

TEACHING PRACTICE AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: PATHWAYS AND CHALLENGES IN THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH ASD IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper presents part of a master's research project that investigated the inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Higher Education, focusing on the challenges encountered at this educational level from the perspective of Inclusive Education. The study is grounded in the socio-historical approach to psychology and establishes a theoretical dialogue between Vygotsky and other authors who discuss learning, development, and inclusion. The research is qualitative in nature, allowing for the construction of thematic categories and in-depth interpretations of the reality under study. The results indicate a significant demand for continuing professional development focused on working with students with ASD. This need concerns not only the expansion of knowledge about inclusive teaching strategies, but also a deeper understanding of the specific characteristics of these students' teaching-learning process and sociability. At the institutional level, universities were found to have sought to implement strategies to promote inclusion, such as methodological adaptations, curricular flexibility, and expanded support resources. Nevertheless, contradictions persist between the historically consolidated organizational structure and the specific demands involved in including this population. These discrepancies demonstrate the need for more profound structural changes encompassing institutional policies, academic management, and teaching practices. It is concluded that the inclusion of students with ASD in Higher Education requires more than isolated measures. Institutional commitment is essential and

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must include investment in continuing professional development, the strengthening of support networks, and a review of organizational processes in order to overcome the barriers that continue to hinder the effective implementation of Inclusive Education.

Keywords: Inclusion, Learning, Society, Teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion in Higher Education occurs when teaching procedures are planned to address the specific characteristics of each student, ensuring their participation in the institutional environment and enabling them to build a meaningful learning trajectory. To this end, the institution “[...] must be prepared, adapted, and equipped so that inclusion can take place meaningfully [...]” (Ribeiro, Alessa, Andre, 2020, p. 155). In the case of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), such preparation requires recognition of their potential, respect for their individuality, and the promotion of opportunities equal to those offered to other students.

Despite advances in public policies and discussions surrounding Inclusive Education, inclusion remains an unfinished process that must constantly be revisited with seriousness and discernment. In Higher Education, the challenges are even more complex, as they involve pedagogical, structural, and relational issues. Many professors and program coordinators do not receive specific continuing professional development, and although universities have made progress, they still lack systematic strategies capable of fully addressing the needs of students with ASD. Mazzilo (2009, p. 17) notes that “[...] inclusion is an unfinished process that still needs to be frequently reviewed.”

This gap in professional development and institutional structure may compromise not only these students’ academic performance, but also their social integration and well-being. Investigating teaching practices in relation to the inclusion of students with ASD is therefore relevant to identifying difficulties, mapping effective practices, and informing institutional improvements that contribute to more equitable education.

The general objective of this study is to analyze, from the perspective of teaching practice, the challenges encountered in Higher Education concerning the inclusion of students with ASD. The specific objectives are:

1. To understand how professors and undergraduate program coordinators view the inclusion of students with ASD;
2. To identify the forms of support that the university provides to these students;
3. To determine the main difficulties encountered in the teaching-learning process from the perspective of the professionals involved.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first presents the introduction, addressing the topic, rationale, and objectives. The second describes the methodological approach, detailing the research process and the qualitative approach adopted. The third section presents the analysis and discussion of the results, focusing on the challenges of inclusion and teaching practice. Finally, the fourth section presents the final considerations, revisiting the main conclusions and offering recommendations for strengthening Inclusive Education in Higher Education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Inclusive Education is founded on the principle of ensuring that all students have access to, remain in, and learn within mainstream educational environments. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) already emphasized that schools should welcome all children while respecting their individual differences. In the Brazilian context, the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação, BRASIL, 1996) and the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (Política Nacional de Educação Especial na Perspectiva da Educação Inclusiva, BRASIL, 2008) establish the obligation of educational institutions to ensure conditions of accessibility and equity. Students with ASD require an approach that respects their limitations and

professionals who believe in their potential. To this end, professors must be engaged and seek learning opportunities that include all individuals without differentiation, regardless of their area of specialization.

According to Mantoan (2015, p. 32), “inclusion does not simply mean placing a student in the classroom, but creating genuine conditions in which that student can learn and develop.” This understanding also applies to Higher Education, which faces additional challenges related to faculty development, infrastructure, and teaching practices. According to Olivati (2017), one of the factors that adversely affects the learning process of students with ASD is professors’ lack of preparation regarding teaching methods and the practical application of content. It is important to note that many professors are unaware of students’ ASD diagnoses, which impairs these students’ development and learning.

