

**TEACHER TRAINING FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH AUTISM  
SPECTRUM DISORDER: TRAJECTORIES AND CHALLENGES**

FORMACIÓN DEL PROFESORADO PARA TRABAJAR CON ALUMNOS CON TRASTORNO  
DEL ESPECTRO AUTISTA: TRAYECTORIAS Y RETOS

FORMAÇÃO DOCENTE PARA ATUAÇÃO COM ESTUDANTES COM TRANSTORNO DO  
ESPECTRO AUTISTA: TRAJETÓRIAS E DESAFIOS

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**Abstract**

The inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in regular schools is relatively recent and the target of great discussions. Due to the specificities presented by this public and their demands at school, educators' question, especially, how to promote the learning and development of these subjects. The objectives of this study were to investigate the presence/absence of training processes to work with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder throughout the teaching career and discuss how this training reverberates in the practices of educators who work with this public. A regular education teacher who had a student with ASD in her classroom participated in this study. The information analyzed was collected through an interview. The results showed gaps in the teacher's training that may have contributed to the difficulties experienced in her work with students with ASD in the classroom. Data analysis also pointed to the need for constant acquisition of knowledge to help the teacher in his educational action aimed at this public in inclusive schools. Conditions must be ensured so that teachers have access to initial and continuing education that contributes to their work with students with ASD. Thus, it is necessary to invest in improving teacher training, both initial and continuing, so that it is possible to include students with ASD in regular schools, ensuring not only the access of this group to school, but their permanence with quality.

**Keywords:** Autistic Spectrum Disorder; School inclusion; Teacher Training.

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### Resumen

La inclusión de alumnos con Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA) en las escuelas ordinarias es relativamente reciente y objeto de grandes debates. Debido a las especificidades que presenta este público y sus demandas en la escuela, los educadores se preguntan, especialmente, cómo promover el aprendizaje y el desarrollo de estos temas. Los objetivos de este estudio fueron investigar la presencia/ausencia de procesos de formación para trabajar con alumnos con Trastorno del Espectro Autista a lo largo de la carrera docente y discutir cómo esta formación repercute en las prácticas de los educadores que trabajan con este público. En este estudio participó una profesora de educación ordinaria que tenía un alumno con TEA en su aula. La información analizada se recogió mediante una entrevista. Los resultados mostraron lagunas en la formación de la profesora que pueden haber contribuido a las dificultades experimentadas en su trabajo con alumnos con TEA en el aula. El análisis de los datos también señaló la necesidad de adquirir constantemente conocimientos que ayuden al profesor en su acción educativa dirigida a este público en las escuelas inclusivas. Deben garantizarse las condiciones para que los profesores tengan acceso a una formación inicial y continua que contribuya a su trabajo con los alumnos con TEA. Así, es necesario invertir en la mejora de la formación del profesorado, tanto inicial como continua, para que sea posible la inclusión real de los alumnos con TEA en las escuelas ordinarias, asegurando no sólo el acceso de este colectivo a la escuela, sino su permanencia con calidad.

**Palabras clave:** Trastorno del espectro autista; Inclusión escolar; Formación de profesores.

### Resumo

A inclusão de estudantes com Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA) em escolas de ensino regular é relativamente recente e alvo de grandes discussões. Devido às especificidades apresentadas por este público e às suas demandas no âmbito escolar, os educadores questionam, especialmente, sobre como promover a aprendizagem e o desenvolvimento destes sujeitos. Os objetivos deste trabalho foram investigar a presença/ausência de processos formativos para atuar com estudantes com Transtorno do Espectro Autista ao longo da trajetória docente e discutir sobre como esta formação reverbera nas práticas dos educadores que atuam com este público. Participou deste estudo uma professora de ensino regular que tinha em sala de aula um aluno com TEA. As informações analisadas foram coletadas por meio de entrevista. Os resultados mostraram lacunas na formação da professora que podem ter contribuído para as dificuldades vivenciadas em sua atuação junto a estudantes com TEA em sala de aula. A análise dos dados apontou, também, a necessidade de constante aquisição de conhecimentos que auxiliem o professor em sua ação educacional voltada para este público na escola inclusiva. Devem ser garantidas condições para que o professor tenha acesso a uma formação inicial e continuada que contribua para sua atuação junto aos estudantes com TEA. Deste modo, é necessário investir na melhoria na formação docente tanto inicial quanto continuada, para que seja possível incluir de fato os estudantes com TEA nas escolas regulares, garantindo não apenas o acesso deste grupo à escola, mas sua permanência com qualidade.

