

ARTICLE

THE TRANSITION OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT: Building on the ongoing discussion regarding the role of quality care in facilitating school transitions, this study examines the perspectives of eight mothers on the transition of their children with Autism Spectrum Disorder to elementary school within the public education system of Brasília (FD), Brazil. A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using active listening techniques and analyzed through content analysis. The findings revealed significant shortcomings that hinder a smooth, individualized, and inclusive school transition for the child, specifically regarding practices that support family engagement and children's participation in planning for new educational environments. The study concludes that there is a need to establish guiding principles and regulatory frameworks that are responsive to the specific needs and contexts of individual schools, thereby promoting more effective and inclusive transition practices.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, families, transitions.

A TRANSIÇÃO DA CRIANÇA COM TRANSTORNO DO ESPECTRO AUTISTA PARA O ENSINO FUNDAMENTAL

RESUMO: Tendo por base o debate sobre os benefícios que o atendimento de qualidade traz para as transições escolares, o estudo objetiva a análise e a compreensão de perspectivas de oito mães no que concerne à passagem de suas crianças com Transtorno do Espectro Autista para o Ensino Fundamental, na rede pública de ensino de Brasília (DF), Brasil. Desenvolveu-se como método uma pesquisa qualitativa, com a aplicação do estudo de caso. O instrumento de recolha de dados foi a

entrevista semiestruturada, seguindo a técnica da escuta ativa, com análise de conteúdo para tratamento dos dados. Como resultados, aponta-se evidências de falhas que dificultam a transição contínua, individualizada e inclusiva, da criança, especialmente práticas que reforcem a preparação e o envolvimento da família e da sua criança no planejamento para integrar novos ambientes. Conclui-se que há a necessidade da constituição de princípios orientadores e reguladores direcionados às escolas e adequados a cada contexto institucional.

Palavras-chave: transtorno do espectro autista, famílias, transições.

LA TRANSICIÓN DEL NIÑO CON TRASTORNO DEL ESPECTRO AUTISTA A LA EDUCACIÓN PRIMARIA

RESUMEN: Basado en el debate sobre los beneficios que una atención de calidad aporta a las transiciones escolares, este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar y comprender las perspectivas de ocho madres sobre la transición de sus hijos con Trastorno del Espectro Autista a la educación primaria en la red pública de enseñanza de Brasilia (DF), Brasil. Se llevó a cabo una investigación cualitativa mediante la aplicación de un estudio de caso. La recolección de datos se realizó a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas, siguiendo la técnica de la escucha activa, y los datos fueron analizados mediante el análisis de contenido. Los resultados evidencian deficiencias que dificultan una transición continua, individualizada e inclusiva del niño, especialmente en prácticas destinadas a fortalecer la preparación y la participación de las familias y de sus hijos en la planificación de su incorporación a nuevos entornos educativos. El estudio concluye señalando la necesidad de establecer principios orientadores y marcos reguladores dirigidos a los centros educativos y adaptados a las características y necesidades de cada contexto institucional.

Palabras clave: trastorno del espectro autista, familias, transiciones.

INTRODUCTION

School transitions happen when children and their families experience significant changes between educational stages. These transitions are crucial and occur at various points, such as moving from home to school, from family to an educational center, from daycare to early childhood education, and from early childhood education to primary education (Formosinho, Monge, & Oliveira-Formosinho, 2016; Marturano, 2013).

Fontil et al. (2020) discuss the influence of a high-quality educational transition and the impact on a child's developmental and learning domains. He highlights the importance of a successful school journey for effective adaptation since these positive early transitions decisively influence subsequent ones. Thus, the impacts associated with transition stages (such as those at school) have significant consequences throughout a student's entire school career. They can affect both relationships and academic performance, and may even increase rates of grade retention and school dropout (Greubel, 2018; Marturano, 2013; Oliveira, 2012).

The literature emphasizes the transition from preschool to elementary school as a key concept. When a child encounters the initial experiences and challenges of a new school stage, there is a convergence of changes in their life as a whole, characterized by a threefold transition: (1) a transition between stages of cognitive development; (2) a psychosocial transition; and (3) an

ecological transition. These transitions involve a period where the child's performance and their relationships with peers and teachers predict future academic success and adjustment (Marturano, 2013).

This scenario brings new needs for children, such as self-control and attentiveness in the classroom; social skills for new relationships within the school community; and, above all, the maturity to cope with reduced contact in the teacher-child relationship and the need to become more autonomous (Greubel, 2018; Silva, Gaiato, & Reveles, 2012).

