



INVESTIGATING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERARY WORKS

INVESTIGANDO O TRANSTORNO DO ESPECTRO AUTISTA ATRAVÉS DE OBRAS LITERÁRIAS INFANTIS

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ABSTRACT: Objective: The objective of this study was to analyze the challenges faced by people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in children's books, the research seeks to inform and give visibility to children with ASD, a theme that has been gaining a lot of notoriety currently. **Method:** The methodology used in this study consisted of consulting children's books, articles, scientific works, and government booklets published between 2014 and 2024, focusing on the difficulties faced by children with autism spectrum disorder. The main platforms used to obtain data were Kindle, Google Scholar and Scielo. **Results:** The analysis of literary works aimed at children revealed that literature plays an important role in the appreciation and inclusion of children with ASD. It was observed that several of these works highlight autistic characters, offering representativeness and a view of the experiences and perspectives within the autistic spectrum. In addition, the emphasis on building welcoming environments was highlighted, emphasizing the importance of creating spaces that can provide inclusion and respect for the needs of these children. **Conclusion:** Therefore, when analyzing these literary works, the importance of children's literature in the construction of appreciation, respect and inclusion of children with autism is observed, especially in school environments.

KEYWORDS: Children's literature. Autism spectrum disorder. School inclusion. Family acceptance. Child development.

RESUMO: Objetivo: O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar os desafios enfrentados pelos portadores do Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA) em obras infantis, a pesquisa busca informar e dar visibilidade ao público infantil com TEA, tema este que vem ganhando bastante notoriedade atualmente. **Método:** A metodologia utilizada neste estudo consistiu na consulta a livros infantis, artigos, obras científicas e cartilha do governo publicados entre 2014 e 2024, com foco nas dificuldades enfrentadas pelo público infantil com transtorno do espectro autista. As principais plataformas utilizadas para a obtenção de dados foram o Kindle, Google Acadêmico e Scielo. **Resultados:** A análise de obras literárias voltadas para o público infantil revelou que a literatura desempenha um papel importante na valorização e inclusão de crianças com TEA. Foi observado que diversas dessas obras destacam personagens autistas, oferecendo representatividade e uma visão das experiências e perspectivas dentro do espectro autista. Além disso, destacou-se a ênfase na construção de ambientes acolhedores, ressaltando a importância de criar espaços que possam proporcionar a inclusão e o respeito às necessidades dessas crianças. **Conclusão:** Portanto, ao analisar essas obras literárias, observa-se a importância da literatura infantil, na construção da valorização, respeito e inclusão das crianças com autismo, principalmente em ambientes escolares.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura infantil. Transtorno do espectro autista. Inclusão escolar. Aceitação familiar. Desenvolvimento infantil.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, mental disorders are gaining visibility in society, but stigmas are still ingrained in part of the population. Deficits in oral communication, socialization and difficulties in maintaining relationships are related to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a disorder associated with human development.¹ According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR), the first signs of the disorder can appear from the age of one, which is why some people are diagnosed early.² This disorder has different levels, so for some people the diagnosis may be late, as it may be imperceptible. Some people discover that they have the disorder as adults, while others are diagnosed in childhood, when their guardians notice the signs. Although there is no cure for ASD, there are treatments that can bring positive results and comfort to the people affected.¹

Information on this subject is still scarce, so research into ASD is extremely important, as it will provide the population with truthful information without stereotypes. Even with public policies that guarantee the comfort and well-being of children, basic education in public schools does not have an accessible structure, since the teaching staff in most cases does not have the training to deal with people who need personalized teaching. The high cost of living in Brazil can be a problem when it comes to providing the necessary support, but the Unified Health System (SUS) offers this treatment free of charge, making it essential, especially for families living in vulnerable situations.³

This research was carried out in order to analyze the challenges faced by children with ASD. In addition, it seeks to inform and give visibility to society about childhood autism, as well as raise awareness among the population. With an innovative approach, analyses were made of children's literature on Autism Spectrum Disorder, bringing a perspective that facilitates understanding for both children and adults. Children's literature is rich in information and teachings, essential not only for children with ASD. The expansion of children's literature on this subject is of great importance, since there is still a significant exclusion of these children, especially in schools, where there is direct and continuous interaction between individuals.

METHODOLOGY

Children's books, articles, government booklets and scientific works published between 2014 and 2024 were consulted, focusing on the difficulties faced by children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Searching for the subject in accessible language for the understanding of children and their neurological condition.