Glat and Pletsch (2011) emphasize that universities are still undergoing a process of adaptation because “academic culture was historically organized for a homogeneous student profile, which stands in contrast to the diversity found today.” Inclusion at this level therefore requires a critical review of curricula, methodologies, and institutional policies. The state-of-knowledge review conducted for this research confirms the scarcity of continuing professional development on this topic and also indicates the absence of relevant information about the student inclusion process in undergraduate programs’ Pedagogical Policy Projects, a fundamental tool for ensuring that this process is successful. According to Bandeira (2020), admission to Higher Education remains an obstacle experienced by both students and professors, and the lack of information about the disorder generates prejudice. The admission of these individuals to universities has been increasing, posing a challenge to students and, particularly, to professors, who must address their specific characteristics while creating opportunities for them to develop their abilities on an equal footing with other students.

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in communication and social interaction, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of

behavior (APA, 2014). However, each individual has unique characteristics, and the impact on the learning process varies widely.

Schwartzman (2011, p. 45) stresses that “autism is not a single condition, but a spectrum of manifestations, requiring professors to have the sensitivity to understand each student’s potential and difficulties.” In this respect, universities must be prepared to make teaching practices more flexible and provide psychopedagogical and institutional support. Professors demonstrate a lack of experience and both theoretical and practical preparation, which creates major obstacles in the classroom. According to Silva (2011), support is essential both for students and for the professionals who work directly with students with ASD. One of the challenges faced by professors is precisely that of overcoming barriers and fostering an inclusive institution.

Bosa (2006) points out that the university environment may offer opportunities for development while also creating barriers if appropriate accommodations are not provided. The absence of specific strategies may compromise not only the academic performance of students with ASD, but also their social participation and well-being. Given that universities currently tend to enroll people with many different disabilities, claims of being unprepared to serve these students may be understood as an attempt to evade teaching responsibilities. A tension exists between the institution’s duty to provide training and professionals’ responsibility to seek the qualifications needed to adapt their work to emerging demands. Accordingly, “the strategies and accommodations planned by professors must take into account the individuality of their students, whether or not they are autistic” (Barbosa; Gomes, 2019, p. 6).

The same authors further discuss how providing access to Higher Education for autistic individuals does not in itself guarantee their inclusion. Claiming alignment with the paradigm of inclusion in education must entail directing attention toward understanding diversity, providing learning opportunities to all students, and respecting their differences and needs. To achieve this, however, the institution and its faculty need strategies for serving these students.

TEACHING PRACTICE AND INCLUSION STRATEGIES

The role of professors is central to making inclusion effective. According to Rodrigues (2006), “teacher education is one of the greatest challenges facing Inclusive Education because, without adequate preparation, policies may not be implemented in practice.” In Higher Education, this is evident in the difficulty many professors experience when planning differentiated methodologies and in their lack of knowledge about accessibility resources. A lack of information can make professors insecure, which may create difficulties for students and make their relationships and continued attendance at the university even more challenging, given that students require professors to take “a differentiated approach to their specific characteristics, while professors likewise need to understand the particularities involved in order to work with these students” (Dantas, 2017, p. 168).

In addition to improving faculty development, Carvalho (2017) emphasizes that strategies such as methodological diversification, the use of assistive technologies, and flexibility in assessment are essential to enabling students with ASD to develop their academic trajectories. Moreover, a welcoming and collaborative attitude among professors helps reduce attitudinal barriers. Professors must analyze and reconsider the impact of professional development on their practice because merely participating in training activities does not guarantee a reformulation of knowledge and principles, considering that “it is necessary to reflect on the fact that professional development is never something given, but rather something constructed and reconsidered both within and beyond everyday school life (...)” (Perez, 2020, p. 56). Continuing professional development arises from the need to provide a foundation for teaching practices with the aim of reframing how professors perceive their surroundings.

Jesus and Alves (2019) emphasize that universities must invest in continuing professional development, the creation of accessibility centers, and permanent institutional policies. Teaching practice must therefore be linked to institutional commitment so that inclusion does not depend solely on the individual initiative of a few professors.

Continuing professional development should thus involve reflection on teaching practice and should address more in-depth studies of learning diversity and different ways of teaching, along with other issues that may serve as means of addressing adversity and building pathways toward the inclusion of students with ASD in Higher Education.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The research that gave rise to this article was conducted at a college located in the south-central region of the state of Paraná. This exploratory qualitative study was based on observations and interviews and was intended to generate knowledge capable of informing practices for including students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Higher Education.