For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), these changes and unpredictability associated with transitions can lead to difficulties during the school transition process (Fontil et al., 2020). Characteristics associated with ASD, such as challenges with socio-emotional reciprocity and communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2014), require appropriate support. These deficits limit interactions with caregivers and peers, hindering the move into new social and academic environments. For these children, such changes can create a sense of unpredictability and lack of control; moving between schools, separating from early childhood education friends, facing performance expectations, adapting to altered routines, and navigating unfamiliar rules in the new setting often result in heightened stress (Correia-Zanini & Marturano, 2016; Greubel, 2018).

Fontil et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of collaborative and supportive practices in facilitating the transition process for all the people involved and, consequently, a successful start to school. The implementation of quality practices in early childhood intervention to support transitions, and the way children and families experience these successive transitions, have a positive impact and simultaneously influence well-being, learning, early school adjustment, and future development, potentially affecting inclusion.

In the context of this approach and within Brazil, the Early Education Program implemented by the Federal District Government since 1987 stands out. This program provides specialized educational services at Special Education Centers and early childhood education schools. It focuses on a range of educational activities that promote biopsychosocial stimulation, aiming for the holistic development of infants and children up to three years and 11 months old. Children are referred to the program by health services due to diverse reasons, including developmental delay, risks associated with prematurity, specific needs (e.g., ASD), potential for high abilities/giftedness, or social vulnerability (Distrito Federal, 2019; Distrito Federal, 2020a; Distrito Federal, 2020b; Distrito Federal, 2021a).

The Federal District's Early Education Program contributes to a gradual and individualized educational transition that considers each child's characteristics through a collaborative process involving the family, education professionals, and the school community. It ensures greater familiarity with the new school setting, facilitates adaptation to the new stage, and promotes well-being (Silva, 2022). Within the framework of the Federal District's public school system, various legislation and public policies, such as those from the Ministry of Education and the Federal District Department of Education (SEEDF), provide guidelines that encompass manuals, guides, pedagogical workbooks, and recommendations regarding student reception, integration, transitions, and adaptation. These resources, along with the relevant curricular guidelines for Basic Education, define the ideal educational transition as a continuous process that spans different educational systems (Distrito Federal, 2019; Distrito Federal, 2020a; Distrito Federal, 2020b; Distrito Federal, 2021a).

Thus, this research aimed to understand the school transition process for children with ASD enrolled in the SEEDF school system, based on the following research question: "In Brasília's

public schools, is the transition process from early childhood education to elementary school planned in response to the needs of the child with ASD and the priorities of their family?"

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive, and reflective research methodology, focused on the description of natural phenomena. We selected a case study approach, as it is appropriate for establishing the contextual nature required for the work. The case study is a research design that encourages the researcher to aim for a level of "horizontal coherence" among diverse statements, within which "vertical coherence" is discovered. This process presupposes a comparison between at least two statements (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Eight mothers participated in this study, which was structured as a single case study focusing on the families and monitored the transition of their children with ASD from early childhood education to the first cycle of elementary school during the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 academic years. The children attended various public schools in Brasília, Federal District. The selection of mothers was intentional, as they are typically directly responsible for overseeing their children's school participation and, according to Correia-Zanini and Marturano (2016), are best positioned to analyze and understand the effects of this process on their children's development and functional adaptation capabilities.

Our sample used the "snowball" method (Coutinho, 2021) due to the difficulty of identifying and reaching this specific population. Starting with an initial contact with mothers known to the SEEDF who expressed availability, interest, and motivation to participate, other members of the same population were naturally identified in a snowball effect. At the end of the eighth interview, we found theoretical saturation and data redundancy.

To ensure ethical standards and methodological rigor, we adhered to the specific criteria. From an ethical perspective regarding the respondents, we prioritized transparency in the information provided. We guaranteed confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity, respecting the principles that protect their rights and well-being. This approach aimed to foster trust and enhance the credibility of our research (Coutinho, 2021). To protect the identities of the participants, we assigned pseudonyms, using uppercase for mothers and lowercase letters, for their children, while maintaining alphabetical order based on their initials.