For this article, seven children's literary works were chosen, as well as three scientific books focused on this subject, such as "Autismo diferentes nuances do espectro" (Autism: diferentes nuances of the spectrum); "Autismo: um olhar a 360°" (Autism: a 360° view); "Manual Diagnóstico e Estatístico de Transtornos Mentais" (DSM-5-TR) (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) and articles. The platforms used were Scielo, Google Scholar, Kindle, the website of the Mato Grosso do Sul State Department of Education, and the keywords were translated using Microsoft Word software. When searching for literary works, some selection criteria were used, such as the age range of the audience, the author's ideas, the relevance of the subtopics and the year of publication. The following keywords were used for the research: Children's literature; Autism Spectrum Disorder; school inclusion; family acceptance; child development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Children's literature plays a fundamental role in the understanding and inclusion of children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). This understanding is approached through the use of captivating narratives and characters, demonstrating the ability to move not only children, but also adults. Thus, children's books can be used as a powerful resource in the development of more inclusive and welcoming environments for children on the autistic spectrum, in which each work promotes unique narratives, highlighting the achievements, challenges and experiences of children with ASD in an inspiring and accessible way.⁴

The aim of this discussion is to investigate this disorder in children's books, exploring the protagonists' difficulties in dealing with autism, making the reading of these books, which play an important role in the inclusion of children with this disorder and in raising awareness that differences exist and must be respected, a priority.

To begin this analysis, it is essential to conceptualize Autism Spectrum Disorder, which is characterized as a complex of neurodevelopmental deficiencies that directly affect the child development process, classified as level 1 manifestations (mild), up to more profound manifestations, classified as level 3 (severe), in which, depending on the degree of the spectrum, challenges can be found in communication, sensory interaction and social relationships, although some symptoms of the syndrome are difficult to define since each child with the spectrum is unique in their own way.⁵

Over the years, the Autistic Spectrum has gained a lot of notoriety, leading to many questions among family members about the possibility of their children having the disorder, and consequently parents themselves trying to independently diagnose their children, a practice which, although understandable, is considered problematic, since a trained medical team is needed to diagnose the child.^{5,6}

However, when exploring the children's book "Seu nome é David e ele é autista" (His name is David and he is autistic)⁶, we can also see the issue of family non-acceptance in the face of confirmation of the diagnosis, a fairly recurrent situation in which parents use the feeling of denial as an escape strategy, despite the outcome.⁷ However, until parents acknowledge their children as autistic, they seek out countless specialists with the aim of finding a solution to this "problem". From this perspective, Asnis⁶ describes how David's parents sought out doctors, psychologists, occupational therapists, psycho-pedagogues and special educators until they understood and accepted that they were all right about David's diagnosis. This rejection of the diagnosis consequently affects the child development of these children, since the family environment plays a fundamental role in this process, being the first basis and influence.⁸

This situation is linked to the construction of expectations that parents create about their children. When a child is born, parents don't imagine that he or she might have some kind of disability, because the diagnosis of autism is usually made 2 to 3 years after birth, and when parents receive the diagnosis, they are plunged into an immense void, full of shadows, uncertainties and missteps.⁶ The work of Asnis⁶ shows that David's parents, after the diagnosis, said that the thought that arose was that all their dreams of fatherhood and motherhood, in the blink of an eye, had turned to dust.⁶⁻⁹

The prospect of grieving for a child after being diagnosed with ASD is noticeable, due to the lack of knowledge about the disorder, given that, at first, parents consider autism to be an incurable disease. It is extremely important for parents to understand the disorder, so both positive and negative expectations about the child's development can be influenced by the information acquired and the resources offered, which make it easier for parents to understand.⁷⁻¹⁰ Thus, this family reluctance about

autism is not only linked to the disruption of expectations of the ideal child, but also to the lack of knowledge about Autism Spectrum Disorder, bearing in mind that at this moment of confirmation, the feeling that prevails is that of mourning, creating a perspective of definitive loss of the child.⁷

In the book, it is clear that David's parents, after accepting their son's differences, began to take a light-hearted view of their son's behavior and not a view of the stigmas society places on ASD⁶, because when a child is diagnosed with autism and the family accepts it, adaptations become accessible and ideal for child development. Therefore, seeking knowledge from professionals and other families who have been through the same situation can help this journey towards unconditional acceptance of the diagnosis, making it a path to be traveled with love, fullness, empowerment, resilience and, most importantly, respect for time.⁶

