating any possibility of institutions not being required to provide a specialized aide to autistic students when proven necessary.

Law No. 13,146/2015, dated July 6, 2015, in turn, established the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (Lei Brasileira de Inclusão da Pessoa com Deficiência), also known as the Statute of Persons with Disabilities (Estatuto da Pessoa com Deficiência), which aims to enforce, expand, and strengthen the rights of Persons with Disabilities (Pessoas com Deficiência - PcD) (Brasil, 2015). Souza et al. (2022, p. 615) emphasize that Article 1 of this law reiterates its purpose: the inclusion of PcD, to ensure the realization of their fundamental rights, so that they are treated "equally, without any discrimination" (Brasil, 2015, online).

Regarding education, Article 27 of the law under analysis clarifies that:

Education constitutes a right of persons with disabilities, ensuring an inclusive educational system at all levels and lifelong learning, in order to achieve the fullest possible development of their talents and physical, sensory, intellectual, and social abilities, according to their characteristics, interests, and learning needs (Brasil, 2015, online).

That said, when analyzing the legal provision mentioned, it is observed that the legislator assigns to the State, the family, the school community, and society the responsibility of providing quality education to individuals.

From this contextualization arises the problem that justifies this research and that we intend to investigate, which can be evidenced through the following question: how do Early Childhood Education teachers perceive the pedagogical practices they develop with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

In this sense, the present study aims to investigate the difficulties encountered by Early Childhood Education teachers regarding the pedagogical practices developed with students with ASD.

For the research, a qualitative approach was chosen, which places greater importance on the testimonies of the social actors involved, their discourses, and the meanings they convey. This type of research values the detailed description of phenomena and the social components surrounding them, encompassing both bibliographic review and field research.

As a theoretical-methodological framework, the Historical-Cultural Psychology approach was adopted, specifically the theoretical contributions brought by Vygotsky (1896-1934), Luria (1902-1977), and Leontiev (1903-1979), to understand the specificities of learning in children with ASD, as well as to reflect on pedagogical practices with these students.

To achieve the proposed objective, this research was divided into two parts. The first presents the methodological procedures for conducting the study. The second discusses the data on the sociodemographic profile of the research participants and the difficulties in pedagogical practices in attending to children with ASD. In the final considerations, reflections on the educational implications of this study are presented.

2 Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature. The qualitative approach gives crucial importance to the testimonies of the participants involved, their discourses, and the meanings conveyed by them. Furthermore, it prioritizes a detailed description of the phenomena and their surrounding components (Creswell, 2014; Minayo; Costa, 2018).

According to Creswell (2021), in qualitative research, the natural environment is the direct source of data, and the researcher is the primary instrument. The data collected are predominantly descriptive, focusing on understanding "how" the studied problem manifests in activities, procedures, and daily interactions.

The study is also classified as descriptive, aiming to rigorously describe facts and phenomena of a particular reality to gather information about what has been defined as the problem to be analyzed (Triviños, 2008).

Regarding the approach, it is classified as theoretical-empirical. This type of research deals with the empirical and factual aspects of reality, producing and analyzing data under empirical and factual control (Demo, 2000). The author emphasizes that the meaning of empirical data depends on the theoretical framework, but these data have significant practical relevance.

The research involved a bibliographic and documentary review, collecting, analyzing, and grouping relevant information regarding the perceptions of participants in the schooling process of children with ASD, as well as public policies related to their inclusion.

For field research, data collection instruments included a sociodemographic questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and an observation guide for Early Childhood Education classes. The research was approved by the Permanent Ethics Committee on Research Involving Human Beings (COPEP) at the State University of Maringá (UEM) under substantiated opinion number 3.646.709, CAEE: 21923319.6.0000.0104.

The study involved 23 teachers from Early Childhood Education Centers in a municipal education network in a city in the interior of Paraná, southern Brazil.

For data analysis, four categories were developed according to Bardin's (2011) proposal: 1) participants' perceptions of ASD; 2) difficulties in pedagogical practice with children with ASD; 3) teacher training: between reality and ideal; and 4) challenges of school inclusion for children with ASD. However, due to the limitations of this article, only the second category will be presented.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Sociodemographic Profile of Research Participants

Regarding the age of the research participants, a variation between 23 and 53 years was observed, with an average age of 39 years. The vast majority had a degree in Pedagogy (83.33%), except for two teachers who had degrees in Literature and two others who only had a high school-level teaching qualification (normal course). Of the 23 participants, 6 did not have training in Special Education. This means that a significant portion of the participants (75%) had received training to work in Specialized Educational Assistance (Atendimento Educacional Especializado - AEE).

3.2 Difficulties in Pedagogical Practice in Serving Children with ASD

This category sought to group the participants' reports related to the responsibilities assigned to them and the difficulties encountered in pedagogical practice and in serving children with ASD. Box 1 presents a summary of the reports from the lead teachers and Specialized Educational Support Teachers (Professoras de Apoio Educacional Especializado - PAEEs) regarding their respective responsibilities and the communication established between them.

