

ARTICLE

**INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM IN REGULAR SCHOOLS:  
AN ANALYSIS WITHIN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** The present article refers to research with a qualitative-quantitative approach, for which the aim is to verify how the inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) happens in common teaching at a public school in Marabá (PA) district. The work starts from a theoretical framework about the inclusion of the autistic child, and about the school and family roles in the child's development, but also the challenges and needs of proper teacher training, in order for the inclusion to become effective. Regarding the methodological means, a survey was conducted with mixed questions, using Google Forms, aimed at 10 (ten) educational professionals, counting among them teachers, managers, and school coordinators from an elementary school in Marabá/PA district. The choice to use Google Forms was made because of the timing of the research, carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic period. The participants showed knowledge of the proposed theme, yet they still needed training courses and specific formation in dealing with autistic students. Regardless of this fact, to have the inclusion of these students in common teaching, respect for the limits imposed by the disorder should be linked to the use of resources and strategies to cater for students with ASD, especially since the benefits of an early diagnostic and partnership with other actors of the school environment, and also the family, are fundamental for them to feel as part of the society they live in, and see themselves as actors of rights, such as education, priority services, social assistance, culture, sport, among others.

**Key words:** Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), children, school inclusion.

**INCLUSÃO DE ALUNOS COM AUTISMO NO ENSINO REGULAR:  
ANÁLISE EM UMA ESCOLA DE ENSINO FUNDAMENTAL**

**RESUMO:** O presente artigo consiste em uma pesquisa de abordagem quali-quantitativa, cujo objetivo é verificar como ocorre a inclusão de alunos com Transtorno do Espectro do Autismo (TEA) no ensino

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comum em uma escola pública do município de Marabá (PA). O trabalho parte de um referencial teórico sobre a inclusão da criança autista, abordando o papel fundamental da escola e da família para o seu desenvolvimento. Além disso, discute os desafios e a necessidade de uma formação adequada dos professores para que a inclusão ocorra de forma efetiva. Metodologicamente, foi aplicado um formulário com perguntas mistas, por meio do Google Forms, direcionado a dez profissionais da educação – entre eles, professores, gestores e coordenadores – de uma escola de Ensino Fundamental do município de Marabá/PA. A escolha pelo uso do formulário via Google Forms deveu-se ao fato de a pesquisa ter sido realizada durante a pandemia de Covid-19. Os participantes demonstraram conhecer a temática proposta, embora ainda necessitem de cursos de capacitação e formação específica no trato com alunos autistas. Independentemente desse fator, para que haja a inclusão desses alunos no ensino comum, é preciso que haja o respeito aos limites impostos pelo transtorno, associado à utilização de recursos e estratégias pedagógicas adequadas ao atendimento do aluno com TEA. Isso porque o diagnóstico precoce, aliado à ação conjunta de outros atores envolvidos no contexto – como a escola e a família – é fundamental para que esses estudantes se sintam parte integrante da sociedade em que vivem e sujeitos de direitos, tais como educação, atendimento prioritário, assistência social, cultura, esporte, dentre outros.

**Palavras-chave:** Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA), criança, inclusão escolar.

## **INCLUSIÓN DE ALUMNOS CON AUTISMO EN LA EDUCACIÓN REGULAR: ANÁLISIS EN UNA ESCUELA PRIMARIA**

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo es una investigación con enfoque cualitativo y cuantitativo, cuyo objetivo es verificar cómo ocurre la inclusión de estudiantes con Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA) en la educación común en una escuela pública de la ciudad de Marabá (PA). El trabajo parte inicialmente de un marco teórico sobre la inclusión de los niños autistas, además del papel de la escuela y la familia en su desarrollo, así como los desafíos y la necesidad de una adecuada formación de los profesores, para que se pueda lograr la inclusión. Metodológicamente, se aplicó un formulario con preguntas mixtas, aplicado a través de Google Forms, dirigido a 10 (diez) profesionales de la educación, siendo participantes docentes, directores y coordinadores de una escuela primaria de la ciudad de Marabá/PA. La elección de un formulario a través de Google Forms ocurrió porque se realizó durante el período de la pandemia de Covid-19. Los participantes demostraron que conocían el tema propuesto, pero aún necesitaban cursos de formación y formación específica en el trato con estudiantes autistas. Independentemente de este hecho, para que estos estudiantes sean incluidos en la educación regular, el respeto a los límites que impone el trastorno debe estar vinculado al uso de recursos y estrategias para la atención a los estudiantes con TEA, especialmente porque los beneficios de un diagnóstico temprano y de las alianzas con otros actores del ambiente escolar, así como la familia, son fundamentales para que se sientan parte de la sociedad en la que viven y agentes de derechos, como la educación, la asistencia prioritaria, la asistencia social, la cultura, el deporte, entre otros.

**Palabras clave:** Trastorno del espectro autista (TEA), niño, inclusión escolar.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties with social interaction and communication, and repetitive and restricted behaviors. These three aspects are considered essential elements for diagnosis. Symptoms can vary from case to case and can be detected before age 3. However, many children are still diagnosed late, both due to family misinformation/resistance and a lack of specialized medical expertise, according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013).