**Palavras-chaves:** Transtorno do Espectro Autista; Inclusão Escolar; Formação Docente.

## Introduction

Over the years, the debate about inclusion in different social spheres has been growing and becoming stronger, enabling the struggle for rights by groups considered to be minorities to be intensified. This movement seeks the guarantee of equalization of rights and opportunities for everyone, without exceptions (GLAT, 2011).

In the theme of inclusion, we highlight the discussion over school inclusion of people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which has been guided by education professionals due to its complexity and the difficulties presented by this audience when inserted in school. When it comes to people with ASD the educational action is a topic that always comes up, because the teacher is considered an important figure for the permanence of the student with ASD in school to happen effectively. The teacher, being the main mediator of the teaching-learning process, takes part in the protagonism concerning the cognitive and social development of the student with ASD (GRASSI, 2008).

Regarding quality school inclusion, Glat (2011) emphasizes:

[...] quality Inclusive Education does not imply only in access and permanence of the student with special educational needs in basic school, even if they are well adapted and socially developing, but especially in their **academic performance**. If the student is not participating in the activities like the other classmates and learning, then there is no Inclusive Education! (p.6, author's emphasis)

Teacher training towards working in the context of inclusion is an important topic to be considered when there is an aim to guarantee the right for the education of the target audience of special education, in general, and of people with ASD specifically. Regarding the inclusion of this last group, the challenges refer to dealing with their cognitive, affective, and social specificities. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, 2014), people with ASD manifest some general characteristics: deficits in communication and social interaction in multiple contexts; restrictive and repetitive patterns of behavior, interest, or activities. We know that this disorder has different aspects and the manifestation of characteristics varies from person to person.

Given the diversity that characterizes the public with ASD, we highlight the need for teaching that considers their clinical, behavioral, language conditions, among other needs that present themselves throughout their lives. This way, the educator needs to know their student, identify their potentialities and limitations, creating strategies to develop the subject, considering their specific characteristics. In face of all these challenges, teacher training must have as a parameter the different situations that constitute the act of educating.

That said, the following question that will guide the present investigation arises: In which way the presence/absence of formative processes related to Autism Spectrum Disorder reverberates in the pedagogic practices of the educators that handle children possessing this disorder?

The general objective of this study was to investigate the presence/absence of formative processes about the Autism Spectrum Disorder throughout the teaching trajectory and how these processes reverberate in the practices of the teachers with children possessing the disorder. The specific objectives were to: Get to know the teacher conceptions about ASD; Describe the trajectory of a teacher that works with children with ASD, highlighting aspects related to initial and continued training; Discuss the implications in the pedagogical practice of the presence/absence of debates about ASD in initial and continued teacher training.

It is necessary to search for an educational system that guides and encourages the initial and continued teacher training, mitigates social inequality and educational exclusion in order to provide the right to education for all students with special educational needs or not. (GRASSI, 2017).

With this in mind, we look to understand how the training of teachers that deal directly with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder occurs, in order to identify how this alters the methods to handle these students in the classroom. Next, we will present the methodological processes used in this study and then, the analysis of the interview made with the selected teacher, and finally conclude the study with final considerations.

## Methodology

This research had the participation of a 32-year-old teacher, graduated in Pedagogy, specialized in School Management and Psychopedagogy, and master in Special Education. The participant was selected for working in an inclusive school of the public education system, having graduated in Pedagogy for approximately ten years and, effectively, working with children with ASD.

The study was realized in a federal public school, located in a suburban neighborhood of the city of Belém. The school works in three shifts, serving all school levels from Kindergarten to High School. It features an administrative structure composed of a School Board, principal, inclusive education coordination, secretaries, pedagogic coordination, Research and Extension Coordination (COPEX), internship coordination, and school subjects coordination.

