

**INTERACTION BETWEEN CHILDREN IN PRESCHOOL:
PERCEPTION OF DIFFERENCES IN THE SCHOOL
INCLUSION PROCESS FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM**

**INTERAÇÃO ENTRE CRIANÇAS NO PRÉ-ESCOLAR: PERCEÇÃO
DAS DIFERENÇAS NO PROCESSO DE INCLUSÃO ESCOLAR DE
CRIANÇAS COM AUTISMO**

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Abstract

This qualitative research used participant observation in an early childhood education group to understand how children perceive differences among their peers, especially in their relationships with children with autism. An early childhood educator and 28 children aged four to six years participated, two of whom were autistic. Observation was carried out from February to May 2023. The results indicate that the behaviour and relationships that children establish with children with autism vary depending on the level of commitment and interaction that these children present. However, children's receptivity and acceptance of the differences presented by children with autism were positive, helping them with pedagogical or daily life activities, when necessary. The teacher's actions brought children closer together and enhanced their understanding of their peers. As a limitation, it is understood that a study restricted to a specific pre-school can make it difficult to understand and deepen the phenomenon under study.

Keywords: preschool inclusion, children, autism, early childhood education, differences

Resumo

Esta investigação qualitativa recorreu à observação participante num grupo de educação de infância para compreender como as crianças percebem as diferenças entre os seus pares, especialmente nas suas relações com crianças com autismo. Participaram uma educadora de infância e 28 crianças com idades compreendidas entre os quatro e os seis anos, duas das quais autistas. A observação foi realizada de fevereiro a maio de 2023. Os resultados indicam que o comportamento e as relações que as crianças estabelecem com crianças com autismo variam em função do nível de empenho e de interação que estas crianças apresentam. No entanto, a receptividade e aceitação das crianças em relação às diferenças apresentadas pelas crianças com autismo foram positivas, auxiliando-as nas atividades pedagógicas ou de vida diária, quando necessário. As ações da educadora aproximaram as crianças e melhoraram a compreensão de seus pares. Como limitação, entende-se que um estudo restrito a um pré-escolar específico pode dificultar a compreensão e o aprofundamento do fenómeno em estudo.

Palavras-chave: inclusão pré-escolar, crianças, autismo, educação na primeira infância, diferenças

Introduction

This chapter aims to present the results of the participation observation in a pre-school class in the municipality of São Paulo, Brazil. It is a class of children aged between four and five, two of whom have been diagnosed with autism. The research aimed to understand the children's perception of the differences in their relationship with those who specific needs, and to understand the Early Childhood Educators 'mediating (ECE) role in the school inclusion process.

With the visibility of autism around the world and the growing number of individuals diagnosed, early childhood education is faced with questions about how these children learn and the role and function of the environment in this process (Gómez-Mari et al., 2021).

Autism is a condition characterised by communication and social difficulties that begin in the first years of life and become evident throughout development. The term spectrum currently used includes a complex and wide range of characteristics, with different levels of severity and commonalities with other disorders, making it challenging for parents and health and education professionals (Nunes & Schmidt, 2019).

From a biopsychosocial perspective and from a systemic and bioecological approach, autism can be understood in the context of multiple factors that are intrinsically linked, bringing real life into the analysis, including the person and the environments relevant to the development process. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasises how different factors in social systems directly and indirectly influence children's learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1975).

Although autism is a topic that has been widely discussed, many ECE are still unaware of or have difficulties in working with these children in the classroom, many due to insufficient training and others due to the lack of structure and support from the school (Silva, 2022). Among the challenges reported by ECE regarding the inclusion of children with autism in pre-schools is the lack of accessible materials and the use of traditional teaching methodologies, which create barriers for children with autism to learn (Suassuna, 2021; Silva, 2022).

Peterson-Bloom and Bolte (2022) emphasise that the multifaceted needs of these children often require substantial educational resources and reinforce the importance of teacher development for the support, teaching and inclusion of autistic children.

Among the potential of school inclusion for children with autism is the coexistence between peers, mutual learning between children, contributing to the structure of inclusive environments. Moser et al. (2021) state that children with autism are exposed to a situation of socio-environmental vulnerability when they are deprived of socialising with their peers and benefiting from the meaningful experiences provided by pre-school.