Cardoso et al. (2019) state that there is a consensus that, as a childhood neurodevelopmental disorder, ASD is characterized by difficulties in social interaction, communication, repetitive behaviors, and restricted interests, and may also present sensory aspects. In the educational context, Klin (2006) shows that autism is not considered a fixed, irreversible, and immutable mental state, but the result of a process that can, at least in part, be modified through interventions.

When discussing the inclusion of children with autism in regular schools, Oliveira (2020) highlights the importance of also considering the preparation of teachers, who are often not adequately trained to welcome these students. As the teacher is the mediator of the inclusive process, their responsibility is to facilitate the child's initial contact with the classroom and the activities proposed.

Therefore, research related to teacher training, teaching strategies and methodologies, and studies on the perceptions of students with ASD regarding school must consider that these students have characteristics that compromise the use of functional language, directly impacting their social interactions. Bessa and Maciel (2016) discuss the importance of support in the communication and teaching-learning process, highlighting the role of a multidisciplinary team and the implementation of interventions directly linked to motor development, especially psychomotor development.

This is one of the greatest challenges in this field today, but it is possible to provide an education without discrimination through organized educational work adapted to individuals with disabilities. Considering that this research focuses on the inclusion of students with ASD in regular education, based on a case study with ten education professionals at an elementary school in the municipality of Marabá, the choice of the topic was motivated by the researcher's experience as a teacher in the region, aiming to analyze how these students are included in regular education.

According to a survey by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 8.4% of the Brazilian population over 2 years old—corresponding to 17.3 million people—has some disability, with almost half of this group (49.4%) being elderly. Furthermore, data from the 2021 School Census indicate that the percentage of students aged 4 to 17 with disabilities enrolled in regular classes has gradually increased, rising from 90.8% in 2017 to 93.5% in 2021 (Brazil, 2022).

With the enactment of the National Policy for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Law 12,764/2012, persons with autism began to be legally recognized as persons with disabilities. As a result of this and other current legislation, people with autism were guaranteed the same rights already guaranteed to other people with disabilities (Brazil, 2012).

In Law 13,146/2015, known as the Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities or the Statute of Persons with Disabilities, a person with a disability is considered to be one with a long-term impairment, whether physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory, which, in conjunction with one or more barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Brazil, 2015).

In the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), autism spectrum disorder was unified under code 6A02, consolidating the different spectrum disorders into a single diagnosis, as recommended by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5). Based on this classification, ASD can be characterized by the presence or absence of intellectual development disorders, as well as varying degrees of functional language impairment, which may be mild, absent, or impaired. Additionally, Autism Spectrum Disorder can be classified as unspecified.

Corroborating the previous statistical and legislative information, the importance of including students with ASD in mainstream education emerges, based on teaching strategies that prioritize psychomotor, sensorimotor, cognitive, and affective education. This process would begin in

early childhood education, continuing through the initial grades, until literacy and introduction to logical-mathematical reasoning are completed.

The initial hypothesis of this study demonstrates that municipal education systems and public policies aimed at education can (and should) promote changes in their organization, offering quality educational services to all children with ASD, eliminating potential barriers, and offering different ways of learning and socializing. Based on this information, the question arises: do the public policies implemented by the municipality of Marabá aimed at improving mainstream education contribute to the inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?

Regarding the relevance of the study in question, Delors et al. (2003) assess that the topic of educational inclusion of students with autism in regular schools has been recurrent in the specialized literature. However, according to Gomes (2013), there is much to be explored regarding the pedagogical activities developed with this population, especially due to knowledge gaps and new approaches that explain the development of these students in the classroom, leading to a well-rounded education.

This inclusion incites the need to investigate the performance of teachers and the school to understand how the development of students with autism occurs. Considering that students with ASD present characteristics that compromise both affective relationships and language, the need for support in the communication and teaching-learning process becomes urgent, through the work of a multidisciplinary team and interventions focused primarily on psychomotor development.

Based on the above, the general objective is to verify how students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are included in regular education. The specific objectives include: demonstrating, through field research, teachers' knowledge of working with students with ASD; identifying whether the school, the locus of the field research, promotes inclusive practices during the teaching-learning process of students with ASD; and assessing whether ongoing training/qualification is offered in the area by the municipality of Marabá, Pará.

Thus, based on the development of public policies and the implementation of pedagogical strategies for the educational process, as proposed by Cunha (2015), research that directly or indirectly addresses the development of students with ASD in the school environment stands out, which supports and justifies the proposal of this study.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by atypical development, behavioral manifestations, deficits in communication and social interaction, repetitive and stereotyped behavior patterns, and a restricted repertoire of interests and activities. Warning signs in a child's neurodevelopment can be noticed as early as the first few months of life, although the diagnosis is usually established between 2 and 3 years old. The condition is more prevalent in boys. Individuals with ASD present difficulties in reciprocal social interactions, stereotyped and repetitive communication patterns, and restricted interests and activities, characteristics that generally manifest in the first five years of life.

In this regard, renowned neurologist José Salomão Schwartzman states that “[...] at least 50% of autistic people present varying degrees of intellectual disability; however, some have special abilities and become computer geniuses, for example” (Schwartzman, 2017, p. 54). A few years ago, the language changes presented by autistic people were considered merely a characteristic of the disorder; today, however, these issues are considered one of its main problems (Klin, 2006).