Box 1 – Summary of responses on the relationship established between Regular Teachers and Specialized Educational Support Teachers (PAEEs) in the surveyed schools.

Regular Teacher	Specialized Educational Support Teacher (PAEE)
Teacher 3 – "We have good communication; she's aware of everything I plan. I say: 'This week, we're going to work on this.' When it involves paint — he loves paint — I say: 'Let him, because he needs that sensory contact.' It's a mutual understanding between us."	Teacher 4 – "We have a very open dialogue, and our relationship is very smooth. I stay in the classroom with him all the time, and we go out with him when the other children go out too, to maintain that routine."
Teacher 6 – "Yes, we have good communication. We talk a lot about games and activities, the PAEE always asks me to develop a game to work with her... She talks to me a lot, but ends up doing it on her own, so when she faces difficulties or needs help with creating any materials, we talk about it and I prepare them, because whatever I can prepare, whatever I can help with, I do."	Teacher 5 – "Actually, the pedagogical program is applied in the morning, and since she doesn't participate in the morning, the pedagogical tasks are passed on to me so I can apply them in the afternoon."

Teacher 10 – "Yes, we have good communication, it has improved a lot with the change of the PAEE, it works like this: she receives him, takes him to the bathroom, accompanies him until snack time, does the activity with him, all inside the classroom, following our routine—bathroom, snack, activity, the park, playing outside the classroom, the directed recess—so she accompanies him at all times and is always with him."

Teacher 9 – "We are in a very pleasant synchronization right now because she already knew him before, she had worked with him before. She has shared the experience she is having with him, the difficulties she is facing in his development. She is very hopeful that the PAEE will make a difference."

Teacher 12 – "It's like this: I give the activities, explain them to everyone, then we go with the student. If there's something she can't do, I try, and if he can't do it, I ease up a bit, but we try to make him do it."

Teacher 11 – "She likes him too, stays there to help, but usually, it's me. The activity is with me, I'm the one who applies it."

Teacher 18 – "She and I get along very well. If it's not her, it's me. The student is ours. If there's a moment when she's not here, I stay with him. I see him as a student in the class. Even though she came to help because he's at level 3, I don't see it that way. I don't mind. To me, he's my student."

Teacher 17 – "We try to adapt in the best way. She also helps, she collaborates a lot. When we see that it's not working, we take him out of the class, but we do everything to avoid taking him out. We try to keep him there."

Teacher 21 – "One helping the other, she helps me with the things I need, and I help with the things she needs, one complementing the other's work, because we always have to be in sync. If not, it doesn't work. We have to do it for the children, so they can learn and develop. We get along well."

Teacher 22 – "Since I was in one classroom during the first semester and now I'm in another, this question is a bit tricky, but yes, in general, yes. In the morning, she gives her class, and I stay with Student 1, but I help if something extra needs to be done. There's also the intern, so I end up helping her. In the morning, I stay with Student 1 because I can do that. With Student 2, it's different; I focus more on him. With Student 1, I can assist because there aren't as many kids with difficulties, helping with things like making a board. We do have good communication, but I do see a bit of difficulty, especially in focusing a bit more on them."

Source: Prepared by the authors.

*It is important to note that the table was made with two columns to facilitate the visualization of the teacher pairs from each school. In the left column, the classroom teacher is listed, and in the right column, the PAEE teacher working in the same class is listed.

9

It can be observed in the response from Teacher 5 (PAEE) that the child with ASD is not present during the morning session, which is when the pedagogical activities take place. In the afternoon session (when the child is present), recreational and psychomotor activities are carried out, but the activities are done separately with the child by the PAEE teacher, without the possibility of engaging with the other students. Additionally, there is no fixed routine to help the child become accustomed to the activities occurring at school. Based on the following excerpt, it can be noted that, due to the lack of greater interaction with other students and the absence of a structured routine, the child still has difficulty accepting the presence of others, as the socialization work is not systematically organized in a routine.

"She tries to sit, the other children try to sit with her to play, the children like her, and so do the other staff members. She's been here at the school for more than a year. They get along a little, but she wants to be with me, and all the children like her very much. Sometimes, she accepts, and they are receptive to her. Sometimes, she goes to take the toy from another child, and they say: 'you can't!' I try to help integrate her with the other children." (Teacher 5).

It is important to highlight that in this case, the teacher explicitly states that she does not contribute to the interaction process, as the child stays exclusively with the PAEE, while the classroom teacher focuses on the other students. This is evident in her speech when she emphasizes: "[...] *she talks a lot*", "[...] *she always asks me to develop a game to work with her... She talks a lot to me, but ends up doing it alone*", "[...] *whatever I can help, I help.*" These practices demonstrate the transfer of responsibility in methodological approaches: due to a lack of understanding of the situation, they end up leaving the work entirely to the PAEE. The PAEE, also not understanding the theoretical aspects of ASD, focuses on basic daily care, which prevents the child from acquiring pedagogical skills and scientific concepts.