Early Childhood Education as a social right is a recent achievement in Brazil and in the public policy scenario for the educational care of children between the ages of zero and five. In 1990, the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA), created by Law 8069/1990, introduced the principle of full protection and ensured equal conditions for access and permanence in free public schools close to the student's home (Law, 1990). The ECA stipulates those children aged between 0 and 3 years and 11 months must attend nursery school and children aged between 4 and 5 years and 11 months must attend pre-school. Just like all the other stages of education, Early Childhood Education must also follow the principles of Inclusive Education. According to the definition given by the Department of Basic Education, through the National Policy for Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education - PNEEPEI (Ministries of Education, 2008), Inclusive Education is a teaching proposal based on human rights and equal opportunities, in which the education system must organise itself to ensure that all students learn together and have their specificities catered for.

With regard to people with disabilities, Brazilian legislation guarantees their inclusion in schools (Law, 2015; Ministries of Education, 2008). The Berenice Piana Law (Law no. 12.764, of 27 December 2012), designed to protect the rights of people with autism, guarantees access to education and vocational training. Since education is a legal and social right of every individual, whether they have a disability or not, they are guaranteed the right to study in regular schools, with a view to education for all. In the Brazilian education system, universalisation of public basic education must be ensured, with priority given to Special Education from an Inclusive Perspective in regular schools and Specialised Educational Assistance (AEE) in a complementary or supplementary way.

In the context of this global movement, the 2030 agenda for education stands out (UNESCO, 2015), formulated by the 193 member states, with Brazil being its signatory, which is committed and determined as a goal to be achieved by 2030 "eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and

children in vulnerable situations”. Within this context, by adopting inclusion as an ethical, normative and pedagogical principle, we talk about transforming school culture and educational practices, with displacement and changes in teaching-learning activities, social interactions and a curriculum committed to diversity and children’s rights.

To make school inclusion effective for children with autism, the organisation of the school’s space and time and the proposed activities need to facilitate expression, communication and learning through the use of everyday routines. In young children with autism, difficulties in social and communicative interactions can be an obstacle to learning with peers and can generate negative responses (Moser et al., 2021).

Aisncow (2020) states that inclusive education is seen as a principle that supports and welcomes diversity among students. This definition was published by UNESCO in 2017, proposing that, to eliminate social exclusion resulting from discriminatory attitudes about race, social group, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability, it is necessary to guarantee education for all as a basic right and the basis for a fairer society (UNESCO, 2017).

Likewise, Silva (2020) stated that each person is unique and their educational needs are also unique, as well as their way of learning. Therefore, inclusive education presupposes equal opportunities, access and appreciation of differences.

From a biopsychosocial perspective, the greatest impact on a child’s development process would be their participation in daily activities and interactions with people. For Pletsch et al. (2021), early childhood education from a bioecological perspective represents a microsystem that has a great influence on human development and can create opportunities for identifying and effectively responding to developmental issues presented by children.

Furthermore, the potential of children with autism must be understood in the context of multiple factors that are intrinsically linked, bringing real life into the analysis. From this perspective, it is necessary to include persons and relevant environments that interact throughout life and time, considering autism beyond individuals, including aspects of interpersonal relationships, family, community, political structures and the society and culture to which individuals belong.

Bronfenbrenner (1975) already emphasised that schools with defined educational objectives become an important element of the microsystem of young children in interdependence and articulation with other development contexts. In relation to children with autism, often agitated, or with repetitive movements, fixation on routines and sensory difficulties that make them uncomfortable with noise, light, among others, can hinder social contact among children.

Materials and methods

This qualitative research used participant observation to collect data. This method consists of the researcher’s real participation in the community, group or situation that will be observed, taking over, in part, the role of a group member (Oliveira et al., 2019).

For Ezpeleta and Rockwell (1989), each school is unique in its history and daily dynamics. Arriving at a school that will be observed and recording what is observed involves multiple tensions for a researcher. Recording everything they see is difficult and it is necessary to define how to do it. In general, participant observation can be divided into three essential phases: (1) descriptive observation, which corresponds to the phase in which researchers observe and record through field diaries, recordings, photographs, filming, among others, everything that was initially possible to observe, including description of subjects and location, reconstruction of dialogues, description of special events, description of activities and description of target group and observer behaviour; (2) localised observation, which corresponds to the phase in which observers put aside the camera, recorder, notebook and pencil to effectively participate in interaction among group members, listening and sharing their conversations; (3) selective observation, which corresponds to the phase in which researchers synthesise and use special methods to collect, analyse and record their data (Oliveira et al., 2019; Marques, 2016).

The researcher's field diary was used to record all the facts that were observed throughout the visits, as a way of presenting, describing and ordering study subjects' experiences and narratives and as a tool to understand them (Oliveira, 2014).