In 2013, a revision was made, resulting in the new version of the DSM-5. It began to show that the disorders within the autism spectrum were grouped into a single diagnosis: ASD. The ICD-10 included several diagnoses within Developmental Disorders under code F84, called Childhood Autism, Atypical Autism, Stereotyped Movements, and Asperger Syndrome. The ICD-11 groups these diagnoses under ASD 6A02, and the subdivisions began to be related to functional language impairments and intellectual disability (Santos, 2022, p. 1).

Some authors have begun to consider other characteristics. The proposals of Dunlap, Pierce, and Kay (1999, as cited in Sousa; Santos, 2010) suggest that some individuals exhibit superior abilities in specific areas, such as music, mechanics, or arithmetic calculation, while demonstrating significant delays in others. Cognitively, even the most skilled autistic children face a major challenge: their inability to generalize. According to Aarons and Gitters (1992 apud Sousa; Santos, 2010, p. 9), “They may even know what to do and how to act in a given situation; however, they are unable to use this experience and adapt it when a new situation arises.”

For Asperger, it is possible to regularly encounter

[...] attention disorders in autistic children, who would have difficulty, from the beginning, in directing their attention to external stimuli, harming their school performance. They seem to follow their ideas and do not like to be distracted from their thoughts (Asperger, 1994 apud Sousa; Santos, 2010, p. 10).

Currently, the characteristics of individuals with ASD are associated with impairments in social interaction and communication. These characteristics include unusual speech patterns, lack of eye contact, failure to respond to being called by name, delayed development of speech skills, difficulty maintaining a conversation, repetition of phrases or words, difficulty understanding others' feelings and expressing one's own, and repetitive or unusual behaviors. Additionally, children with autism may have excessive attention or interest in a particular object, perform repetitive body movements, systematically align or organize toys, among other things. In general, changes in routine or exposure to noisy and overstimulating environments can disrupt them, leading to outbursts of anger, frustration, distress, or sadness (Backes, Zanon, Bosa, 2017).

Therefore, an autism diagnosis is only officially recognized when performed by a physician or a medical board, following the criteria of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5). This is a clinical diagnosis, performed by a specialist, who considers both reports from parents (or guardians) about the child's behavior and direct observation in different contexts.

In the biological factors associated with autism, approximately 70% of cases present with intellectual disability, while approximately 30% manifest epileptic seizures. To define the limits and risks related to ASD, the application of globally standardized screening tests is essential. Through the results obtained from these tests, the scientific community constantly analyzes the mysteries of ASD.

Currently, there are numerous scales (standardized screening tests) used in Brazil for the diagnosis of autism, such as the M-CHAT, ATA, and PROTE-R, which help identify the characteristics of ASD. The M-CHAT (Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers), for example, is a screening scale that can be administered to all children during pediatric appointments, aiming to identify autism traits at an early age. It is a simple instrument that does not require exclusive administration by physicians, since the responses to the items take into account the parents' observations of the child's behavior. Completing the scale is quick, taking only a few minutes.

The M-CHAT also offers other advantages. By screening for autism early in children between one and a half and two years old, its administration is simple, low-cost, causes no discomfort to the child, and does not require specific skills, making it possible for any mental health professional to administer. According to the translators of the Brazilian version of the scale, psychiatrists Mirella F. Losapio and Milena P. Pondé, the M-CHAT is an extension of the CHAT, consisting of 23 yes/no questions. The questionnaire should be self-completed by parents of children aged 18 to 24 months, provided they are literate and accompany their children to pediatric appointments.

Of the total number of questions, 14 were developed based on a list of common symptoms in children with autism. If a child scores more than 3 points from any of the items, they are considered at risk for autism. If they score 2 points from critical items (questions 2, 7, 9, 13, 14, and 15), they are also considered at risk for autism. Responses scored as “no” are: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, and 23. Responses scored as “yes” are: 11, 18, 20, 22 (Losapio; Pondé, 2008, p. 223).

The aforementioned behavioral scale, in addition to supporting the diagnosis of autism based on these criteria, enables the precise identification of each individual's specific characteristics, as well as a global analysis of the sample, allowing for the identification of similarities and differences between the individuals analyzed. Therefore, Sousa and Santos (2010, p. 8) comment that “[...] the autistic universe is a complex reality, encompassing different concepts.” The evolution of its terminology over time has further clarified autism spectrum disorder; however, many of the identified characteristics are not present in all individuals, nor do they always manifest in the same way.

Regarding the presence of sociocommunicative deficits and repetitive and restricted behavior patterns, the level of impairment and the need for support in these areas vary significantly (APA, 2013; Volden et al., 2009). Given these characteristics, language constitutes an important field of investigation in the study of ASD.

Regarding causes and interventions, many approaches have been developed, each with different philosophies and methodologies. The most common involve a combination of behavioral therapy, speech and language therapy, and education for people with disabilities in schools. Treatment should include psychosocial and educational interventions, in addition to medication. Regarding this typology, Nikolov, Jacob, and Scahill (2006) state:

Generally, first-line treatments for children with autism include psychosocial treatments and educational interventions aimed at maximizing language acquisition, improving social-communicative skills, and eliminating maladaptive behaviors. However, there are currently no standard drug treatments available that address core symptoms, nor are there any drug treatments approved by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration, USA) (Nikolov, Jacob, Scahill, 2006, p. 2).