In addition to the importance of family acceptance, which plays an extremely important role in the process of child development, the stigmas imposed by society regarding this issue must also be taken into account. Accordingly, the book "Uma mente diferente" (A different mind)¹¹ provides an accessible methodology for how society can understand and support these children. Through the protagonist's experiences, the reader can understand what it's like to deal with the Autistic Spectrum, promoting acceptance and enabling greater visibility for these children. The development throughout the story is about exploring daily experiences in a journey of self-discovery, from the challenges of interacting in the social environment to how he reacts in certain situations.¹¹

Analyzing the passage "Shouting, clapping, very loud sounds and noises can really upset me... But a dear friend can warn me. So he bought me some time to get ready and celebrate together".¹¹

In this fragment of the book, the approach to stereotypes common in children with ASD can be analyzed, promoting two perspectives for the reader, the first being that of the child with autism who can feel represented in a literary work, which is very important for these children's self-esteem and the second aspect would be how a child should react in some cases when a child in their social circle with autism spectrum disorder is manifesting a crisis due to their hearing sensitivity. This promotes a conception of greater inclusion and respect for the reader to acquire this baggage for life and that their generation is not marked by prejudices and stigmas.

The book "O menino só" (The lonely boy)¹², creatively presents in accessible language the story of a lonely boy, whose identity is open to interpretation. The author reveals that he could have been born anywhere and had any name, implying that "the lonely boy" could be anyone. The focus of the book is to explore the inner life of an autistic boy and how he sees the world around him, "The lonely boy. Looking up at the sky, watching the stars, wishing he were dust."¹²

Looking at this excerpt, you can see that the author uses a poetic point of view to describe the protagonist's unique and often neglected vision.

"The boy just doesn't like hugs or kisses very much. Cuddling, only from his mother is good. Sometimes he accepts it from his father, sometimes even from grandma. The boy just won't step on sand, he's disgusted by mud, he just longs to reach another place far away from everything, far away from everyone."¹²

An analysis of this fragment shows that the book explores common manifestations of autism, such as sensory sensitivity and difficulty in maintaining relationships of affection. The protagonist shows a preference for affectionate interactions only with people who are present in his life, preferably his mother, showing the child's challenge to explore the emotional side. The book shows the boy's intimate point of view and exposes an implicit message so that the reader can reflect on the importance of understanding and respecting the diversity of each individual.

Autism cannot be cured, but there are various treatments that can help children develop important skills to improve their daily routine. There are theories about the cause of ASD, some of which point to factors such as genetics. Some doctors agree that there are several genes that cause autism and others assume that people are born with a tendency towards the spectrum. However, it is known that the incidence of autism is currently higher in boys than in girls, and some studies show the possibility of a link between environmental factors and the disorder, since studies show that small towns with high rates of autism have large sources of pollution.⁵ Many of these theories are considered false, while others are still being studied. On the other hand, much more research is needed to identify the true cause of autism; these ideas are only theoretical.⁵

In addition, despite the existence of legal guidelines, there is still a lack of encouragement for the training of professionals specialized in assisting people with autism spectrum disorder, as well as parents and guardians. The lack of school effectiveness is still a major challenge in national policy, given that, this stimulus unfortunately occurs only in theory and not desirably in practice, where there are many barriers related to this issue, in addition to the lack of knowledge about Autism Spectrum Disorder on the part of school staff, this has been a major obstacle to building inclusive and welcoming environments in schools.¹³

In view of this, it is clear that the role of the educator in inclusive actions is of paramount importance and necessity, because it is not just because of regulations, but because of the social reason involved in teaching, which goes beyond the subjects learned in the classroom.^{13,17}

This perspective is evident when analyzing the frequent doubts of basic education teachers¹⁷ and how the first school phase becomes an indispensable opportunity for the analysis of child development. This phase requires a great deal of school preparation, because when it comes to the Autistic Spectrum, it has characteristic behaviors and cognitive patterns, so when a teacher doesn't know how to identify whether or not some of her students have autism, there is a lack of professional preparation. However, this inexperience can be linked to a lack of knowledge about autism, so this preparation is not just during the first steps in school, but throughout academic life. It is extremely important to note that academia has inclusive and welcoming educational needs for all children.¹³⁻¹⁷

The book “Téo, Meu Melhor Amigo” (Téo, My Best Friend)¹⁷, takes an inspiring look at how building meaningful relationships between children, especially children with ASD, can help to promote a welcoming and inclusive environment, especially in school settings. “At school, I told the teacher what had happened and that I'd really like to know what ASD is. Ms. Ana gathered the whole class around her and explained, and Téo was attentive and looked proud.”¹⁷

We can see in this excerpt that the teacher's attitude is a clear example that the school is also an inclusive and welcoming environment, promoting empathy and respect for differences, helping to break down stigmas and barriers, creating an environment where all children are respected and understood. Thus, when Téo makes “a proud face”¹⁷, it represents the positive impact that this construction can have on self-esteem and social development, benefiting not directly children with ASD, but enriching the environment, bringing a culture of understanding and respect for differences.