Field diary records were the result of detailed observations of children and the group, which allowed the researcher to be fully inserted into children's daily lives. Most records were from moments when the researcher was close to children, whether directly or indirectly involved in the group, being able to follow the events and understand the contexts. At other times, more observations were made in which the researcher remained more distant so as not to interfere in the situations.

The research was initially presented to the school's headmaster through a telephone conversation, where the intentions and objectives of the research were presented. After the headmaster agreed, the pre-school classes that fitted the research profile and their respective ECE were presented. The class with the largest number of children with autism was included in the study. The researcher contacted the ECE and introduced her to the research, and she agreed to take part. The ECE spoke briefly about the profile of the students with autism, highlighting the behavioural differences between the two.

To obtain the parents' consent for the research, she attended a parents' meeting, presented the research and collected their signatures on the consent forms.

Thus, the research participants were a teacher from an early childhood education school in the municipal education network in the city of São Paulo and children who were regularly enrolled and who attended group during participant observation, two of whom were boys diagnosed with autism and 26 children with typical development. Students were enrolled in early childhood education and were aged between 4 and 6 years old.

Observation took place during February, March, April and May 2023 on every Monday and Wednesday. The observation began at the start of the school term and the observation days were agreed with the school and the ECE, as well as the researcher's availability. The researcher actively participated in all activities carried out in the daily

life of the participating group such as arrival at school, interactive calls, moments of free and guided play, meal times and outdoor activities, such as playground and library.

The ECE was 44 years old and had been working in early childhood education in the public school system for 22 years. She had a degree in Literature and a postgraduate qualification in Children's Literature. The two children with autism had already been pupils of this ECE the previous year, so they were already familiar with the classroom environment. To describe them, we will use the fictitious names 'Levi' and 'Tiago'.

Levi was 5 years old, communicated little orally and had immediate and delayed echolalia. He got to and from school-by-school transport. At school, he recognised his belongings, fed himself, took part in activities that interested him, responded to verbal commands and interacted with other children.

Tiago was also 5 years old and didn't communicate orally, only babbling. He arrived at school in the middle of term accompanied by his parents and didn't stay for the whole shift. He didn't bring any school materials or eat at school, and his participation in activities was restricted. He didn't respond to verbal commands and interacted little with the other children.

Once the data collection was complete, the field diary entries were analysed from June to August 2023. The researcher read them in their entirety, separating out the moments of interaction between the children and between the children and the teacher, and then selected the excerpts according to the contexts that would later be allocated to the topics of the results (1) Interaction between the children: perception of differences (2) Child-adult interaction

The research was approved by the university's Research Ethics Committee, under Opinion 63823722.0.0000.5505. The participating teacher and parents signed a consent form after being informed about the research. The names mentioned in the article are fictitious to preserve participant anonymity and confidentiality.

Results

The research was carried out in a municipal school located in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. The school has seven classrooms, differentiated by colour, two playgrounds and others areas such library, a computer lab, bathrooms for children. The school operates in the morning and afternoon. The first period is from 7 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and the second period is from 1 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Children are handed over to support staff at the entrance gate by their parents, guardians, or drivers and go alone to their respective classrooms. At departure time, drivers pick up children from the room by presenting their identification cards.

Early childhood educators in the school work 4-hour shifts per group, i.e., those who only have one position in the municipal education network share a room with another teacher, who takes over during the intermediate period (11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.). Thus, a classroom can have two ECE, who work at different times, but have equal responsibility for their group.

The Municipal Department of Education's proposal for early childhood education is mainly to emphasise babies' and children's autonomy in their discoveries of themselves and others and in their knowledge of the world and to encourage the expansion of their human experiences, as babies and children learn especially when establishing interactions and playing (SME/COPEP, 2019). In the case of the group observed, the time for free play generally occurred after breakfast (7:30 a.m. to 7:50 a.m.), where Lego toys, fabrics, dolls, cars and other toys were available, and during playground hours. Guided games were carried out after story time, for instance. These activities were almost always carried out in groups, as children in this age group enjoy shared play.

The first contact with children was made in the first week of school, i.e., during the children's adaptation period to the environment, teachers and routine. Therefore, many were shy and remained more constrained, except for children who were already part of school the previous year. The early childhood educators are always receptive to everyone, waiting for them at the entrance and kissing and hugging those who accept this. The difference in children's ages is perceived mainly by their height and maturity, as younger ones were more dependent on a teacher initially.