Corroborating these authors, several scholars assess the importance of early diagnosis and intervention, which are associated with significant gains in children's cognitive and adaptive functioning. These studies suggest that early and intensive intervention has the potential to promote more functional behaviors in individuals with ASD, as it coincides with a period of development when the brain is highly plastic and malleable (Dawson et al., 2012).

Regarding the culture, race, and socioeconomic status in which the disorder may occur, Camargos Junior (2005, p. 42) demonstrates that its causes are unclear, especially since it is a disorder frequently associated with Intellectual Disability (ID), organic diseases such as epilepsy, and genetic conditions such as Fragile X Syndrome and tuberous sclerosis. However, its origin is very likely biological.

Klein and Hattge state that the word “inclusion” has been used “[...] as jargon in the educational field to describe practices that we would like to see more just, democratic, and supportive” (Klein; Hattge, 2010, p. 12). Thus, it is a topic that remains controversial, as it involves the right to education and the exercise of citizenship, social justice, and, simultaneously, teacher training, the formulation of public policies, and the philosophy of schools, whether public or private.

According to Santos (2010 apud Klein; Hattge, 2010, p. 37), the “[...] right to be different [...]” seems to be the imperative proclaimed by educational policies. The construction of a democratic society in which everyone would achieve citizenship, in which diversity would be respected, and in which differences would be accepted and politically recognized, was based on inclusion.

According to Gomes (2009), the educational society has proven to be exclusionary, prioritizing certain ways of learning and teaching, adopting partial and circumstantial assessment criteria, and imposing a learning pace whose rigor and pace many learners cannot keep up with. Despite all that has been studied, produced, and advanced in education, schools and their professionals in Brazil still operate with a discourse that is detached from practice. From this perspective, students are not served based on what they know, but rather on what they can learn.

The school is not an island. It is embedded in an economic, cultural, and social context that produces meanings and impacts the daily lives of the school community that participates in it; therefore, students, teachers, administrators, and the community must participate in this context (Hattge, 2010, apud Klein; Hattge, 2010, p. 37).

Para que haja a inclusão do aluno com TEA, deve-se perceber que, durante o ensino-aprendizagem, ele pode facilmente

Therefore, an inclusive school ensures quality education, achieving success in both learning and participation for all its students, without any kind of discrimination. Therefore, the idea of inclusion, according to Mantoan (2015), a pioneer in studies on the subject in Brazil, represents a true shift in the educational paradigm, as it points the way to a viable pedagogical approach for all.

To include students with ASD, it must be recognized that, during the teaching and learning process, they can easily

[...] read, solve mathematical expressions with letters and numbers, and surf the internet. You can have many friends and learn the meaning of emotions with pride and happiness, as long as you have the appropriate support both at home and at school (Verotti, Callegari, 2008, p. 10).

Therefore, from an educational perspective, Mantoan argues that a radical change must also occur in teacher training: “The teacher's role is to develop a specialized educational plan for each student to reduce their specific barriers. Flexible, skilled professionals interested in learning are always welcome” (Mantoan, 2015, p. 33). Considering this perspective, it is clear that inclusion forces the educational system to rethink, discover new ways of teaching, and even reformulate its very understanding of what learning is.

Inclusion is the process of adapting society to the needs of its members so that, once included, they can develop and fully exercise their citizenship. Inclusion must be unconditional—that is, no one can be excluded—and is important from three perspectives: familial, social, and educational.

School emerges in a child's life as one of the most important extra-familial environments. There, children begin their socialization, share knowledge, and expand their universe. This expansion should be a continuation of the process started at home, where they have long built their story. Human beings are whole, not fragmented by the spaces to which they belong. In each of these spaces, they are a complete human being. If a personal journey begins in the family, many chapters will be written at school (Casarin, 2008, p. 66).

In the family sphere, parents need to build a strong alliance with the school. According to Queiroz, the need for this inclusion is generally realized when the child is born:

[...] the birth of a child with the possibility of a “disability” is a moment of growth for the family, which is faced with changes and the need to be reorganized, especially because the family is the first social group the child lives with (Queiroz, 2004, p. 40).

Thus, Buscaglia (1993 apud Queiroz, 2004, p. 40) states that the possibility of disability brings with it the confrontation with a new, unexpected, and potentially devastating reality. Adjusting to this reality may require a family to drastically change their lifestyle, profession, hopes for the future, and plans to achieve their goals. Reinforcing Buscaglia's perspective, Nascimento (2007) states that “[...] when a child presents some kind of problem at birth, each member of the family will react differently, most often resulting in a change in role performance” (Nascimento, 2007, p. 74).

Before Nascimento, Brito (2006) had already made a relevant comment:

Generally, when a child is born, some people say: it looks like its father... others think it looks like its mother. But when a special child is born, few dare to say who it looks like; however, it is undoubtedly the face of the family and the body of society (Brito, 2006, p. 53).

Integrating an autistic child into the family is essential. However, adequate preparation is paramount, as many families believe that, after the child's birth, everything will go smoothly. However, when faced with the reality of a child with a different developmental pace and who demands significant emotional investment—especially in terms of affection, attention, and understanding, without necessarily meeting expectations, frustration arises. According to Werner (2002 apud Queiroz, 2004, p. 37), this situation can generate “[...] a high level of anxiety, wondering if they are suitable parents.”