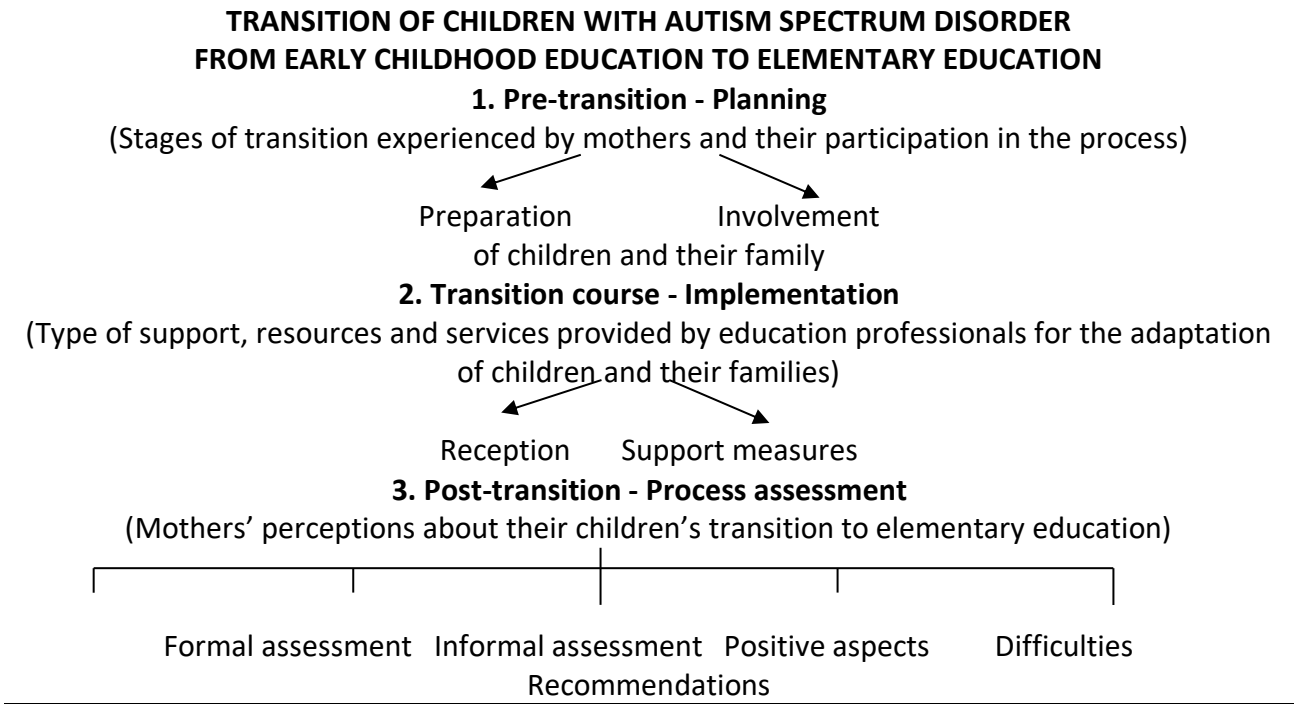
From a practical point of view, we highlight the socio-professional relevance of the research findings and the obligation to inform colleagues about the procedures to reach the described results. To avoid observer bias (Coutinho, 2021) and ensure credibility, we shared recordings and verbatim transcripts with another researcher as the data were collected and had participants verify them for validation. To ensure transferability, we employed detailed, thick descriptions of the entire research process. To ensure dependability and confirmability, we clarified the researcher's biases by documenting data processing information and the method used to segment interpretations.

Due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, commonly known as COVID-19, which was ongoing at the time of data collection (October 2020 to July 2021), the experiences of the participating mothers were captured through semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted using an active listening approach in the form of individual online conversations between the participant and the interviewer. To guide the line of inquiry, the interviews followed a protocol featuring predetermined general questions that were open-ended, concise, and neutral (Bogdan & Biklen, 2013).

The data analysis process in this research followed the methodology of Bardin (2016), using exploratory content analysis with a nominal classification scale. The categories and subcategories were defined deductively, guided by a review of prior studies such as those by Martinho (2016) and Oliveira (2012), as well as by key practices that influence the transition outcomes for children and families. This alignment was also informed by the study's objective, its central research question, and the professional experience of the researchers. Additionally, subcategories that emerged from the analyzed material were identified inductively, based on shared characteristics found in the participants' statement transcripts.

Thus, our system of categories emerges, summarized in Figure 1:

Figure 1 - System of categories and subcategories of the transition process



Source: Developed by the authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We decided to present the analysis of the eight cases together and in a cross-cutting way to clarify the common characteristics found from the participants' statements in the transcripts. The results are presented starting with the characterization of the mothers and children, as shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2 – Characterization of mothers and their children

Source: Developed by the authors.

Presentation of results

Characterization of mothers and their children

	CASE A	CASE B	CASE C	CASE D	CASE E	CASE F	CASE G	CASE H
	ALICE and Alan	BEATRIZ and Bil	CARLA and Caio	DANIELA and Dália	EMÍLIA and twins Edu and Eric	FERNANDA and Flor	GABRIELA and twins Gil and Gal	HELENA and Hugo
Mother	40 years old Married Civil Servant	44 years old Married Pedagogy student	44 Years old Married Security guard	48 years old Single Clothes seller	41 years old Married Nurse	39 years old Married School owner/partne r	42 Years old Divorced Store worker	38 Years old Married Housewife/ Speech- language therapist
Child	2 younger brothers Diagnosis at 3 years old	1 older brother Diagnosis at 2 years old	1 older sister Diagnosis at 3 years and 8 months old	1 older sister Diagnosis at 5 years old	Twins Diagnosis at 3 years old	1 older brother Diagnosis at 3 years old	Twins Diagnosis at 1 ano and 8 months old	4 brothers Diagnosis at 5 years old

Out of the eight mothers we interviewed, six were employed, one was a student, and another dedicated herself exclusively to caring for her children at home. Six of the mothers were married, one was divorced, and one was single. The ages ranged from 38 to 48. All the mothers had children with ASD along with other children. Notably, one of the families we analyzed included twins (both with ASD).