Arriving at school was very peaceful. The researcher was introduced to the group by the main teacher as "Teacher Alanis", and she said that she was there to "play and observe how you play"; this last sentence caused some strangeness for some children, but both the teacher and the children were extremely receptive on every visit. The presence of the researcher in the environment caused some agitation among children, as they wanted to show off their clothes, objects and even talk about events in their lives, but as soon as activities began, they became involved and "forgot" about her presence. In some moments, involvement in games was necessary in order to record the view of events from within the group, but in others, she remained discreet, to observe another perspective of the same groups.

Through field diary analysis, we highlighted observed situations that will be presented in two axes of analysis: 1 – Interaction between the children: perception of differences; 2 – Child-adult interaction.

Interaction between the children: perception of differences

It is known that inclusion of children with autism has facilitators and barriers that can be presented both by the environment and by the children themselves (Stephenson et al, 2021). However, the way these differences are seen directly affects the position in which they will be classified. In the case of the observed group, we realised that sensory differences were the ones that most appeared as barriers to interaction among children. However, the perception of behavioural differences among classmates with autism varied depending on the peers in question.

The two students with autism are 5 years old, and were already part of the ECE in the previous year, so they already knew the classroom environment. Both have different behaviours and react in a unique way to stimuli from group and the ECE. To describe them, we will use the fictitious names "Levi" and "Tiago".

Tiago was always accompanied by his parents and did not stay during the entire group period, having little attendance at school. He demonstrated very agitated behaviour inside and outside the room and did not focus on any activity for long. It is worth noting that he used to arrive at group around 08:00 a.m., a period when the room was more disorganised as it was free play time.

Concerning relational aspects, children were confused by their peers' actions and were barely able to approach him due to agitation, according to excerpts taken from the field diary:

No child interacted directly with him, nor did he with them, apart from moments of exchanging toys. Children didn't show any form of astonishment or discomfort due to his behaviour (Excerpt 5 – 02/09, Thursday).

At one point, a child expressed confusion about him, and that was when his father took him out of the room and took him to the playground, because according to him the boy liked it there. Faced with this, two girls questioned the teacher about why he was like that and she replied, "It's just that he doesn't understand things the way we do, his brain works differently" (Excerpt 6 – 02/09, Thursday).

Some peers made attempts to approach, which were almost always unsuccessful. Others, at times, were afraid of his participation in games, avoiding him or showing denial reactions:

At around 8:10 a.m., Tiago arrived in the room already looking everywhere. He was greeted by the teacher, but there was no demonstration from his peers, who were focused on the game. A peer, who was near the door, offered him her pink helmet and asked him to play with her, but he showed no interest and started walking around the room. When he gets close to the children's table, he triggered some reactions due to their fear of their toy being broken, like when he went to Levi's table and threw the toys that were still in the box on the floor, making a peer to scream, "Nooooooooooooooooo!", and the teacher replied, "Chill out, he's just playing" (Excerpt 12 – 02/13, Monday).

During the observations, we realised that Tiago's restricted contact with the peers was directly related to the short time he spent in the environment, which made it impossible for him to experience different activities and moments of interaction other than free play. On the other hand, when they noticed the behavioural differences presented by their classmate, most of the children didn't engage in interactions with him, because whenever he arrived, they were already involved in other activities and barely noticed his presence.

In addition, free play in the classroom has strong characteristics of a lack of organisation, movement of the children around the room and the ECE being away so that the children can explore the environment and interact with their peers. Tiago's arrival at this point in the routine was marked by a great deal of excitement among the children in the room. As a result, the other children's interaction with their classmate was hampered, marked by a lack of meaningful contact and reactions of distancing and running away,

which shows that the children's perception of differences is related to the behaviour they observe, which directly influences whether they get closer to or further away from their peers.

On the other hand, the ECE's actions, such as prior conversations with the group before Tiago arrived, helped the children understand their peers' attitudes, allowing them to deal with him without conflict.

The other child diagnosed with autism is Levi. He was assiduous and participated in the activities proposed for the group, tending to be more reserved and not taking the initiative to carry out interactions. Children did not show indifference towards him, on the contrary, they seemed to enjoy talking to him and seeing his funny "crazes", as field diary records demonstrate:

At the table where Levi was, five peers sat in addition to him. One of them was his peer last year. I noticed a different movement at the table and saw that she and the other two boys were laughing while she said something to Levi and he repeated it (Excerpt 16 – 02/15, Wednesday).

He sang along with his peers and followed gestures reproduced by both the teacher and the other children. Excitedly, he moved around swinging in the chair, moving his hands and jumping on the chair, which made his peers who were sitting at the table with him laugh at his behaviour (Excerpt 48 – 03/22, Wednesday).