Perhaps for this reason, Buscaglia (1993 apud Queiroz, 2004, p. 34) stated that “[...] the type of life and future that children with ASD will have when they grow up will depend largely on themselves, but will also be influenced by the sensitivity, attitudes, knowledge, and overall personality of their parents and family members.” He also cites parents' attitudes toward their children, isolating them from social interaction and preventing them from exploring and interacting with the outside world. He adds that “[...] the key to the growth process lies in the opportunity the family offers the child to have a safe place to discover themselves and others in their world” (apud Queiroz, 2004, p. 39).

The structural factors of society, according to Dias (2011), are present within the family group, as

[...] the birth of a child impacts the emotional, financial, and daily lives of its parents, as well as their psychological well-being. Parenthood has specific characteristics and demands for care throughout the child's life, with essential responsibilities for education, socialization, and protection of the filial subsystem. These responsibilities create diverse feelings in fathers and mothers, and if they allow themselves to be touched by the depth of these experiences, they may find great possibilities for personal transformation (Dias, 2011, p. 142).

This reality highlights that autistic children need the support of their parents and/or guardians for their inclusion in society, through social, emotional, and educational development; the strengthening of emotional bonds; the achievement of aspects such as self-esteem and autonomy; the formation of personal values; educational development; professional integration; and the ability to establish interpersonal relationships.

However, one of the most common family problems related to autistic children is maintaining a routine. In this regard, Aarons and Gittens (1992 apud Sousa; Santos, 2010, p. 14) comment on a common characteristic of autistic individuals:

[...] the fact that they feel stress and worry when subjected to minimal changes that disrupt family routines. Children insist on maintaining routine, experiencing tantrums when they are led in a direction that deviates from what they are familiar with.

In another aspect, Rosa (2007, p. 128) emphasizes that it is essential to “[...] outline a family program of care, integration, and socialization; and the interdisciplinary team must act cohesively within this program.” Creating bonds between the family and the autistic child facilitates the discovery and identification of their real characteristics and needs. Their development is closely linked to family participation. Achieving family participation can be achieved through various types of activities and recreational events. Regarding this, psychologist Sonia Casarin (2008) states that the need for consistency and coordination across different contexts places parents in the strategic position of articulators and mediators.

They are the ones who can facilitate communication to integrate those involved in the work aimed at the well-being and development of autistic children. This mediation also allows families to benefit from learning opportunities, adaptations, and flexibility, using them to continue these practices in their children's daily lives at home (Casarin, 2008, p. 66).

Worldbuilding and understanding of the school universe and the meaning of learning will be facilitated if there is consistency between the experiences of autistic students in the school environment and in other contexts. To foster, for example, the formation of an “affective bond between the student and the teacher,” the family can contribute by revealing the child's characteristics, habits, relationship patterns, and communication styles, which will serve as a starting point for building this bond.

Studying in a regular school system is another relevant aspect to consider. Casarin (2008) highlights this experience as positive, as it provides students with access to the elements necessary to construct a representation of the world that allows them to become autonomous and participatory adults. It is a way to experience respect for differences, coexistence with other students, and the perception of themselves as unique in their singularity.



Technical and scientific knowledge about disabilities is also important. This information broadens understanding of the child without, however, labeling them. This knowledge can be acquired through training courses and also through information shared by parents themselves, who have a clearer understanding of the child's subjectivity and uniqueness. For this reason, building a stronger relationship with the family should be valued.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

The geographic scope of this research is the municipality of Marabá, located in the southeast of the state of Pará. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), a 2020 census, this municipality has a land area of 15,128.058 km<sup>2</sup>, making it the fourth most populous in Pará, with approximately 287,664 inhabitants (IBGE, 2021). It also has the fourth-largest GDP in the state, R\$40,872.35, according to the Amazon Foundation for Studies and Research Support (FAPESPA, 2020). The average HDI is 0.668, placing the municipality in 10th place in the state (UNDP, 2013).

Marabá is the main socioeconomic hub of southeastern Pará and one of the most dynamic cities in Brazil. The school enrollment rate for children aged 6 to 14 is 94.7%, ranking the municipality eighth in the immediate geographic region for school enrollment. In public elementary education, Marabá has an average score of 5.1 in the early years and 4.3 in the later years (INEP, 2021). In 2021, elementary school enrollment totaled 44,533 students; high school enrollment was 12,830. That year, the municipality had 1,483 elementary school teachers and 191 schools, as well as 533 high school teachers and 38 schools.

### Data Collection and Analysis

A descriptive study was initially conducted using a quantitative and qualitative approach. According to Barros and Lehfeld (2007), descriptive research allows for the study, analysis, recording, and interpretation of facts from the physical world without the researcher's interference. While the qualitative approach can be complementary, enriching the analysis and final discussions, the quantitative approach is a research method that uses quantification (information collection and processing) through statistical techniques such as percentages, means, standard deviations, correlation coefficients, and regression analysis, among others.

Field research was also conducted using an online questionnaire with ten mixed questions addressing issues relevant to the inclusion process for students with ASD. The participants, education professionals with qualifications in management, pedagogy (teachers), and coordination, were randomly selected.