In the children studied, three were female, and seven were male. All the children lived with their nuclear families. The age at which they were diagnosed varied: in two cases, it occurred before the age of three; in four cases, it was made before the age of four; and in two cases, the diagnosis was made at age five. Mothers A and E reported complicated pregnancies and premature births. In the case of Mother E, one of her twins, Eric, was also diagnosed with cerebral palsy and motor impairment.

The mothers of cases A, B, C, E, G, and H reported that their children were keeping up well with their school classes. However, the mothers of cases B and H reported that their children were set to be evaluated for high abilities and giftedness. Seven children attended public preschools, while one child attended a private educational institution owned by the family. At the time of the interviews, six children were in the first year of primary school.

Table 1 shows the data regarding the children's transition process from the mothers' perspective.

Table 1 – Joint summary of data according to the system of categories and subcategories

TRANSITION									
CASES	Pre		During				Post		
	Preparation	Involvement	Reception	Support Measures	Formal Assessment	Informal Assessment	Positive aspects	Difficulties	Recommendations
A	+	+/--	+	+	--	+	• Commitment/Helpfulness	• Pandemic	• Reception/welcoming/respect • Work with families
B	--	+/--	--	--	--	--	• Commitment/Helpfulness • School visit (requested by the mother)	• Pandemic • Relationships • Discontinuity	• Work with families • Preparation/training • Management/physical infrastructure/HR
C	+/--	+/--	+	+/--	--	+	• Interaction/inclusion	• Pandemic • Relationships	• Reception/welcoming/respect • Preparation/training
D	--	--	--	--	--	--	• None	• Welcoming/Inclusion	• Work with families • Preparation/training • Management/physical infrastructure/HR
E	+	+/--	+	+	--	+	• Commitment/helpfulness • Interaction/inclusion • School visit	• Pandemic	• Visit to the sequential school • Management/physical infrastructure/HR
F	+	+	+/--	+	--	+	• Interaction/inclusion	• Welcoming/Inclusion • Pandemic	• Reception/welcoming/respect • Sequential school visit
G	+	+	+	+	--	+	• Interaction/inclusion	• Pandemic • Discontinuity	• Reception/welcoming/respect • Preparation/training
H	--	--	--	--	--	--	• None	• Welcoming/Inclusion • Relationships	• Reception/welcoming/respect • Work with families • Preparation/training

Note: Satisfactory (+), partially satisfactory (+/--), and unsatisfactory (--).

Source: Developed by the authors.

The analysis of the key dimensions related to the experiences that mothers and their children faced during the transition to elementary school, along with concerns about the ongoing transitions children will continue to encounter throughout their lives, allowed us to identify several findings. These findings are categorized according to the three categories defined for the study:

1 - Preparation and involvement of the child and their family in transition planning

This category addresses the understanding of the planning process, the stages experienced by mothers (preparing the child and the family), and their participation or involvement in the process. It encompasses the school term preceding the child's transition (between August and December), covering both institutional contexts in the transition.

Based on the statements (Table 1), the initial impact experienced, specifically, a negative first impression of the school and its staff, appears to have hindered subsequent contact with families in both early childhood education and elementary school settings.

Another point raised by the mothers, consistent with findings from studies by Carvalho (2019) and Teixeira (2022), was that transition preparation took place predominantly during early childhood education. This suggests that both the preparation and the involvement of the child and their family in transition planning should occur well before the stress associated with the turbulent end-of-school-year period, a time when families report facing uncertainty regarding the transition to elementary school. As observed by Connolly and Gersch (2016), most of the mothers state that such support and special attention are crucial for enabling families to cope with and navigate the challenges of the transition.

For HELENA, the family's preparation for the transition "was a very painful process, lacking the guidance of anyone who had firsthand experience with what was happening, both in kindergarten and in elementary school". The school was not available to the family:

"When we went to visit the school where Hugo had been automatically assigned, to handle enrollment and get to know the place, we were told it wasn't possible because the principal didn't have any openings in her schedule. Subsequent contact was very limited; she didn't provide us with information about the school or my son's rights" (HELENA).