Certainly, when it comes to education, it involves a number of responsibilities, both for teachers and for school management, where commitment to new educational practices is applied, even if the success of these actions does not only lie with the school, but it is of the utmost necessity that schools commit to creating inclusive environments, thus bringing better results, both academic and social, allowing children in general to acquire not only scientific knowledge, but also how to value and respect diversity.

The book “Meu amigo faz iiiii” (My friend does iiiii)¹⁸ tells the story of two classmates, Nil and Bia. Bia, the narrator character, observes different behaviors in her classmate and questions the teacher about Nil's differences, who is then urged to observe him in order to better understand him.

“Nil doesn't like noise, he covers his ears when the bell rings.”¹⁸ “When he's happy, he jumps, moves his hands and does a lot more iiiii”.¹⁸ These were some of the main signs Bia observed, so she understood that her little friend's differences are actually one of the ways of being and acting that make him special.

Furthermore, the teacher's stance in encouraging Bia to observe Nil's behaviour reinforces the issue of inclusion, since schools often don't address this issue with children and when they come across these differences they don't understand or know how to deal with them.¹⁸ In this way, the inclusion of autistic children in schools is very important and beneficial, as it helps to improve learning, socialization, autonomy and development at school, at home, and in all the environments they are part of.

“O Fone Que Não Toca Música” (The Headphones That Don't Play Music)¹⁹ is a book that aims to teach children about autism in a fun and easy way, as well as encouraging them not to bully and the importance of including neurodivergent peers. This book tells the story of Ana who moves to the rural area of Minas Gerais with her father, a pediatrician. At her new school, Ana meets Eric, who is autistic and has specific behaviors that are different from hers and the other children she is used to. Because of this, Eric is bullied and treated with indifference by his classmates. Sad to see her friend being criticized, Ana asks her father “what is autism?” and her father not only explains the signs and symptoms, but also why her new classmate behaves in such a way.¹⁹

Excited to learn more about her friend, Ana discovers that the headphones he wears all the time don't play any music, but only serve to soften the noises that bother him. In this way, it is possible to see the importance of the proper upbringing that parents provide for their children, as the number of autism diagnoses is currently on the rise, and in schools prejudice is rife, both on the part of the students and the school staff in general. The girl's attitude in trying to understand her friend and include him in her daily life shows that parental encouragement is crucial for caring for others.

Therefore, when analyzing these literary works, one can see the emphasis on appreciation and inclusion of children with autism, highlighting characters who bring this representativeness, showing the range of experiences and perspectives that exist within the autistic spectrum, emphasizing the importance of building a welcoming environment that allows all children to feel accepted and valued, respecting their differences. This approach reflects on the need for inclusion in all aspects of society, recognizing diversity as an enriching factor.

CONCLUSION

In view of the facts mentioned above, it can be seen that childhood Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) continues to be frequently diagnosed, and that children with this condition still suffer from the stigmas ingrained in society. When analyzing the challenges faced by the autistic public, it detects such misinformation on the part of the population, in most cases linking autistic children to ableism, helping to create stereotypes and devaluation.

As such, the analysis of these children's books plays an extremely important role in building values and child development. Similarly, one of the main aims of this literature review was to provide information about ASD and raise awareness of the stigmas experienced by these children, through works that address this issue in an accessible way.

In addition, we seek to provide a better understanding for those researching the subject, bringing notoriety to the approach since children's books have an easy-to-understand approach. In this way, it is of great importance to highlight this subject in children's books, bringing notoriety to Autism Spectrum Disorder. It is therefore recommended that there are more children's books with characters on the Spectrum, with the aim of bringing more representation and knowledge to the subject.

Finally, the acceptance of parents and/or guardians for an accurate diagnosis, dialog between those involved in the process of adapting children to society, and a good relationship in the social and educational spheres are essential, allowing for significant advances in neurocognitive development.

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