During the questionnaire, we sought to understand, based on qualifying data, the reality of certain phenomena from the perspective of various social actors (Cervo; Bervian, 2002) – in this case, teachers. Data collection, coding, and analysis techniques were implemented to generate results based on the meanings of the phenomena studied, leading those involved to reflect on actions and consequences for the reality in which they are inserted.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey instrument was administered via Google Forms to avoid health risks for both researchers and participants. In this survey model, participants were only able to access the questions after signing an Informed Consent Form (ICF) and then discussing the topic.

The survey participants work at a Municipal Elementary School within the regular education system. The institution offers classes up to Elementary School I and currently has 498 students enrolled, 32 of whom have some type of disability. Of these, 15 have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The research population consisted of 20 full-time school staff, both male and female, with over 12 months of professional experience. For the sampling criteria, we sought the participation of at least 50% of participants (in this case, ten professionals), all with experience in Elementary Education,

to ensure a safe data margin. Regarding the number of cases, we started from commonly used numbers to obtain a safe margin, varying between four and ten cases (Gil, 2002).

Data from the objective questions were presented as percentages. Content and semantic analysis were used to analyze the responses to the open-ended questions and categorize them, as per Mayring's (2010) approach.

The study was conducted following the rules and regulations of the National Health Council, in its Resolution 510/2016, considering the signature of the ICF by the participants (signed via PAE). This article was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee – Campus VIII UEPA, under opinion no. 5.038.279. It is emphasized that the data obtained in the research remain under the custody of the researcher, ensuring the confidentiality of the information for a period of five years, after which they will be duly discarded.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results, obtained through the proposed Google Forms form, showed the participation of ten education professionals working at the “Professora Ida Valmont” Municipal Elementary School, located in the municipality of Marabá, Pará.

Eight of the participants had bachelor's degrees, of which five (50%) were pedagogues, and three (30%) were teachers of other subjects. Regarding postgraduate degrees, two professionals (20% of the total) were educational psychologists, with experience ranging from 4 to 22 years. These professionals answered the questions described in the following paragraphs:

*“Have you ever worked, or do you work, with students with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder)? If yes, please describe how long you have worked.”* Of the respondents, 90% answered “yes” and 10% “no.” For those who answered yes, the length of experience ranged from two months to two years.

In the item “Regarding difficulties encountered in working with ASD students,” in which it was possible to mark more than one alternative, 60% of participants cited difficulties in planning; 40% reported difficulties in using special resources; and 30% mentioned communication difficulties, among other aspects.

Considering the difficulties faced, Ângelo (2021) highlights, in his study, the importance of teacher action and planning as fundamental elements in building the learning of students with ASD. By understanding the particularities of each student, it becomes possible to assess their progress and achievements. Students need to receive stimuli that facilitate teaching and learning, as well as communication strategies that promote their safety in any environment.

Informants were asked if they “believe in the process of including students with autism in regular education.” Considering the affirmative responses, 60% said that it is through contact and interaction with other individuals that students learn and develop. Therefore, they consider inclusion appropriate and emphasize that it is supported by current legislation. Regarding the negative responses, 40% said that, although legislation guarantees inclusion, the school and teachers are not prepared to welcome these students. This lack of preparation encompasses not only the lack of training (lack of specific education) but also deficiencies in school infrastructure.

The production of inclusive academic content is paramount. When discussing inclusion and accessibility, it is clear that not all teaching materials are adapted to meet the needs of the different audiences present in schools. Often, institutions are also not fully prepared to carry out inclusive work.

Inclusion must be a daily activity, not relegated to the background. Beyer (2007) states that the classroom teacher is a fundamental element in ensuring that educational initiatives for autistic students achieve a reasonable degree of success. Therefore, both initial and ongoing teacher training in service must encompass pedagogical concepts and practices that create the conditions for educational practices consistent with the inclusive project.

Regarding the question: *“Are you taking (or have you taken) any type of course to better communicate with students with ASD?”*, with the possibility of selecting more than one alternative, the responses indicated that 60% of participants had never taken any course, while 40% stated that they had already taken courses in the area of Education for Students with Disabilities and Inclusion.

When a teacher says they have not taken any courses to improve communication with students—whether they have disabilities or not—it is important to reflect on the causes and consequences of this attitude. Some point to a lack of opportunity or investment by the school in training courses; others, a lack of interest or personal desire to pursue training in the field. Regardless of the motivation, it's essential to evaluate how the educational system works to effectively include these students.

It is crucial to invest in both the educational system and teacher training, aiming for quality education for all students. This investment should include ongoing training, offering specific courses so teachers learn how to interact with students with disabilities. Corroborating this perspective, Zampieri, Souza, and Monteiro (2008) state that the educational process unfolds through the teacher, ensuring the necessary support for students with disabilities to develop their learning. The teacher, therefore, is a key player in the entire educational system, acting as a mediator between knowledge and student challenges. Therefore, if the teacher does not have greater knowledge of the difficulties and the way these students behave, it is important that he or she learns about this disorder, which can be achieved through ongoing training.

Regarding the barriers faced by autistic students in the school environment, inclusion constitutes one of the main challenges. Education plays a fundamental role in breaking down (destigmatizing) these barriers, especially when it fosters social bonds, promotes cognitive development, encourages teaching and learning, and creates spaces for students to feel part of a whole (family, society, school).