For the data collection method, we chose to use the interview, which according to Gil (2008), is a form of social interaction where a subject seeks to collect data on one side and another subject presents themselves as a source of data. Thus, the interview

[...] as a method of data collection is very suitable to get information about what people know, believe, expect, feel or wish for, intend to do or did, as well as about their explanations or reasons in regards to the previous points. (GIL, 2008, p.109)

For the instrument, we selected a script of orienting questions with 18 questions divided into the following axes: initial training, classroom work, and continued training.

First, we contacted the Inclusive Education Coordination of the school requesting authorization to carry out the research. We informed the inclusion criteria used in the study to select the location of the research to verify if the school fit, and if there were any apt professionals to perform the study. The criteria seen as fundamental were: a school in the public system with a teacher that had been working for over eight (8) years, and that had a student with ASD in their classroom.

After getting authorization from the school to carry out the study, we were referred to the Research and Extension Coordination (COPEX), where they requested some documents for the approval of the research. Upon getting authorization from COPEX we contacted the Inclusive Education Coordination, where we exposed the intention of the research yet again. This sector appointed the teacher that met the criteria of inclusion as a participant in the study. In the first meeting with the appointed participant, we handed out the Free and Informed Consent Form - FICF to be read and signed in case of agreeing to be a part of the research. The date and time of the interview were also scheduled, by the Inclusive Education Coordination, in the same opportunity.

The interview happened in one of the rooms of the Specialized Educational Service - SES, on the school grounds, in the morning shift. The conversation was recorded on a cellphone, with the duration of 47min28s, and later transcribed.

Upon reading the transcription, the information obtained from the responses was organized into three categories: 1) Conceptions about ASD; 2) Teacher training; 3) Relation between training and pedagogic practices. This way, the data analysis was structured by comparing the responses in dialogue with authors who referenced this study.

### **Data analysis**

#### **- Conceptions about ASD**

As to their conception of ASD, the teacher stated that it is a neurodevelopmental disorder of still unknown causes, however genetic and environmental factors might be related to the disorder. Among the environmental factors, she cites prematurity, low birth weight and gestational diabetes, but emphasizes that the neurobiological origin still does not find a genetic marker. About this, Praça (2011) says that it is still not possible to prove from the etiological point of view what is the cause of ASD, if it is an environmental or genetic factor or even an interrelation of both.

In addition, the teacher highlighted that currently there is a lot of research being conducted about ASD in Brazil, but mainly abroad. Informing that, from a temporal perspective, the study about autism is very recent, as it was described for the first time as it is known today in 1943. She mentions that the prevalence rate of ASD has been growing significantly, as in the 1980s in the United States it was said that there would be one (1) autistic child for every two thousand (2000) children born. Today, this reality has become wider, reaching one (1) autistic child for every fifty-nine children born. As for Brazil, she mentions this reality is no different since there are more and more children with ASD coming to the classrooms.

Meeting the information above, Barbosa (2018) explains that ASD had its initial milestone in 1943 with the studies of two physicians, Kanner and Asperger, who were also the ones to coin the basic definition about ASD, which at the time had other nomenclatures. As for the increase in the prevalence rate of children with ASD, the Paiva Júnior (2019) states that there are no studies in Brazil that confirm this information, however, taking into consideration data from a research made in the United States, it is shown that every 110 people born, one is born with ASD. It is estimated that Brazil, with its more than 200 million inhabitants, has about 2 million autistics. For Santos (2017), the increase of cases is due in part to the recent amplification of diagnostic criteria, enabling more cases to be included in the spectrum.

According to said teacher, the child with ASD has a different cognitive style, and for that reason, needs some prostheses, since children with the disorder have difficulties in mind theory<sup>3</sup>, forming central coherency<sup>4</sup> and imaginative process, she also commented that it is currently in test the possibility of the person with ASD also having difficulties in the aspect of memory. The DSM (2013) apud Nascimento *et al* (2014) affirms that the child with ASD presents three qualitatively distinct aspects of language, social interaction and repetitive and stereotyped movements. However, Barbosa (2018)

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<sup>3</sup> Capacity to identify and comprehend one's own mental states (desires, beliefs and emoticons), as well as attribute these mental states to another, and from those attributions, predict possible behaviors.