Most mothers considered their involvement in the planning process unsatisfactory, noting that the placement for the following year was not individually handled, as recommended by Silva, Gaiato, and Reveles (2012). Their statements reveal that family involvement in transition planning was nonexistent; where it did occur (such as during the preparation of reports at the early childhood education center, the development of curricular adaptations, or the selection of a class or school), the family's decision-making power was minimal (little more than mere agreement). DANIELA considered family involvement in transition planning to be nonexistent, stating that "the school showed no interest or concern in getting to know Dália" and failed to take the family's needs assessment into account. Her family's concerns "were not addressed; despite their promises, they did not follow through", and she believed "that they did not read the kindergarten report... nor her medical records... Aside from the referral to the resource room, the school never met to discuss or evaluate her".

The mothers' statements also clearly showed a lack of adequate communication, coordination, and collaborative work with families and among services, both during the planning and implementation of the transition. This ran counter to Brazilian guidelines emphasizing the importance of coordination and continuity between educational cycles, as well as collaborative processes involving professionals and families (Brazil, 2010). According to HELENA, "they showed no interest in listening to our concerns during decision-making". The school showed no interest in addressing the family's requests and "demonstrated no flexibility to accommodate Hugo"; nor were they open to working jointly with the professionals who were supporting him, in short, they showed no interest in getting to know him.

Some stress and concern factors mentioned by families, also pointed out in the study by Connolly and Gersch (2016), were (1) the lack of credibility of professionals regarding the information they passed on and (2) the moment of searching for a new school, surrounded by questions about suitability for their children, the stigma surrounding the diagnosis of ASD, and fears of social exclusion. This concern is mainly revealed when entering new environments, as they are genuinely challenging for children with ASD, especially in the process of acceptance and social interaction by peers, which was pointed out by the mothers.

For ALICE, the involvement and participation of the family in planning the transition was small, but

“of agreement, because they informed me what would be done, that Alan would go into a smaller class with other neurotypical children. I even asked if a special class might be better, but they said no, that he could handle a smaller class since his cognitive abilities were good”.

2 - The type of support (assistance, resources, and services) provided to families by education professionals during the transition.

This category focuses on understanding how the transition was carried out. It highlights the types of support, resources, and services provided to families by education professionals during this process, while also examining communication and the level of collaboration. This phase covers the start of the school year (between February and May) during the first year of elementary school.

According to the mothers surveyed, an initial welcoming contact was considered essential to the transition process. From the mothers' perspective, this welcoming approach by the school would entail: a visit (before the start of classes); preparation of both children and families to start the new school; coordination among both educational settings and the resources made available to the family; and the inclusion of the child, along with their family and other support systems, in the new environment through collaborative work involving the entire school community, and especially the other children and families who would be welcoming and interacting with their children with ASD, fostering a sense of calm for everyone.

According to BEATRIZ, the school did not hold a meeting to prepare for or welcome the families; instead, the initiative for contact came from her own family. She believed...

“that this is an internal error, a mistake by the school, a management error”; however, the parent does not know “the origin of such a massive error involving neurodivergent students, especially given that the school is known for specializing in Pervasive Developmental Disorders”. “When moving to Elementary School, the structure changes completely; play-based learning disappears, and it depends heavily on the teacher (...); the playground is non-existent in Elementary School, and this was very frustrating, as he used to love going to school (...)”. “Despite all of Bil’s documents having been submitted in advance, this school holds no transition preparation meetings, not even for neurotypical children. (...) “There was no information regarding Bil’s transition process, relevant legislation, available services, or curriculum adjustments”.

The mothers surveyed held mixed opinions regarding their satisfaction with the support measures provided by education professionals to assist in their children's and their families' adaptation during the transition. Most of them felt that appropriate curricular adjustments were not adequately implemented. BEATRIZ, for instance, took the personal initiative to mediate the curricular adjustment process with the teacher; to promote interventions and work on necessary skills with Bil; to request meetings with the school; and to assert Bil’s right to support from a

volunteer social educator. "There was no support from the school" (BEATRIZ). The mother suspected that, regarding the transition, the school had not "consulted the reports sent about Bil, not even the resource room teacher, because gaining entry to the school is always very difficult" (Beatriz).

The mothers noted the absence of a dedicated welcoming process by the school community for incoming children. This would involve preparing professionals, families, and other children, and ensuring interaction to facilitate introductions, a warm welcome, acceptance, and social engagement for the child with ASD, helping them feel comfortable participating in the new environment. Such measures would have served as potential facilitators of the transition. According to HELENA:

"No opportunity was created for people to get to know Hugo; the school referred to him as 'the boy,' and he hated that. Nor was there a chance for the parents to meet one another, and the school would place us in front of them in a way that was embarrassing and exposed us to scrutiny". "It turned out that the people at the school and the other parents didn't know he was autistic, only that he was a 'problem child' who disrupted the teacher's lessons".