As he is very calm and often accepts the games passively, the children end up directing the actions of the game. He was the friend they looked for to push them on the swing, be the catcher and so on. At times, he seemed uncomfortable, but at others, he seemed happy with the game:

A peer took one of the clips and used it as a comb for Levi's hair, who was uncomfortable, but did not exhibit aggressive or agitated behaviour. She remained playing for a few minutes without noticing her peer's discomfort. That was when I asked if she had asked him if he was enjoying it, and from then on, she started asking questions like, "Are you enjoying it, Levi?". Sometimes he said no, and sometimes he said nothing, which she interpreted as yes. In the end, he ended up not complaining anymore and continued to enjoy the games she proposed (Excerpt 18 – 02/15, Wednesday).

Only later did a peer, realising that he was in the corner, took him by the hand and they went to play, but she took the opportunity to persuade him to do what she wanted, like pushing her on the swing and sliding down the slide together (Excerpt 62 – 04/17, Monday).

Sometimes, he needed help to understand or execute the proposal for a task that was assigned by the teacher, and his peers themselves carried out this intervention, sometimes commenting on the way he performed them, and other times just indicating what should be done.

Three peers quickly finished the task and then helped Levi, looking for the letters and handing them to him or showing them and saying, “Look Levi, it’s here”. Groupmate support was praised by the teacher (Excerpt 56 – 03/04, Monday).

As the story told was about a red ball, the teacher drew a circle on students’ sheets and asked them to create something from there. One of the peers who was at the table with Levi said, “Miss, doesn’t Levi do everything wrong?” (Referring to the friend who doodles when he draws), and was promptly warned saying that it was his way of drawing (Excerpt 60 – 04/05, Wednesday).

Children did not show any resistance to starting an interaction with Levi, who frequently attended classes, and always greeted him at the beginning of the period and offered help with activities. Naturally, there were children who had daily interaction with him. Others interacted sporadically, more precisely when the ECE made changes to the table arrangement, taking them to other groups.

Levi was the fourth child to enter the room; he walked quietly to one of the tables, hung his backpack on the chair and sat down (a routine he was already used to following, since last year). A peers greeted him with a wide smile, “Hi, Levi”, and talked directly to him throughout the period, sometimes giving feedback verbally or with movements of the head and hands (shaking the head from side to side and shaking the hands in the air) (Excerpt 9 – 02/13, Monday).

During playtime in the classroom and in the playground, children grouped together according to the game they chose and their affinity with their peers. Children were free to choose their toys and create their own games. In Levi’s case, he used to stay in his own place in the room and preferred to play alone, remaining that way throughout the period if no peers initiated an interaction. On the other hand, children were always interested in their friend’s interests and made use of this to interact with him, whether inside or outside the classroom.

Excited about what they were creating, the girls started to incorporate dinosaurs into the game, until one of them made a Dinosaur Cake, to the delight of Levi, who said it was “Levi’s birthday”, and children quickly sang happy birthday to you. Upon seeing what Levi was playing with, one of the boys joined the table and started playing with him. Fighting between dinosaurs. He was not reluctant to see his friend, on the contrary, he enjoyed the game (Excerpt 15 – 02/13, Monday).

A peer went to him and they began to play together in the dirt, digging, apparently without any specific pretext. But soon the friend ran to the ECE and said, (...) his friend’s interest. As the two were digging, Levi was walking dinosaur bones, demonstrating that he knew his friend’s interests. They continued the game and soon welcomed another peer to their digging, as the two were digging and Levi was walking around and watching. When asked

about this play, they responded, “It’s just that it’s telling us which dinosaur’s bone it is” (Excerpt 55 – 03/29, Wednesday).

On occasions when several children were involved in the same activity, Levi would usually become more constrained, even if he had initiated the activity. When this happened, he would wait until his peers lost interest or he would give up playing and isolate himself. If the ECE noticed what had happened, she would immediately try to get around the situation and reintegrate him into the game, sometimes successfully and sometimes not.

Levi was playing alone in a corner of the playground, collecting small stones and filling half of a plastic bottle, until a peer from the other room decided to also participate in the activity. He arrived and asked for one of the bottle jars, stopping in front of him and squatting in the dirt as well. The two then spent a few minutes filling the pots and throwing the stones back on the ground (Excerpt 32 – 03/01, Wednesday).

I invited him to play colour matching and he soon got excited and got involved in the proposal. We started the activity and little by little some children arrived wanting to play too. As the colours appeared and Levi did not respond immediately, they soon spoke or whispered to him, which he then repeated. But when the crowd of children became larger, he began to get uncomfortable and could no longer pay attention to the activity. He looked up and to the side, made grunts, shook his head, etc. (Excerpt 66 – 04/19, Wednesday).