<sup>4</sup> Cognitive theory that refers to the style of information processing, which in some occurs from global to local and in others in reverse.

stresses that the American Association of Psychology- APA (2013) does not take this characteristic triad of ASD into consideration anymore, turning it into a dyad, because the APA evaluates the relation between language and social interaction inherent, or in other words, closely related, thus, this dyad is defined as difficulties with social communication and interaction, and repetitive or restricted behaviors.

#### - Teacher training

The teacher stated that her degree was in Pedagogy. However, throughout her graduation she had access to few discussions about school inclusion. She states that there was a specific course about special education and, beyond that, the subjects related to this area of knowledge and school inclusion appeared diluted in different courses such as Developmental Psychology, History of Education or courses about public educational politics.

The 59th article of the LDB (1996) institutes that regular school teachers must be trained to work with special children in common classes, and the national curriculum guidelines of the pedagogy degree (2006) explain that the pedagogue in training must not only know the inclusive education politics but also comprehend the organizational and pedagogical implications for the democratization of basic education.

The interviewee believes that no degree currently has a specific subject about school inclusion, because, in her opinion, the curriculum of the Pedagogy degree cannot fit too many specificities. However, she points out that the degree could offer this type of specialization. About special education, she states that even in this degree, the different types of deficiencies are addressed superficially throughout graduation. This way, the teacher states that it is only possible to study about the deficiencies thoroughly in specialization courses. Cartolano (1998) apud Braga (2009) criticizes the training of pedagogues for inclusive education emphasizing the need for initial training courses to provide undergraduates internships in both regular classrooms and classrooms with special students or specialized institutions.

The teacher also says that even though her graduation did not help her work with special children, it helped her enter the job market through a public tender, despite acknowledging that in order to get in it also required personal dedication. Braga (2009) emphasizes that in order to have a transforming educational practice it is indispensable to unify theory and practice in the pedagogy degrees, and thus reach a global comprehension of the educational process.

Only after entering the job market, by means of a public tender, did the teacher start to have periodic training over each deficiency more thoroughly. According to the National Curriculum Guidelines of the pedagogy degree (2006), the Graduate in Pedagogy must be qualified to incentivize and promote the coexistence of all involved whenever they enter the classrooms or any other organizations, in order to respect the plural society in which they are inserted.

- Relation between training and pedagogic practices

The first contact of the interviewed teacher with ASD, as with other deficiencies only occurred when she started working as a support teacher in inclusive education, where she had the function of offering advice to regular classroom teachers that received special students. In order to materialize this work, she reported that a group of professionals from specialized institutions would give her advise and that was how the training was done, which according to her, could answer questions about specific problems, such as challenging behavior or something of the like. After this advice, she would go to the monitored schools to explain what she had learned to the teachers. Glat and Nogueira (2002) defend the idea of advising teachers with training programs and periodic follow-up, because education gains a lot from these policies, becoming more inclusive and democratic for all students.

According to the teacher, training should compel the educator to eliminate competing stimuli for the student with ASD inside the classroom, for in her opinion, making a classroom too attractive, beautiful and organized hinders the student's learning process, and for children with ASD it is usually better to avoid these excesses in the classroom.

The teacher also states that the child with ASD, according to their difficulty level, requires adaptations, and the way to provide these adaptations will only be possible with strong formations, that actually work the collective individually. According to Grassi (2017), a good training must prepare the graduate for the job market in a way that they have a reasoned perspective of the pedagogic practice they should exercise in their profession, as educating for the author is a great responsibility that requires coherence between three factors: formative orientation, assumed practice and the expectations of the subjects involved in the educational process with or without special needs.

The interviewee stated that the school teachers are offered workshops to adapt materials and activities for children with ASD, respecting the individuality of each one, as well as seminars and special education meetings. There are also very specific meetings with the SES team, when, for one, a student presents behaviors or demands that she does not know how to deal with immediately. She cites some causes of behavioral change in her students, which she learned over the years in classroom, such as change of medication, changes in their routines at home and the excess of out of school therapies, that significantly alter the ASD student's development with classroom activities and relation with their peers.