The perception of the success of the transition for the mothers in the study was determined by the child's adaptation to the new school context, mainly due to the reception, inclusion, and the relationships formed by the entire family. In this context, the teacher's role is decisive for a child's adjustment to a new setting. When the school showed care and support and collaborated with families, mothers felt safe, leading to a partnership between the school and home. This is the success described by Carvalho (2019), fostering rich and varied interpersonal relationships that promote empathy and respect for others from an early age. For ALICE:

"The transition to the new class went very smoothly (...). Alan had already settled in perfectly; there was no crying or resistance, and he was happy going to and from school. He learned his teacher's name on the very first day and would come home talking about her". "It happened in a very synchronized way, that shift from one phase to the next".

The teacher provided oral feedback regarding Alan's development: "I saw a strong desire by the teacher to get to know him and his needs and to offer help, making herself available so our family could connect with her and ask questions or seek guidance regarding him" (ALICE).

The mothers in this study viewed the adjustment process as a key aspect of the transition, specifically regarding the child's adaptation to the new setting (including the physical space and new routines) and the adaptation or preparation of the people and environments to suit the child's profile. This aligns with findings from Teixeira (2022), which suggest that concerns surrounding these aspects predict how well a child adapts to elementary school, underscoring the need for timely and consistent intervention in school planning. HELENA defined it as her...

"greatest wish for Hugo's future is that people listen to him and adapt to him. Because he tries to adapt all the time, even without having the brain for it, he keeps making the effort, so the world could make an effort to understand him and discover just how much he has to give, to teach".

When contextualizing the interview with this mother, the "lack" she stated should not be interpreted as an intrinsic inability by the child, but rather as a critique of the rigidity of the settings involved. These environments, having become overly technical and characterized by "very

cold professionals" (HELENA), failed to provide the necessary support for a transition free from distress. The mother's informal complaint regarding the lack of "brain" reveals a keen perception of the adaptive effort Hugo had to make in the face of the neurological and emotional overload imposed upon him. This expression highlights the disparity between the child's biological and emotional maturation and the school's systemic demands. Thus, the mother appears to be criticizing a school model that disregards the child's development by demanding self-regulatory and cognitive skills that were still in progress.

We should emphasize that, in the mothers' statements, the school's adaptation (encompassing all its contexts and participants) to the children appears more significant than the child's adaptation to the new environment. In other words, for these mothers, the school's effort to adapt to their children was essential. This underscores that the primary effort should be from the environment rather than the child, highlighting an effective transition within the inclusion.

The mothers also showed greater concern for relationships, a welcoming and inclusive environment, than for the curricular continuity offered to their children. This contrasts with findings from McIntyre et al. (2010), who revealed that parents of children with specific needs demonstrated excessive concern regarding behavior/communication, academic readiness, and general readiness, prioritizing these over the social system (Greubel, 2018). According to FERNANDA, "Despite the short timeframe, it was a smooth transition; she was very well received at the school by everyone". She felt that the school adapted to Flor and that there was no "need for her to do things the way the others did, or to do them simply because the others were doing them". "This initial support was essential for Flor's transition to the new environment, especially since it was an adjustment for everyone, including the family", and it provided an opportunity for dialogue and guidance. Activities were adapted, featuring "more playful approaches so that neurodivergent children could also engage in tasks and activities, going beyond just literacy content".

The mothers highlighted that successful transitions are closely linked to the collaboration between schools and families. They emphasized the importance of schools allowing and encouraging families to engage with the school community, venturing beyond its gates and walls. This openness, even if limited to the initial phase of the transition to the new school environment, was viewed as a strong indicator of the school's quality. It fosters valuable information exchange and, consequently, a successful transition.

ALICE suggested that the school seek to learn as much as possible about the child from the family and previous teachers:

"The fact that the school shows it knows the child puts parents at ease right away and represents a major step for the teacher (...); the changes that lie ahead will be monitored by the teacher, so it doesn't become a problem. It is difficult to start when no one knows anyone, the child doesn't know the teacher, and the teacher doesn't know the child". "Parents are often afraid to bring up difficulties and disrupt the flow of school activities. And (...) the fact that the school is available, constantly letting families know they could reach out, made me feel very reassured and secure".

As Carvalho (2019) teaches us, families have privileged knowledge of their children and are the best people to speak about them. Thus, they must be allowed to participate in school activities and have access to their child's educational journey. In this way, it would be possible to foster, for "every child", the development of a resilient personal, social, and academic identity: one characterized by self-confidence, expectations of respect and success, belief in the support to which they are entitled, and the ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings (Formosinho; Monge; Oliveira-Formosinho, 2016).

Another outcome mentioned by the mothers was that the implementation stage, beyond encompassing the most positive experiences discussed in the interviews, left a lasting impression on them. The welcoming atmosphere and support measures at the new elementary school mitigated the potential negative impact that transition-related difficulties might otherwise have had on the children's development and learning, as well as on the family's memories. Carla reported that "at the new school, the staff showed an interest in getting to know Caio. I was welcomed by the principal, and once classes began, we were invited for a visit specifically so they could get to know him better". She described another specific occasion dedicated to welcoming and introducing the families, noting that "some parents were called to the resource room; everyone introduced themselves and their children, and spoke about the issues or disabilities involved. It was an opportunity to interact with one another, exchange ideas, and share contact information" (Carla).