In general, interactions among children occurred naturally and in different environments, and, most of the time, they were initiated spontaneously by other children. They constantly sought contact with their friend and were willing to share his same interests. However, in many moments, it was possible to observe the strong characteristic of isolation by Levi, who avoided moving around the room and approaching the more agitated peers.

As for Tiago, it was observed that he had very few moments of sustained interaction with other peers, since his approach was almost always due to his interest in a toy that a particular child had, often taking the objects for himself. Children used to not notice his presence or absence, as his time in the classroom was short and alternated with other school environments.

Child-adult interaction

Throughout the observations, it was possible to verify that the ECE was concerned about including students with autism in classroom activities by offering toys that fit their interests, instructing how other children should greet them, providing places closer to them and offering support, when necessary, as reported below:

From the moment the child arrived, the teacher encouraged the group to greet him with “Good morning” and gave him a didactic-pedagogical toy, but the boy paid little attention (Excerpt 2 - 02/09, Thursday).

Before starting, the teacher always separates the toys that will be used in the day's activities. The highlight for today was her speech when separating these items, which said, "I'm going to get fabrics, Tiago likes fabrics*". She also picked up some child pans, stoves and dolls (Excerpt 22 – 02/27, Monday).

Children began to arrive and settle down, but when some sat at "Levi's table", the teacher asked them to free up a seat for him, and he stopped in front of the table and waited. (Excerpt 44 – 03/15, Wednesday).

As the profile of the two children with autism was different, the ECE helped them according to their needs. Tiago always needed exclusive attention when he was in the room, as he had great difficulty participating in the proposed activities and engaging with other peers. Therefore, during his stay in the peers, the ECE presented him with different toys in an attempt to gather his attention in some way, and instructed children to be understanding with him.

Taking advantage of the fabrics being around the room, the teacher grabbed some to present the proposal to him. He caught it, threw it in the air, shook it among other things, so the teacher had the idea of covering him and he seems to have liked it. Taking advantage of the opportunity, his father took one end and a peer took the other, thus forming a kind of "hut", where he ended up staying for a few minutes interacting with his peers and his father. (EXCERPT 40 – 03/08, Wednesday)

The dynamics of the classroom followed a routine that children were already used to, such as activity schedules, a day at the playground and library, "Good Morning" songs, among others. In addition, the ECE always changed the arrangement of tables and chairs, with the aim of causing rotation among children. This strategy was very efficient, especially for Levi, as it allowed him to have contact with several of his peers, regardless of how close they were.

When handing over toys, there was also this idea of moving children and providing new relationships. Therefore, the teacher placed the toy boxes in different corners of the room, leading children to move around the environment in search of their favourite toys. In these situations, Levi normally remained at the table, even when instructed by the teacher, and only had access to toys when his classmates picked them up and took them to the table.

To encourage exchanges among tablemates, the teacher left each toy on a table and guided students to go to the table where they wanted to play. It was actually interesting because the teacher went to Levi to explain this with the following words, "So, if I want to play with dinosaurs, I have to come here to the dinosaur table, understand, Levi?", and he responded with a big and expressive, "Yees" (Excerpt 27 – 02/27, Monday).

The classroom tables were once again rearranged, now all being individual (with 4 chairs). This contributes to children's interaction, who accommodate themselves with other peers each day. This can be noticed immediately when

J.M. and B. sat at the table together with Levi (normally they both sit with the other boys in the group at joint tables). (Excerpt 33 – 03/06, Monday).

Not all of the proposed activities pleased Levi, who sometimes remained sitting with his head resting on the table while the other children played. However, the ECE always encouraged him to participate, either by bringing him close to her or by including something in the proposal that was of interest to him. This strategy, most of the time, worked out.

The ECE played songs with train noises that accelerated and slowed down and children moved around according to this rhythm. Three students remained sitting at the table when the game began, including Levi. But after some advances from the teacher, he got up to play too, with his hands covering his ears, but moving like the other children. It only took a few minutes for him to loosen up and start enjoying the game, walking and running in circles around the room, just like the other children who followed the teacher (Excerpt 19 – 02/15, Wednesday).

As for the ECE's relationship with the autistic children, we observed that she was very affectionate. They were always very welcomed by her and had their needs met when they expressed them. For this reason, we observed a two-way relationship, as the boys were also affectionate towards the ECE and had her as a support reference at school.