Continuing the questioning, informants were asked *“if you think it's possible to have school activities between students with and without disabilities.”* All answered “yes,” highlighting socialization as a strategic suggestion. The involvement of the entire school community in activities is essential for inclusion to occur. Partnership during activities can occur through inclusive play, teaching resources, and the participation of families and students, considered “normal,” bringing knowledge and information to everyone. Thus, school activities between students with and without disabilities contribute to the acquisition of new knowledge and encourage the search for transformative solutions in this context.

Actions should be planned with the goal of transforming the entire school community through knowledge, practice, and interaction. For this planning to be effective, Souza, Souza, and Araújo (2017) emphasize that teachers must take the initiative, providing direct support to students with disabilities. This first step involves meeting with family members and representatives of the Department of Education to exchange experiences and knowledge, creating a support network for the agents involved in serving students.

Regarding the factor *“discrimination against students with ASD in the school where they work,”* 90% of respondents said “no discrimination,” and 10% said “yes,” but did not specify the type of discrimination. From an educational perspective, the issue of discrimination is a cause for concern. According to Sousa (2015), teacher participation and action in preventing discrimination are essential. Effective prevention requires the development and improvement of knowledge and techniques that foster the inclusion of students with autism, fostering a sense of belonging. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to cultivate sensitivity and seek, through experience, to guarantee attitudes that promote quality inclusion.

An essential aspect of this issue is the necessity to prevent the denial of enrollment for students with disabilities in regular education. Currently, Bill PL 5.352/19, which is under consideration in the Chamber of Deputies in Brazil, addresses this concern by deeming it discriminatory to obstruct the enrollment of individuals with disabilities in any level or type of public or private educational institution. Consequently, no school is permitted to deny admission to a student with a disability.

The Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (Brazil, 1996) serves as a framework for enrolling all students in the regular education system. Article 59 of this law mandates that educational systems provide a curriculum, teaching methods, resources, and organizational structures specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of these students. Therefore, if this right to access education is not upheld by an educational institution, civil society has the option to appeal to local authorities, including the Department of Education and the Public Prosecutor's Office.

Regarding “*investments and public policies aimed at training professionals, as well as lectures, workshops, and structural improvements to facilitate the inclusion of students with autism,*” 70% responded that these initiatives are taking place, citing Advanced Training Courses, Ongoing Training, Specialized Educational Services (AEE), Accessibility, Use of Teaching Resources, among others. Thirty percent responded “no,” arguing that the inclusion process still needs to advance significantly, reinforcing the need for greater investment to ensure that students with ASD receive a quality education and promote their integration into their social and family environment.

Sousa (2015) states that many teachers feel insecure about including students with disabilities, mainly due to a lack of experience and training to address this reality. When seeking to promote the inclusion of autistic students, teachers sometimes end up leaving them too comfortable, forgetting the importance of using strategies – even if adapted – that help overcome the challenges faced.

The constant pursuit of inclusion requires investment in public policies and the building of partnerships that promote assertive classroom interaction, as inclusion is no easy task. If an inclusive school is truly to be a school for all, the educational system must recognize and address individual differences, respecting the needs of all students.

In the item “*How has the educational system of the Municipality of Marabá addressed the issue of continuing education for education professionals regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular school system?*”, 10% of respondents assessed that the municipal administration encourages continuing education; 40% responded that this is limited, as public policies appropriate to the topic are still lacking; 50% criticized the lack of investment in continuing education, meaning teachers often have to pay out of their own pockets for courses, lectures, workshops, and other activities.

In the municipality of Marabá, the Municipal Department of Education (SEMED-*Secretaria Municipal de Educação*) offers services to students with ASD through the Specialized Educational Service Center for Students on the Autism Spectrum (NAETEA-*Núcleo de Atendimento Educacional Especializado ao Aluno de Espectro Autista*), which operates outside of school hours. This center aims to serve over one hundred students, offering pedagogical support with one- to two-hour workshops, as well as clinical monitoring. The municipality also has 36 resource rooms throughout its schools, four of which are located in rural areas. For NAETEA activities, the Department offers ongoing training to all teachers working there, aiming to improve their practices and thus help autistic students achieve functional abilities.

In Marabá Pioneira, the Center is well-equipped, with five treatment rooms, a laboratory for early stimulation, an administration room, a kitchen, a courtyard, a bathroom adapted to meet accessibility standards for people with disabilities (PwD), a sports court, and a garden. The multidisciplinary team is made up of a psychopedagogue, speech therapist, psychologist, and occupational therapist, among other professionals.

The school has a Multifunctional Resource Room that serves students with various disabilities, including autistic students. The professionals working in this room provide after-school care, with the following facilities: two laptops, a printer, a children's activity table, educational games, tables, chairs, and a workbench.

The service covers 32 children with various disabilities, 15 of whom are diagnosed with ASD. Of these 32 students, five are from external units, meaning they come from other schools that do not have a resource room. For this reason, the school is highly regarded in the IDEB and in its inclusion category. Recently, the municipality invested, through a public selection process, in hiring mediators who provide specific services to autistic students. An intern also works as a collaborator in the care and assistance of these students.

Therefore, the school-locus, as an educational environment, needs to validate pedagogical practices, as it is directly responsible for the academic development of students. The inclusion of students with disabilities must be part of the school's political-pedagogical project, and the municipality's participation in this project requires investment in ongoing training, courses, and lectures. The goal is to benefit not only the school community but also the family, overcoming a homogenizing vision in pursuit of strategies that ensure the right to learning for all students, regardless of their condition or limitations.