As far as GABRIELA is concerned, the school was committed to effectively meeting the needs of the entire family:

"There was always a partnership; I felt like a partner. The school also adapted significantly to our family". "There was always that ongoing communication, providing feedback on how the day had gone (...). The school always remained open to helping me with anything related to daily routines, or with the documents or clarifications I needed to claim my children's rights".

Also, the school held meetings to present the professionals' perspective on the...

"development of the twins, Gil and Gal, in the classroom; they rarely had crises at school. They were fine throughout the entire class; their schedule was never shortened". "There was always a concern to offer them the best; I always received feedback on what could be improved for them, and the teachers would ask me", "[the lead teacher, the resource room teacher, and] the psychologist always gave me personal updates on the children's progress in class. They were open to my input, and I felt very involved".

For the mothers, maintaining continuity and educational support between early childhood education and elementary schools is crucial.. This point was also highlighted by Sands and Meadan (2023), stating that it helps to minimize the negative impacts that can arise from weakened ties to the previous school (which typically creates insecurity for children and families). These impacts include a reduction in individualized teacher attention and in the quality of the family-school relationship and communication. Mothers from cases B and G expressed concerns about the lack of continuity between the early childhood and elementary schools. BEATRIZ noted the disruption of play-based activities and access to playgrounds. GABRIELA also observed "how much they miss the bond with the previous school, once we've grown accustomed to the staff, even if the move is to a nearby school, it is still a different school and a different environment during a delicate transition".

In summary, the mothers identified several support measures provided during the transition, which included both physical and human resources. These measures comprised building relationships, making curricular adjustments, and offering feedback and guidance regarding the child's development. Additionally, there was a commitment to addressing the needs of both the child and the family, which involved consulting families on their preferences during decision-making; the way the child's adjustment to the new setting was also highlighted, along with the adaptation and preparation of people and environments to match each child's specific profile. These initiatives demonstrated respect for the children's unique characteristics and signaled a valuing of childhood, allowing it to be understood in its entirety and uniqueness (Carvalho, 2019; Sands & Meadan, 2023).

According to the mothers, they were responsible for the smooth, synchronized way the process unfolded, helping the mothers feel guided, involved, and like partners from the very beginning of the transition.

However, these mothers felt that the outcomes of the initial reception by education professionals, upon the child's entry into elementary school, and of the support measures implemented during the transition process, were directly linked to several factors: the teacher's preparation and specialized expertise; the promptness and availability of support services within the school; the time required for the child and family to adapt and feel comfortable and secure in the new school environment; and, above all, the extent to which the school adapted to the child. According to DANIELA, "parents should be received with greater attention and provided with clear information regarding school management, as very little was conveyed to parents, creating an impression of fatigue and a lack of interest"; the school needed to improve by having "a team of principals and teachers trained and experienced in dealing with autism and children with special needs, teachers who adapt to the children, offering more attention, closer engagement, and knowledge of every detail".

As in the study by Stoner et al. (2007), mothers observed that professional preparation, knowledge, and competence (derived from prior experience), as well as specific training or an interest in ASD, were fundamental factors in the performance of the professionals responsible for the transition. These factors influenced aspects such as interest, attentiveness, information provision, planning, curricular flexibility, inclusion skills, and the adaptation of practices to the needs of children and their families, particularly during the initial contact and reception phase.

3 - Positive aspects and challenges experienced by mothers during the transition process

In this category, it is important to observe the mothers' assessment of their children's transition to elementary school, from the end of the preschool school year (November and December) to the end of the following school year.

All the mothers considered that the failure to evaluate/monitor the transition process is weak and said that these schools did not support a joint reflection. In addition to the absence of a formal evaluation moment to monitor the child and their family during the transition process in elementary school, most of the mothers indicated that these procedures were limited to some informal evaluation moments provided by the school. This included feedback, especially from the homeroom teachers, with information about their children's transition in the progress of classes, their development, and adaptation to school.

For FERNANDA,

"There was no formal assessment; however, the teacher conducted a daily evaluation of Flor's adjustment and development. When an in-person meeting was not possible, the communication notebook worked very well, and the school adapted to the points raised".

According to Teixeira (2022), the school misses an effective opportunity to optimize each child's development and learning and to reflect on relevant performance data and teachers' work through the regular monitoring and assessment of a wide range of areas. Such practices would help the student learn and the teacher teach more effectively, contributing to the creation of a high-quality school.