He returned to the room to say goodbye, and the teacher said goodbye affectionately with a hug and a kiss, which he returned. He also kissed me goodbye, encouraged by his parents (Excerpt 52 – 03/22, Wednesday)

The ECE greeted children emphasising saying "Good morning" for some, like Levi. At the moment, he did not respond, but soon after, while the teacher's back was turned, he got up and hugged her, returning to her seat shortly after. The teacher, surprised, turned and went after him to return the gesture. (Excerpt 65 – 04/19, Wednesday)

It was possible to verify that the group teacher's teaching practice contributed at various times to mediating social interactions among children and to including children with autism in the classroom context. The ECE modified the activity proposals, with what she had at her disposal, in order to include children and reserved for them the right to remain where they felt comfortable in the environment.

Discussion

This research aimed to understand how pre-schoolers perceive differences among their peers, especially in their relationships with those who have specific needs, and to understand how ECE deal with differences in the classroom. The results allowed us to verify that children perceive the differences arising from the condition of their peers with autism, but talk or dialogue little about it. The classroom ECE acts as a mediator, encouraging the inclusion of children in daily activities, but the difficulties that Tiago

exhibit were little addressed, and barriers to the inclusion process continued to exist during the participant observation process.

One of these barriers concerns the lack of pedagogical assistance for the ECE, especially at times when Tiago was present in the class and demanded exclusive attention to remain in the environment, which resulted in limitations in adapting activities and environment that would facilitate Tiago's participation. ECE support is essential and needs to be provided by the school.

Interaction between the children: perception of differences

Throughout the observation period, it was possible to verify that, for children in the group, it is natural to seek social interactions with their peers, and these are observed on a large scale during the group period. However, for children with autism, the process takes place slowly and, in most cases, is mediated by other children or by an adult, in this case, a ECE (Chícon et al., 2019).

In the case of autism, there are specific characteristics of the disorder, such as communication and socialisation difficulties, which are reflected in the behaviours presented by children, resulting in differences in the way they play and relate when compared to other children. Children with autism can, for instance, spend hours entertained with the same object or enjoying the same toy, present hyper focus on themes such as dinosaurs or cartoon characters, demonstrate a lack of imagination and an orientation towards make-believe, having a preference for playing in isolation (Moura et al., 2021; Mattos & Lione, 2023)

In preschool, playing is the form of communication and learning and should be one of the main strategies for socialisation and social interaction among children. A study carried out by Folha et al. (2023) in three early childhood education units observing children with typical development and children with autism analysed different play situations, such as collective directed play, free play in the classroom, free play in an outdoor area and spontaneous creation of games. The characterisation of children's participation was called full participation, active participation and restricted or rudimentary participation. It was recorded that, regarding the playing of children with typical development, it was possible to observe full participation in contexts of directed, free play and, often, in spontaneous creation of games, evidenced by excerpts from narrative descriptions. With respect to the play of children with autism, there was motivation for involvement and active participation in moments of free play, even with repetitive play repertoire; however, predominantly, restricted or rudimentary participation in both directed and free play and an absence of spontaneous creation of games were observed.

Considering play as one of the essential activities for children's learning, working with differences at school should involve recreational and cultural activities. It is through play that children can understand differences and how to live with and learn from them. Children's stories and games are examples of how to approach differences in the world of childhood.

Levi and Tiago had differences in behaviour and social interaction and needed different mediation from both children and teacher so that they could participate and remain in activities. The study by Proença and Freitas (2023) shows that the word of the other contributes to both initiating and sustaining interaction, in other words, we realised that interactions occurred more significantly in situations where the children or the ECE addressed the students with autism directly, calling them to play and giving them an active role. In Tiago's case, adopting this strategy would be essential for him to get involved in the activities, as it is known that free play favours isolation in autistic people due to their inability to understand its meaning, damaging their relationships (Rodrigues, 2023).

How to approach autism with other children who seemed to conform to their friends' behaviours, but did not understand their causes, needs to be discussed further with children. Often, it is not enough to just name the differences, as children need to better understand the characteristics of their peers. This happened on the occasion of the researcher's farewell to the group, by using a story telling activity based on a children's book called "Meu amigo faz iii", by Andréa Verner. Children demonstrated a better understanding of their peers' characteristics and made several notes, relating the story to what they experienced in group.

The Brazilian National Curricular Guidelines for Early Childhood Education highlights those collective educational spaces are privileged to eliminate any form of prejudice and discrimination, making children, from a very young age, understand and engage in actions that know, recognise and value differences (Ministries of Education, 2009).

