




The educational challenges facing the inclusion of autistic students in elementary school: A narrative review

Os desafios educacionais frente a inclusão de alunos autistas no ensino fundamental: uma revisão narrativa

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ABSTRACT

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is diagnosed based on communication deficiencies and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior. Since the creation of legislation, the presence of these students in regular classes has grown significantly, which imposes on schools the need to adapt to the diversity of students. Thus, with the intention of promoting a better knowledge about how the integration of students with autism occurs in the school environment, this work aims to expose the most relevant information about the educational challenges regarding the aspects of inclusion and rights of people with ASD, in elementary school, through a narrative review. The work was carried out from a qualitative investigation, through a bibliographic survey of studies published in Portuguese, through the search in databases, the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) and Google Scholar, among others. Analyzing these studies, it was possible to conceive that we are far from the ideal scenario of inclusion, taking into account some factors: The lack of psychopedagogy professionals to assist students with ASD and the teachers themselves in the elaboration of an Individualized Educational Planning; and the absence of training programs for the continuing education of teachers in the area. Therefore, this study contributed to a better understanding of the inclusion of students with ASD, highlighting the importance of continuing education in order to better prepare teachers to work in inclusive classes.

RESUMO

O Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA) é um distúrbio do neurodesenvolvimento que tem seu diagnóstico baseado em deficiências na comunicação e nos padrões restritos e repetitivos de comportamento. A partir da criação de legislações, a presença desses educandos em classes comuns tem crescido de forma expressiva, o que impõe às escolas a necessidade de adaptação diante da diversidade dos alunos. Assim, com a intenção de promover um melhor conhecimento sobre como ocorre a integração dos alunos com autismo no ambiente escolar, este trabalho tem como objetivo expor as informações mais relevantes sobre os desafios educacionais perante aos aspectos de inclusão e direitos dos portadores do TEA, no ensino fundamental, através de uma revisão narrativa. O trabalho foi realizado a partir de uma investigação de caráter qualitativo, através de um levantamento bibliográfico de estudos publicados em Língua Portuguesa, através da busca em bancos de dados, o Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) e o Google acadêmico, entre outros. Analisando esses estudos foi possível conceber que estamos distantes do cenário ideal de inclusão, levando em conta alguns fatores: a falta de profissionais da psicopedagogia para auxiliar os alunos com TEA e aos próprios professores na elaboração de um Planejamento Educacional Individualizado; e a ausência de programas de capacitação para a formação continuada dos docentes na área. Portanto, esse estudo contribuiu para um melhor entendimento sobre a inclusão de alunos com TEA, apresentando como destaque a importância da formação continuada a fim de melhor preparar os professores para atuar em classes inclusivas.

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is diagnosed based on deficiencies in verbal and nonverbal communication and the restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests of individuals (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2016; CABRAL; MARIN, 2017). In this sense, children with autism may present characteristics that involve difficulty in establishing social interactions, eye contact, participation in shared activities, preferences in taste, smell and touch, or alteration in the ability to memorize information. Individuals, in addition to having limited interest in certain activities and objects, also have such limits of interest in people or situations (ONZI; GOMES, 2015).

According to De Paula and Peixoto (2019), taking into account such difficulties presented by individuals with autism, it is possible to measure the difficulty for a child with autism to understand what is happening around him, and to instantly understand everything that is proposed to him.

It is also important to point out that although some autistic people may have a higher degree of the syndrome, which makes it difficult for them to learn as well as for teachers to act when trying to teach these students, many others have an extreme facility to learn and develop. As Cunha (2019) wrote, some, without ever having studied, can learn, in a matter of minutes, what a normal mind would take days or even months. According to the author, some autistic people analyze, for a few moments, the object of study and keep the smallest details about what was shown to them. Their rules of reasoning are impossible for the minds of typical people to grasp.

Martins and Monteiro (2017) mentioned that regardless of whether the autistic student attends the regular school or the special institution, there is a discourse about the schooling of these children, an aspect that demands greater knowledge about the relationships established between students with their parents, pedagogical team and other institutional bodies, as well as reflections on the possibilities of teaching these students.