Families acknowledged that addressing the issues raised in the interviews would prevent an important disruption during the transition to elementary school. However, these issues were linked to government support. According to the mothers, many of the barriers cited regarding the transition were understandable, as they stemmed from a lack of means, specifically human resources, such as the Volunteer Social Educator (a figure providing support and monitoring for the child).

As DANIELA stated, “there was no feedback regarding Dalia’s adjustment process at the new school (...); the regular classroom teacher, with 15 children in the room, cannot manage the necessary accommodations and support for a child with special educational needs”. She also noted the lack of preparation and specialization regarding ASD, as well as the absence of “someone in the classroom to assist with these children who do not receive the necessary attention” to keep up with the class. She believed that:

“Teachers and the school are largely left to fend for themselves. The government does not provide all the necessary resources, so principals have to scramble to find them. What is missing is good management, leadership that isn’t focused on these problems or on re-election, because the children are what matter most”.

According to the interviewees, the lack of support made it impossible to uphold fundamental rights, including the right to curricular adaptations. This situation increased the classroom workload, making it humanly impossible for teachers to manage (Silva; Gaiato; Reveles, 2012). This workload was further intensified by a reduction in collaborative and communication processes during the first cycle of elementary education compared to early childhood education. There was a lack of adequate time to meet, plan, and coordinate the transition, factors that ultimately undermine quality inclusive practice (Tanganho, 2022).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

An analysis of the mothers' perspectives, including those who successfully transitioned and those who faced failures within the school system, reveals two main conclusions:

i. For every aspect of the transition, the nature of social relationships, the coordination between educational levels, and the understanding of the children and their needs for inclusion were consistently highlighted; these three fundamental factors are present in the mothers' memories of the transition process;

ii. For the mothers, the teacher represents the closest link regarding “communication about how the transition goes”; however, school management is the main key, determining and influencing the feasibility of that link, as well as the quality of the welcome, inclusion, engagement, and family preparation throughout the transition, encompassing everything from physical infrastructure to human resources.

Although mothers highlighted some positive aspects regarding the implementation of the transition, it is evident that responses concerning the process as a whole leaned toward the classification of “unsatisfactory”, particularly regarding practices that foster the child's preparation for and engagement with new environments. This revealed that the transition they experienced fell short of expectations. This finding was also highlighted in research by Oliveira (2012), which focused on developing specific procedures for process evaluation, planning, and intervention involving the entire family.

The mothers' statements regarding the transition were underscored by the aspect of "inclusion", experienced by the child alongside their family and other forms of interventional support in the new environment, and its potential to avert certain adverse effects associated with their children's transition. This aligns with the studies of Carvalho (2019), which define inclusion as a process, a journey, and view education as the key to fostering an inclusive society that permeates all its systems with this sense of belonging.

Based on the guidelines of the Federal District, for this articulation process to be simplified and to minimize the anguish faced by families (Tanganho, 2022), the school system should be attentive to the situations involved in the child's entry into Elementary School, both from the family and from Early Childhood Education. It is necessary to maintain social and emotional ties and learning conditions that provide security and confidence, guaranteeing the six-year-old child who enters Elementary School has a welcoming environment to face the challenges of the new stage (Brasil, 2006; Brasil, 2007). As recommended by the legislation of the Public Education Network of the Federal District in the context of inclusion and reception, particularly in the Federal District (2021b; 2020a), an inclusive Network requires the development of its pedagogical activities to raise awareness, prevent, confront and combat any form of violence against children and adolescents, with the participation of the entire school unit in the process of inserting students from all stages and teaching modalities, with their specificities, involving them in environments and actions that maximize academic and social development compatible with the goal of full inclusion and the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development of the United Nations (2015).

However, to improve transition experiences and outcomes, particularly for children with ASD and their families (Carvalho, 2019; Sands & Meadan, 2023), and to ensure continuity and harmony in intervention, it is fundamental to devise significant changes regarding resources and supports, the structure and functioning of educational institutions, teacher training, family-school relationships, and the implementation of family-centered practice (Guglielmo, Jurdi, & Pereira, 2022; Sands & Meadan, 2023). There is an urgent need for deeper reflection on the alignment and coordination of procedures across policy, national, local, school, and individual levels. This includes establishing more specific laws and guiding principles for transition practices, encompassing monitoring, planning, and evaluation, to adopt standardized measures and procedures suited to each institutional context and aligned with recommendations found in the literature (Martinho, 2016).

The study's results and conclusions indicate the need for further empirical research on the transition of children with ASD. This would address an important gap in the literature, expand the scope of inquiry, and explore the topic from different perspectives and contexts.

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The content of the research text is within the manuscript.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 – Conception and development, methodological design, literature review, active participation in data collection and analysis, drafting of the final text.

Author 2 – Supervision, conception and development, methodological design, critical review of the text, and addition of significant sections.

Author 3 – Conception and development, methodological design, critical review of the text, and addition of significant sections.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this article.