The teacher stated that there are students with ASD that can read and are more advanced than the rest of their classes, and thus the teacher is advised during these encounters to develop activities that keep stimulating these students so that they feel challenged, however, there are also students with ASD that cannot keep up with the class, and for those the teacher must think of activities that follow their development. This way, to find out what level of development her student is at, she applies an assessment called Psychoeducational Profile Revised (PEP-R), which is a type of

assessment for autistics that helps her a lot in designing the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which according to the teacher when speaking of IEP for students with ASD, one should not speak of individualization of teaching, but personalization of teaching. Silveira (2013) highlights what they think is important for working with children with ASD in regular schools, mentioning to be indispensable the use of the IEP, as going from there the school can establish the best form of teaching for that child, as it must always adapt teaching to the student and not otherwise.

The teacher confessed having some difficulties in handling the student with ASD, but she also declared to have dedicated a long time of her life studying about it, as her students motivate her to always seek more, saying that depending on the degree of ASD, mentioned by her in severe or light, it drives her to look for ways to help that student. She remembered a student with ASD that left an impression, and after working with them she decided to specialize in the area of ASD. Grassi (2017) mentions the need for the teacher to always be open to dialogue in search of new ways, even if they seem unusual, as only then they may find new practices that help in decision making about what and how to teach the student in order to transform their social reality.

An approach that the teacher worked with was the TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children) method, which she assures gives good results with her student, however she regrets that these types of training are always offered out of her region, making it very hard for her to attend. Also according to her, courses about ASD cost way above average, becoming yet another difficulty for the teacher. Glat (2011) emphasizes the need for federal, state and municipal public policies to subsidize with motivational and financial assistance the continued training of teachers in service, so that the teacher can assume a pedagogical praxis that is actually involved with inclusive and democratic education.

## Final considerations

Inclusive education is defined as the insertion of all subjects with special education needs in regular classrooms and the democratization of educational opportunities. In Other words, inclusive education aims to ensure access, permanence, learning and development of everyone's potentialities, including the ones of the students with ASD.

Brazil has legislation that regulates the presence of these students in regular school, however, the inclusion of the student with ASD is not limited to enrollment in regular classes or their presence in the school. It goes beyond, requiring that schools and education systems reorganize their structures, curricula, methodologies, pedagogic resources and, most importantly, ensure that their professionals are prepared for this new reality.

In view of this analysis, we understand that the partipating teacher recognizes ASD and its main characteristics, which can lead to challenges in interactions, language and behavior, thus the need for more attention, learning difficulties, among other issues. The interviewee possesses an up-to-date concept of ASD, but it's worth noticing that this knowledge was only acquired through continued training.

The formative trajectory of the teachers has presented numerous gaps in relation to being prepared to work with the inclusion of students with ASD. Most teachers that need to work with this public seek for qualification on their own, and this action ends up transferring a responsibility that should belong to the State to the personal/individual sphere. The consequence of this practice is an inequality between professionals that work in this area, for the best prepared and most knowledgeable are the ones with more acquisitive power. In addition to contributing to the precarization of teaching, as the teacher themselves need to invest in their training, they end up overworking themselves as they have to accumulate in their "free" time the studying activities associated to all the other activities that already occupy this time outside school, such as tending to the house, family, preparing classes, etc.

We emphasize that probably no initial or continued training course will be able to offer the teacher all the specific knowledge related to school inclusion of the target audience of special education, as this encompasses a plurality of students. However, despite recognizing the importance and necessity of continued training, there is a need for consistent initial training, therefore it is necessary to invest hard in the latter for the former to be seen as compensatory, but complementary.

It is also worth noting the inclusion of the student with ASD is not just the teacher's job, but the entire school community, which must act together with the teacher for the best service and schooling of this student, through collaborative, creative and critic actions. As well as it is also a job of the national, state and municipal levels to enable better training to these teachers.

In conclusion, we understand that it is essential to have a solid initial training that allows the future teacher to understand what is inclusive education and their role in this education, its implications, among others, and an innovative continued training that enables them to perform competently their practice in face of the challenges posed by inclusive education of students with ASD, at the same time it intends to incite further research on the topic, as well as help in the inclusion of these children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

This research demonstrated the need for deeper analysis and reflection about teacher training in the Pedagogy courses with focus in school inclusion of students with ASD. Since this work did not intend to exhaust the topic, we point out the need for further studies on the subject in order to expand the population of participating teachers and to have the insertion of students with ASD in the locus of the investigation, aiming to find new knowledge and solutions for the reality of formation for the education and inclusion of students with ASD.

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