However, there is still a lot of demand for professionals who are adequately qualified to meet this need. Nowadays, there are still many students with autism who do not have the type of care that is due to them within the classroom, that is, there are scenarios of the presence of irregular caregivers in class or even their absence when necessary. Azevedo (2017), in his study, saw that the percentage of educational agents who had training in the area of special education does not exceed 20% and there were no reports of specialized training of professionals to deal with autism.

Thus, it is understood that Law No. 9,394, of December 20th, 1996, which establishes the guidelines and bases of national education, to ensure the presence of a caregiver at school, when necessary, to students with special needs, is not being respected.

During my academic training in the Degree in Biological Sciences, when studying the discipline “Inclusive Education”, several questions arose regarding how basic education teachers are dealing with the challenges in the learning process of autistic students. So, when taking the Internship courses, I felt the need to better understand my role as a future teacher in the face of such challenges that will certainly arise in the school environment.

Thus, with the intention of promoting a better knowledge about how the integration of students with autism occurs in the school environment, the present work aims to expose the most relevant information about the educational challenges regarding the aspects of inclusion and rights of people with ASD, in elementary school, through a narrative review.

Methodology

The work was carried out from a qualitative investigation, in which the present narrative review was developed, which includes the inclusion of autistic students in the school environment. In this context, the research gave rise to a detailed panorama of information, which provided subsidies that significantly corroborated the structuring and development of the referred theme, which was described by sections - subheadings, in order to meet the proposed objective.

The study presented a qualitative approach based on the conceptions of Pereira et al. (2018), who highlight the qualitative method as important in the interpretation by the researcher with their opinions about the phenomenon under study and is characterized, preferably, by describing the data collected. To this end, a bibliographic survey of studies published in Portuguese was carried out, through the search in databases, the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) and Google Scholar, among others, thus providing a narrative review.

According to Rother (2007), narrative review articles are broad publications, appropriate to describe and discuss the development or the “state of the art” of a given subject, from a theoretical or contextual point of view; consist of: Introduction, Development (text divided into sections defined by the author with titles and subtitles according to the approaches to the subject), comments and references.

Considering the above, the review was developed in sections that could contemplate the theme, as follows: 1. Index of students with autism in the current scenario: A brief discussion; 2. Teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of autistic students; 3. Teacher training and performance in school inclusion.

Development

Rate of students with autism in the current scenario: A brief discussion

The first epidemiological study on autism was conducted in 1966 in England by Vitor Lotter (Ribeiro, 2007). At that time, he found a prevalence of 4.5 autistic children for every 10,000. Since then, the global prevalence of autism has increased approximately thirty-fold, as a result of statistical studies created by the Center of Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC), which allows monitoring the evolution of diagnoses of the disease every two years; The disorder currently affects about one in every 68 children, according to U.S. statistics, with a prevalence of 1.47% (ALMEIDA; NEVES 2020).

It is worth noting that most studies on the prevalence of autism are conducted in Europe and the United States, and many countries do not have such well-documented data, including Brazil (PAULA et al., 2011). However, research points to a significant growth in the number of cases diagnosed not only in Brazil, but worldwide. In the United States alone, there has been a 150% increase in diagnosis, while the Eindhoven region of the Netherlands has an incidence rate of one in 44 children (SALGADO et al., 2022).

In Brazil, there are studies that indicate that about 600,000 people have ASD, corresponding to approximately 0.3% of the country's total population (Paula et al., 2011). For Schmidt et al. (2016), these data translate into challenges for the adequacy of the various social and institutional contexts for the inclusion of people with ASD and among these contexts, the school stands out, which, from the perspective of current inclusive public policies, aims to expand the access of these students to regular classes.

The enrollment of students with Pervasive Developmental Disorders (GDD), including ASD, has been guaranteed by law in Brazil since the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988 and, specifically, Law No. 12,764, in force in December 2012, ensures the right of people with ASD to regular school (BRASIL, 2012). As pointed out by Gomes and Oliveira (2021), the number of students with autism in regular classes grows year after year, with a very significant increase of 37.27% in 2019 alone. Therefore, the high percentage of autistic students in this study is in line with epidemiological data that point to an increase in diagnosis in recent years.