Sousa (2015) states that inclusion is investing in quality education for the benefit of all. To believe this is possible, it is necessary for government officials and society, in general, to see children with ASD as capable beings, despite their limitations.

When asked about *“the use of some type of instrument or diagnostic to assess children with ASD,”* 10% answered “no”; 90% answered “yes,” based on activities created by teachers in the classroom or by the educational psychologist in a multifunctional resource room (adapted resources), in addition to reading/writing diagnostics.

There are many types of instruments/diagnostics used to assess children with autism. At school, assessment protocols are important because they help the multidisciplinary team (administrator, teacher, educational psychologist, among other professionals) standardize specific care actions, promoting social interaction, communication, play, and imaginative use of materials skills in children suspected of having ASD.

During the diagnostic process, since autism is a disorder, Cavaco (2014) advises that attention and reading are necessary to understand the behaviors of autistic students, to avoid misunderstandings that compromise the true meaning of the disorder. Since autism presents itself in a variety of ways—with behaviors that differ from individual to individual—it is important to understand, during the assessment, that there is no single pattern or a single set of behaviors. To this end, the teacher must be adequately prepared through specific training, as students depend on these professional competencies to access a truly inclusive education—their learning, therefore, requires teacher preparation.

Finally, the question was asked about *“the effectiveness of inclusion and what can be done to improve this process, through suggestions and opinions.”* The interviewees responded as follows:

- *It is being implemented, but more investment is needed in the inclusion of students with ASD.*
- *I want to emphasize the importance of supporting the families of students with ASD.*
- *Training, resources, investments, etc.*
- *There needs to be a teacher assistant (specialist) in classes with autistic students.*
- *Specific training is needed for educators who work with autistic students so they can improve and/or acquire more knowledge about the disorder, facilitating classroom interventions.*
- *The need for inclusion of these students by educators and the school unit.*
- *Educators need to remain trained and prepared to make diagnoses consistent with the reality of each student and their disorder.*
- *Educator's role in maintaining and developing autonomy.*

Analyzing the statements of informants allows for a discussion of the approaches presented, underscoring the significance of employing foundational elements such as teaching resources and strategies to enhance the education and learning experiences of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This involves prioritizing a quality, proactive educational framework that fosters self-esteem and autonomy.

In her notes, Mantoan (2015), an inclusion specialist, raises concerns about current practices in addressing these issues. She points out that educational systems often rely on facilitating measures such as caregivers, tutoring, and acceleration classes, which frequently fall short of addressing the underlying challenges. To effectively qualify a school for accommodating all children, it is essential to implement measures and resources that restructure teaching and move away from conventional, exclusionary practices. From an inclusive perspective, it is not the child who must adapt to the school, but rather the school that must evolve to meet their needs.

Family participation is also crucial, and establishing an ongoing dialogue between the school and families is essential. This communication allows for an evaluation of both the positive and negative aspects of actions taken in each setting, fostering a spirit of mutual collaboration. As Cunha (2014) notes, such dialogue enables teachers to objectively assess student and family behaviors, assisting in the realignment of interventions when expected outcomes are not achieved in either the home or school environment. Regular meetings, reports, information exchange, and continual observation of progress provide significant support in this process.

Therefore, in the school setting, to gain expertise in this area and promote inclusion, educators must seek collaboration with a specialized support team, including professionals such as specialized educational services staff, neuropsychopedagogues, and speech therapists. Additionally, leveraging support from school administration and the broader community is vital.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the objective proposed in this article—to determine how students with autism are included in regular education in the municipality of Marabá, Pará—it is essential to initially highlight the role of teachers and the importance of the school structure to accommodate such students.

The role of teachers—whether administrators, coordinators, professors, etc.—in the school inclusion of children with ASD is extremely important, due to their mediation in the inclusive process and the promotion of teaching and learning. Furthermore, it is the teacher's responsibility to encourage positive relationships between autistic students and other students and the school community, using adaptive activities and resources/strategies that ensure organized and inclusive educational efforts.

Confirming this relevance, field research conducted with education professionals in the municipality of Marabá, Pará, revealed alternative approaches used by teachers to promote the learning of students with ASD.

Despite the limitations identified—such as the insufficient investment in continuing education courses provided by the municipality and the absence of public policies aimed at facilitating the integration of these students into the regular education system—the school remains committed to delivering specialized educational services to them. This commitment is supported by a partnership involving a multidisciplinary team and families, with the goal of promoting and enhancing students' autonomy, creativity, and communication skills.

This collaboration seeks to challenge the notion that the educational rights of individuals with autism are exclusively linked to existing legal provisions. Instead, it emphasizes the necessity for these students to adapt to both the school and family environments to achieve emotional and cognitive growth, thereby enriching the teaching and learning experience.

Recognizing the importance of developing the skills and potential of autistic students is crucial for helping them overcome challenges. Education serves as one of the most vital tools for this development.

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## **DATA AVAILABILITY DECLARATION**

The underlying content of the research text is found in the manuscript.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS:**

Author 1 – Principal Investigator, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript writing.

Author 2 – Research advisor, participation in supervision, monitoring data analysis, and reviewing the final manuscript.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this article. All authors agree to the submission of this article.