According to Gil (2008), exploratory research seeks to provide greater familiarity with a problem, making it more explicit and assisting in the formulation of hypotheses or the identification of pathways for future studies. In this regard, this study seeks not only to understand the challenges faced by the academic community, but also to describe the particularities of the inclusion process. The research participants were program coordinators, professors, and students from a class that included a student diagnosed with ASD. This group was selected because of its direct proximity to the context under investigation, making it possible to obtain different perspectives on the inclusion process.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allow a certain degree of flexibility in the questions and enable researchers to explore information emerging during the dialogue (TRIVIÑOS, 1987). This instrument was supplemented by non-participant observation in order to capture aspects of the environment, classroom interactions, and professors' attitudes toward the needs of the student with ASD.

The collected data were organized and examined through content analysis, as described by Bardin (2011), allowing thematic categories associated with inclusion, teaching practice, and the participants'

perceptions to be identified. The analysis sought to highlight points of convergence, divergence, and gaps in the interviewees' statements, relating them to the theoretical framework under study.

The research complied with the ethical principles established in Resolution No. 510/2016 of the Brazilian National Health Council (Conselho Nacional de Saúde), which governs research in the Human and Social Sciences. All participants were informed of the study's objectives, signed an Informed Consent Form (Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido, TCLE), and were assured anonymity throughout all stages of the research.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The data analysis revealed different challenges encountered in the process of including a student with ASD in Higher Education, which are directly related to the objectives established in this study.

PROFESSORS' PERCEPTIONS

The professors were found to have difficulty recognizing the problems encountered by the student, perceiving only surface-level behaviors without fully understanding the student's specific characteristics. This gap confirms the need for continuing professional development and institutional support because, as Rodrigues (2006) states, faculty preparation is an essential condition for inclusion policies to be implemented in practice.

The lack of knowledge about how to adapt methodologies and assessments directly affects the teaching-learning process, hindering the construction of a meaningful academic trajectory. This finding addresses the objective of understanding professors' views regarding the inclusion of students with ASD.

THE ROLE OF PROGRAM COORDINATION

Regarding program coordination, knowledge of the student's condition was found to be limited to the information that the student had been diagnosed with ASD, with no details concerning the level of

support required or the student's specific needs. This finding reveals weaknesses in coordination among the family, teaching staff, and program administration, compromising the development of more targeted support strategies.

This result reinforces the importance of the objective of identifying the forms of support provided by the university, demonstrating that sufficient systematic procedures for providing individualized support to students with ASD have yet to be established.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH CLASSMATES

In the context of interpersonal relationships, classmates were found at times to display impatience and even bullying behavior toward the student's participation. Although the student participated actively in activities, their contributions were frequently mocked, leading to isolation and alienation from the group.

The academic environment can become either a space for development or a context of exclusion, depending on how receptive the academic community is. In this case, the absence of awareness-raising initiatives and measures to promote positive social interaction contributed to the student's marginalization.

THE STUDENT'S INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Observation revealed that the student exhibited hyperfocus on their cell phone, which impaired their attention during classes. In addition, the student was reluctant to participate in seminars, demonstrating difficulties with oral presentations and interaction in public settings. Although these characteristics do not prevent the student from learning, they require teaching accommodations that take the student's particular characteristics into account.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, the results indicate that professors lack the specific preparation required to identify and address the needs of students with ASD; program coordination possesses only superficial information and has no organized institutional strategies; classmates reproduce exclusionary practices, such as impatience and bullying; and the student, although actively engaged, experiences difficulties related to focus, socialization, and oral presentations. These elements are consistent with the general objective of this study, namely, to analyze the challenges encountered in Higher Education in including students with ASD from the perspective of teaching practice. They are also consistent with the specific objectives of understanding the views of professors and program coordinators, identifying the support provided, and determining the main difficulties arising in the teaching-learning process.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The admission of students with ASD to the college was found to pose a challenge to professionals because of their lack of knowledge about the disorder and its specific characteristics. It is a major challenge for professors, program coordinators, and classmates alike. In addition, it was possible to observe that additional measures are needed to reorganize teaching practices with the aim of developing strategies that ensure these students receive instruction of the same quality.

Professors must be open to understanding, accepting, and respecting what may be regarded as outside the norm, namely, educating students with disorders alongside other students without allowing this to generate unease, frustration, or anxiety. Inclusion requires developing critical awareness among staff members and preparing them through both pedagogical training and practical situations, including instruction on how to manage circumstances involving other students.

Everyone has the right to high-quality education delivered by well-prepared professors. It is therefore necessary to understand the support provided to students with ASD, in conjunction with the team of specialized professionals, while paying attention to the welcome they receive and the type of

assistance each student will require within their own circumstances. There are numerous social, educational, and institutional policies concerning Inclusive Education. It may therefore be concluded that practical ways of preparing for these situations must be developed, as they are likely to become increasingly common each year.

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