From the creation of these public policies, through the current legislation, Garcia, Bacarin and Leonardo (2018) point out that the school is committed to serving human diversity. Thus, it is necessary to adapt to the individual needs of its students and not exclude those judged as “different”, which reflects on teaching-learning and on the interpersonal relationships established in the school context (WEIZENMANN; PEZZI; ZANON, 2020). In this sense, despite the legal right of access to education, the presence of these students in the

regular classroom remains a challenge for educators (NUNES; AZEVEDO; SCHMIDT, 2013), which will require more and more educational policies and continuing education of teachers.

Teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of autistic students

In the study by Schmidt et al. (2016), in the teachers' reports on the characterization of autistic students, two aspects related to social communication were most frequently identified. The first reveals the perception of the person with autism as a subject who “lives in a world apart”, in “a parallel reality”, and the second refers to behaviors of isolation, withdrawal and social distancing. The authors comment that, although these perceptions are similar, it is important to note that they differ because the reports of the first describe the student with ASD as inaccessible to external interventions, such as the teacher's pedagogical practices, while the second describes social difficulties, such as withdrawal and distancing, without the connotation of impossibility of access.

Also, in the sociocommunication category, the teachers' reports in the studies by Pereira (2014), Oliveira (2015) and Kubaski (2014) show that students with ASD are perceived based on their deficits in verbal and non-verbal communication and play behaviors. Regarding the behavioral area, the analysis of the research by Schmidt et al. (2016) generated the category Restricted and Repetitive Behaviors and Interests, where the reports highlight the perception of students with ASD based on their stereotyped behaviors and restricted interests. Among the first, the typical mannerisms of the syndrome were evidenced, such as balances, “waving hands [...] it keeps shaking” (PEREIRA, 2014). The narrow interests are illustrated in the report, “that guy likes dinosaurs, he knows everything about dinosaurs” (PINTO, 2013).

Other aspects mentioned by the teachers were characteristics of learning and challenges to inclusion, where the perception of these students based on their aggressive behaviors, especially the behaviors of self and heteroaggression towards colleagues and teachers, as in the example: “She cries, she goes around hitting her classmates, pulling hair, bites me or bites herself or hits her head on the door” (KUBASKI, 2014).

Peculiarities in interaction and learning were also highlighted, that is, a different way of being, with potential for development (OLIVEIRA, 2015), and reports on anxiety, impulsivity, and agitation behaviors were similar to those of aggressiveness in which the student is described by characteristics that hinder learning and interaction in the classroom, such as being restless (KUBASKI, 2014). In these reports, the student was also perceived as unpredictable because of these characteristics, as observed in “he is a person who does what he thinks, does not measure consequences and does whatever he wants” (OLIVEIRA, 2015).

The conception that students with ASD can disrupt the class is common among teachers, although it can be interpreted negatively when contrasting with some principles of

inclusive education. Fiorini & Manzini (2021) exposed in their work, aimed at Physical Education teachers, the same perception as other teachers, citing not only that the student with ASD could disrupt the class, but also cause moments of discomfort.

Regarding this perception, a point of divergence is discussed by Silva, Faciola and Pereira (2018), who argue that it is very common for the opposite - the class to disturb the autistic student - because the noises produced by other children during class can trigger some inappropriate behavior in autistic students, since many of them are sensitive to environmental stimuli.

Pimentel and Fernandes (2014) point out that, even with deficits in the areas of behavior, socialization, and communication, children with ASD are able to extract some clues from the linguistic environment and internalize them, in order to use them contextually in their social life. In this sense, the positive perception of teachers in relation to their students with autism is a fundamental element for the success of their school inclusion. Therefore, providing support and guidance to teachers, providing a better understanding of student needs, and evaluating effective strategies for student learning are important steps in building inclusion (NUNES; AZEVEDO; SCHMIDT, 2013).