Child-adult interaction

Bronfenbrenner (1975) already stated that it is mainly through interaction with their caregivers that children develop their basic ideas about the world, themselves and others. From the beginning of life, relationships are built from interactions, i.e., from shared and interdependent actions. These actions are established through dialogic processes, in which each person has their flow of behaviour continuously delimited, cut and interpreted by the other(s) and by themselves through coordination of roles or positions within specific contexts. The relationships shared by adults and children are important. Carvalho and Portugal (2017) state that teachers' actions involve attention to the quality of relationships established between adults and children and the quality of spaces and material resources existing in this context for diverse and safe discoveries and explorations that provide meaningful experiences and learning.

At school, teachers are responsible for carrying out appropriate mediation to enhance social interactions among children (Mattos et al, 2023;). It is essential that teachers conduct their groups in such a way that autistic students can learn like others, even if they follow different paths. To achieve this, it is necessary to think about different methods, materials, resources, technologies and pedagogical support that meet students' specific needs (SME/COPED, 2019).

Hence, it was possible to observe that the ECE teaching practice contributed, at different times, to mediating social interactions among children and including children with autism in the classroom. The ECE modified the activity proposals, with what she had at her disposal, in order to include children, to remain where they felt comfortable in the environment. Furthermore, she made constant use of affection to welcome them, showing them, in addition to affection, patience and respect for processes, an attentive look and active listening to their needs and empathy, helping them to develop confidence in themselves and in a reference adult (Ubugata, 2022).

The literature recommends that coexistence among peers allows children to create their own hypotheses and views of the world, but it is the way in which this relationship is mediated that will determine the development of welcoming and respectful practices or actions of discrimination (Adurens et al, 2018). In other words, it is essential that topics are addressed clearly with children, presenting them with explanations based on their groupmates' real conditions and showing them that it is possible to live with differences (Vital, 2021).

The use of pedagogical strategies focused on children's specific needs can favour their inclusion in play contexts, increasing the possibilities for socialising and learning, but for this to happen, the ECE must be aware that each child is unique and understand the importance of adapting activities so that all students have the same opportunities. Proença and Freitas (2023) describe in their study that devising projects that involve play and creating spaces that are favourable to play allow autistic children to be encouraged to take on roles, directing them to the more abstract field and enabling the development of creative skills.

ECE mediation must take into account the most challenging factors for autistic children, such as socialisation, hypersensitivity and concentration, and formulate them to benefit their children. This includes using different strategies such as developing inclusive classroom environments and using adapted resources based on visual and concrete materials to stimulate the skills they want to work on (Paula & Peixoto, 2019). This requires ECE to have well-defined routines, but also to be able to deal with unplanned situations.

Finally, according to the observations and the ECE's own account, it is necessary for the school to provide pedagogical support that helps the ECE during activities and provides individual attention to the needs of children with disabilities whenever necessary, since the ECE needs to divide her attention between all the children. Decree 57.379, of 13 October 2016, provides for the hiring of Pedagogy undergraduates to support ECE who have Special Education children (São Paulo, 2016). However, at the time of the research, the school only had one trainee in the morning, who was helping out in another classroom.

Conclusion

According to the results produced during classroom observations, it appears that differences and diversities are manifested in the daily life of the group, in moments of

play, dialogues and interactions. Children with autism showed behaviours such as isolation, excessive or reduced interest in certain objects or toys, lack of games creation and interactions without mediation from peers or ECE and manifestation of discomfort when faced with visual and/or sound stimuli.

Nevertheless, several interactions among peers were noticed both inside and outside the classroom. Most of the time, these interactions took place spontaneously by children, who showed interest in interacting with friends with autism and seemed curious about the behaviours presented by them, only showing resistance to contact when faced with behaviours expressed by student Tiago.

At other times, the teacher mediated relationships, meeting the needs of students with autism and guiding other children on how to treat their friends. Children often expressed an interest in helping their peers with activities and were always encouraged by the teacher to do so.

However, even with her efforts, the ECE had difficulty dealing with the behaviour of students with autism, specifically with student Tiago, who required more attention and adaptations to the environment. Consequently, she had difficulty answering children's questions about their friend and did not clarify autism conditions and specificities.

The ECE mediation to involve children with autism in activities was essential, expressing adequate communication between ECE and child. However, the differences were not covered in the classroom in a practical, enlightening and continuous way for the children according to their age group, demonstrating that there is still a need for schools to include living with differences in their pedagogical projects.

As a limitation, it is understood that a study restricted to a specific pre-school can make it difficult to understand and deepen the phenomenon under study. Another limitation is that it was restricted to one classroom and did not include the teacher's perspective.

It is hoped that future studies can delve deeper into how children perceive differences in the inclusion processes of children with disabilities and/or specific needs.

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