When analyzing the speech of Teacher 22, it is clear that she perceives her role as a PAEE as merely that of an assistant. This is evident in the following statement: "[...] *with this student, I can assist the classroom teacher because he doesn't have many difficulties, like helping to make a panel, for example, and helping other children.*" The PAEE teacher mentions helping the classroom teacher with a panel or posters. In this classroom, the child does the activities on their own, and the PAEE points out that the child doesn't have many difficulties. This perspective shows a lack of understanding on the part of the professional regarding her role as a PAEE, in terms of fostering the independence of the child with ASD. The support should allow the child to develop other potential during the activity-making process, even if the child does not face challenges in completing the tasks.

According to Cunha (2016, p. 68),

[...] the student with autism is not incapable of learning, but has a peculiar way of responding to stimuli, which can lead to behaviors that may result in both great anguish and great discoveries, depending on the support they receive. (Cunha, 2016, p.68)

According to Costa, Zanata, and Capellini (2018), the success or failure of the student with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) is intertwined with the conditions and adaptations made at school, as well as the continuous training of the entire school team. However, it is crucial for educational institutions to develop pedagogical practices that address differences, stimulating the communication and expression skills of these children so that they can interact in society, removing the possible barriers that prevent them from accessing quality education (Capellini; Shibukawa; Rinaldo, 2016).

In this regard, Brazilian legislation follows global trends concerning the inclusion of individuals with ASD. Law No. 12.764/2012 brought significant contributions, some at the pedagogical level, such as the right to specialized support (Brasil, 2012). However, the implementation of the Law and the roles related to the training of these professionals still lack sufficient support.

Despite the existence of the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) (Brasil, 2018), whose purpose is to guide actions and pedagogical practices in Basic Education,

Souza (2019) emphasizes that the BNCC encourages inclusive practices, but points out that the activities are not directed towards children with ASD and there is no specific planning for these students.

In this sense, Rodrigues (2013) highlights that pedagogical practices must be aligned with an inclusive context, where the actions taken by the teacher consider the diversity of the children and their specificities, adapting activities with the goal of ensuring the internalization of scientific and social knowledge. Supporting this, Santos and Oliveira (2018) add that the planning of pedagogical practice is associated with factors such as: dialogue, research, and collective reflection—essential elements for an effectively inclusive practice.

4 Final Considerations

The present study aimed to investigate the difficulties faced by preschool teachers regarding the pedagogical practices developed with children with ASD. To achieve this objective, bibliographic and documentary research was conducted, as well as a field study. The theoretical framework used was Historical-Cultural Psychology, to highlight the contributions of this theory to the understanding of individuals with ASD. Through the bibliographic research carried out to construct the section, it was found that education must be a planned intervention, with premeditated and conscious objectives, aimed at cooperating with the natural growth processes of the organism. In other words, education must intervene with the necessary actions for the learning and development of the subjects.

Regarding the field research conducted with preschool teachers, it was possible to verify that the main difficulties presented by the participants were related to a lack of theoretical-methodological knowledge, resulting in the absence of the creation of appropriate activities and a lack of systematization, which prevents the pedagogical work from meeting the needs of the children at that stage of development. It is noted that, in general, the teachers do not adopt routines for the daily activities of

children with ASD, which hinders inclusion, as they need predictability and guidance in their actions, even in moments when the routine is simple.

Due to a limited understanding of child development, both by the classroom teachers and the PAEE teachers working in the pedagogical teams, they do not direct the work carried out towards stimulating language and the “Daily Living Activities” of the students. For this reason, these children present behaviors out of context, as they are idle, without activities they can engage in, and they end up expressing this agitation through stereotypies and inappropriate behaviors.

It was also observed that there are no diversified ways to work on the inclusion of children with ASD in Early Childhood Education in the municipality where the research was conducted.

Some teachers take initiatives that are not based on a consistent theoretical-methodological framework, which could facilitate the routine and support the practices, thus hindering the process of inclusion for children with ASD. In this sense, it is emphasized that teachers' practices need to be grounded in the perspectives of Inclusive Education, as diversity and plurality are present and active in our society. All pedagogical actions that are not based on inclusion violate the rights of students with autism.

The findings in this research provoke reflection on the fact that the participation of children with ASD in Early Childhood Education is seen as necessary by the teachers involved in the process, who argue that it is essential for both the development of the child and the development of an inclusive vision by their peers and teachers. In this context, it is necessary to consider, as Vygotsky (1997) states, that human beings learn to meet their needs, developing human capacities, with or without disabilities. According to the author, the difficulties of a person with a disability do not stem from the disability or its limitations, but from the boundaries that society imposes on individuals through class divisions and private property. In this sense, the difficulties surrounding the social inclusion of individuals with ASD in different sectors of society — especially in the school environment, the labor market, and other spaces — highlight the perspective

defended by Vygotsky: disability is not a characteristic restricted to the individual but a condition that extends and reflects throughout society.

In conclusion, it is important to note that this research does not exhaust all the issues related to the difficulties in pedagogical practice in supporting children with ASD in Early Childhood Education. As a result, it is crucial that further studies are developed to ensure that the debate on inclusive education continues to be encouraged.

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16

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