Teacher training and performance in school inclusion

For the teacher to perform his/her function with quality and competence requires technical skills (e.g. specialized training) and personal skills (e.g. desire, flexibility). One of the aspects that justifies this fact refers to school inclusion, which imposes on schools the need to adapt to the diversity of students. Therefore, it is considered that school inclusion is linked to personalized attention, as well as to the individual characteristics of each student, seeking to create and offer opportunities that favor the integral development of all children (LEMOS et al., 2016).

The lack of knowledge that teachers have in relation to ASD, as well as the beliefs created around it, seem to interfere in the pedagogical practice of teachers, since many teachers have distorted ideas about the disorder, especially in relation to the communication of these students (SCHMIDT et al., 2016), this is one of the factors to be considered as one of the difficulties related to the presence of children with autism in the classroom. Many teachers associate the school space only with the socialization of the included with the other students, a fact that ends up restricting the teaching and learning of the latter (GOMES; MENDES, 2010; MARTINS, 2007). For other educators, the inclusion process is reflected in the learning of functional skills, rather than in formal content. As a result, there are many students who are behind in school (SCHMIDT et al., 2016).

Thus, inclusion entails the need for teachers to first know and build a bond with their students, as well as to understand the relationship between them, in order to then enable the development of teaching strategies for the benefit of class learning. Strategies that can stimulate participation and interaction among students, respecting the specificities of each one (FAVORETTO; LAMONICA, 2014); and, as a consequence, it is these differentiated strategies that can favor the learning of students with ASD (APORTA; LACERDA, 2018).

For Faria et al. (2018), one of the main factors that can favor the pedagogical practice of the teacher of a student with ASD is to know the diagnostic characteristics of the disorder, which has been shown to be essential for understanding the functioning of these children. Pimentel and Fernandes (2014) consider it essential that teachers receive support from an interdisciplinary team in order to deal with issues related to ASD, mostly knowledge such as neurosciences and psychoanalysis, as well as aspects related to the education of these students.

According to Weizenmann's research; Pezzi; According to Zanon (2020), teachers reported that after the adaptation period, the feelings of insecurity, fear, and helplessness suffered in the initial impact changed, giving way to the trust and affection created by the student. Aporta and Lacerda (2018), when analyzing the strategies used by a teacher of a student with ASD, showed that when the teacher knows his student, he can create a strategy to develop new skills, which does not need to be previously programmed, but can be built in daily life.

In this sense, the lesson planning used by the teachers investigated in Weizenmann's study; Pezzi; Zanon (2020) is individual and differentiated, because, whether they have a deficit or not, each student is individual, subjective and, therefore, has their own subjective way of learning. According to Sousa (2015), the lack of support and knowledge about pedagogical practice with children with ASD also evidenced the feeling of unpreparedness of teachers, as well as the lack of a better understanding of them in relation to the proposal of school inclusion, better conceptual/technical training and more adequate working conditions are the great challenges of the teacher.

Silva and Viana (2021) also believe that the lesson plan should meet the needs of the target audience of special education, considering the individual potential of these students. So, it is clear that it is a challenge, especially for teachers in the early years of Elementary School, since they need to deal with a variety of curricular components from different areas of knowledge to plan not only the objects of knowledge that will be built, but also how to adapt them to the multiple special needs of their students. An alternative to overcome this challenge is to carry out the practice of collaborative and well-articulated work between regular education teachers and Special Education teachers, so that an Individualized Educational Planning (IEP) is built based on the particularities of students with ASD (PEREIRA; PEREIRA, 2022).

On the other hand, in the review study by Schmidt et al. (2016), some teachers highlighted the use of pedagogical strategies with a view to learning academic content. Among the facilitating elements of this practice are the incorporation of themes of interest to the child and the use of visual resources. The challenge of literacy for students with ASD was another theme addressed by some of the teachers, whose data suggest that alternative literacy practices should be employed, since traditional strategies may be ineffective.

In general, the studies identified that teachers' difficulties are related to several factors, such as the teaching strategy, the selection of content, the lack of specific pedagogical resources and the lack of purposeful action with regard to inclusion. These problems are current and need to be overcome, since the main aggravating factor is that teachers do not receive adequate training capable of responding to the special needs of students with ASD, which justifies the high percentage of teachers with difficulties during the teaching of classes (SOUSA, 2015; OLIVEIRA, 2017; FIORINI; MANZINI, 2021).

The discussion that teacher training is very inefficient is pointed out as one of the problems of contemporary education, which makes it necessary to continue training teachers to overcome these gaps in their training (FERREIRA; TOMAN, 2020). According to Fonseca (2014), although the working professionals do not have specialization in the area, it is very important and urgent that they are trained. It is also pointed out as a facilitating strategy for school inclusion, the constitution of groups and work teams, through which teachers and school managers would act collaboratively, offering mutual support and help throughout the inclusion process (DIAS; ROSA; ANDRADE, 2015).

Alves (2016) points out that the planning of activities, through the integrated work between the regular teacher of a class, together with the assistant teacher, or special educator, based on a cooperative work between teachers, usually has positive repercussions for the student with ASD. However, the study by Kubaski (2014) revealed problems in the care provided by special educators. It was verified that their function did not refer to helping the class teacher, but rather to the fact of removing students from this environment at times when they were in crisis. Thus, the professional does not play his role in a way that helps the student with ASD or his class, but rather fails to offer progressions to him.

The importance of a psychologist/psychopedagogue always available, in public or private schools, to assist teachers was demonstrated in the study by Araújo and Rosado (2018), where they emphasized that the psychopedagogy professional has the aptitude to identify the difficulties and disorders that interfere with the assimilation of the content and the behavior of the student with ASD, applying knowledge from psychology and anthropology. Santos, Hoffmann, and Valle (2021) exposed that there are some impasses regarding the insertion of these professionals in school units, including: where they should be allocated, what is the budget for their remuneration, and how to organize their career plan. Thus, as long as there is

a lack of public policies and legislation to regulate these pending issues, teachers and students will continue to face these difficulties in the teaching-learning process.

No less important, the teacher's personal characteristics, experiences, beliefs, opinions, dispositions towards inclusion and the psychological resources available to carry out such work must also be considered. These aspects could be developed through the creation of spaces for listening and support in the school, which would allow teachers to reflect on practices and experiences and exchange experiences about inclusion (GOMES; SOUZA, 2012; DIAS; ROSA; ANDRADE, 2015).

The lack of preparation of teachers in the face of the challenges presented is not their own fault, but rather the fault of the educational system that does not offer adequate preparation to deal with these demands, resulting in insecurity in the face of inclusion. In this context, education professionals need to be receptive to educational innovations, seeking continuous training through partnerships with education networks, which have the responsibility of offering training to professionals, qualifying them for new educational approaches and for overcoming teaching-learning challenges involving autistic children (SILVA, 2019).

Comments

From the bibliographic survey it was possible to perceive that, in general, national publications are still restricted, in which most investigate the processes of inclusion, schooling and social interaction of children with ASD in the school environment. In this context, the studies refer to communication difficulties, lack of knowledge of the characteristics of children with ASD and lack of pedagogical strategies that impact the learning process of these children, thus showing the difficulties of teachers' performance.

In an elementary school, working as an intern, I was able to notice that most teachers lived with autistic students in the classrooms, unfortunately, without the necessary support. Although the school inclusion of these students in Brazil has undergone progress since the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988 and the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education, we are still very far from the ideal scenario, taking into account some factors found, such as the lack of psychopedagogy professionals to assist students with ASD and the teachers themselves in the elaboration of an Individualized Educational Planning; and also the absence of training programs for the continuing education of teachers in the area. Meanwhile, teachers continue to try to put an inclusive methodology into practice, but without receiving adequate support for it.

Finally, the present study contributed to a better understanding of the inclusion of students with ASD in elementary school classes; And, unfortunately, it was found that

inclusion, as much as it is necessary, is still performed in a flawed way, since, at different times, the teachers' reports in the reviewed studies showed gaps in their training, particularly in relation to the knowledge necessary for the schooling of students with autism.

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