Psychology and School Inclusion of People With Autism Spectrum Disorder in Brazil: An Integrative Review

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Abstract

This research aimed to analyze the insertion of Brazilian psychology into the context of school inclusion of people with autism spectrum disorder. To this end, an integrative review was carried out in two stages: (1) mapping of publications on ASD in different areas of psychology; (2) analysis of the approaches and modes of action adopted to promote the inclusion of autistic people in school. The review considered articles published in the SciELO, BVS-Psi and PePsic databases, in Portuguese and English, between 2013 and 2023. The searches were carried out using the Boolean descriptors and operators psychology AND autism. The results point to three perspectives and modes of action in promoting school inclusion for autistic people: adaptation and adjustment through training, inclusion and development mediated by interactions with adults, and emergence of uniqueness resulting from the deconstruction of normalizing and pathologizing practices.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, school inclusion, psychology

1. Introduction

The school inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is an increasingly urgent topic, given the exponential increase in cases diagnosed in recent years. Zeidan et al. (2022) estimated that one in every hundred children has autism worldwide. ASD is a neurological condition that impacts social interaction, communication, and behavior. Among the most common symptoms are difficulties in communicating verbally or through gestures, problems with social interactions, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors. Furthermore, many people with ASD are hypersensitive to sensory stimuli (Lai et al., 2014).

The treatment of the varied autism symptoms requires multidisciplinary approaches based on the expertise of professionals from different specialties in the health and education fields who intervene at the social, behavioral, and developmental levels (Sandbank et al., 2023). It is necessary to invest in inclusion strategies to ensure that children have the right to access and remain in formal education. Effectiveness in promoting school inclusion for children with ASD involves multiple agencies and includes support through individualized monitoring, changes in the school environment, training for parents and teachers, as well as collaboration between both parties (Barboza et al., 2019; Nascimento et al., 2015; Silva et al., 2020).

In Brazil, the need to include children with ASD in school has mobilized researchers, activists, parents, and representatives of public authorities. Educational policies aimed at ensuring the inclusion of these children have been supporting the development of intervention strategies by professionals committed to promoting inclusion. The Brazilian Law for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, Law No. 13,146 (Brasil, 2015) guarantees the right to inclusive education at all levels. Another significant law, enacted in 2019, requires the presence of psychologists in multidisciplinary teams that must be part of the staff of public schools (Brasil, 2019). Despite the challenges in implementing both laws, there has been an undeniable increase in the number of psychologists in school spaces. However, our central hypothesis is that this insertion is not yet been supported by research that can guarantee the efficiency and validity of inclusive practices. This is because practical applications and research are often misaligned in time. There seems to be a disconnect between the production of scientific knowledge and psychological practice with regard to school inclusion processes (Silva et al., 2021). Accordingly, the objectives of this study were to identify and categorize, initially, publications on ASD in the different domains of psychology. More specifically, we sought to analyze the state of knowledge in publications pertaining to the inclusion of autistic

people into school. As secondary objectives, we sought to identify the predominant theoretical approaches in studies and to specify categories or theoretical concepts present in the selected articles.

2. Methods

The research was guided by the inductive paradigm, consisting of an integrative review; this approach was chosen because of the rigor used throughout five stages: (1) the definition of the study questions; (2) the proposition of inclusion and exclusion criteria for collecting texts; (3) the definition of extraction data from the texts included in the review; (4) the survey and selection of review material; and (5) the analysis and presentation of results (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

The review considered articles published in Portuguese and English from 2013 to 2023 in the SciELO, BVS-Psi and PePsic databases. The searches were carried out using the Boolean descriptors and operators psychology AND autism. The inclusion criteria were the following: complete articles published in journals indexed in the databases used, articles located in the fields of psychology, and articles written in Portuguese and English. Duplicate articles were excluded, as well as articles published before 2013 and articles not located in the fields of psychology. This stage included reading titles and, in some cases, reading abstracts to complement the information necessary for the selection process.

After this primary survey, the study was developed in two phases: (1) mapping of publications on ASD in different areas of psychology developed in Brazil, and (2) identification and analysis of approaches and modes of action used to promote school inclusion for autistic people. The mapping was developed by reading titles and abstracts. In some cases, the introduction was read to better identify the required information. The selected articles were grouped in an Excel spreadsheet according to type of publication (theoretical study, experience report, research report, or literature review); theoretical approach (behavior analysis, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, historical-cultural psychology, social psychology, or psychometrics); and field of research or intervention (clinical psychology, school and educational psychology, and social psychology). Consequently, taking into account the wide range of areas and approaches in psychology, we sought to obtain an overview of publications on ASD before focusing on the analysis of the insertion of psychology into the processes for including people with ASD in school.

We used the mnemonic PCC (population, concept, context) as a strategy for guiding and elaborating the central question of the first phase of the research. It is commonly used in scoping reviews (Pollock et al., 2023). Although this is an integrative review, we used PCC because the first phase focused on an overview of studies on the topic under analysis. In this way, the term population relates to the set of publications consulted. ASD, in turn, appeared as a concept addressed in different domains of psychology#####. Therefore, we asked the following question: What are the main characteristics of publications on ASD, including in distinct domains of psychology, regarding the type of study, the theoretical approach, and the area of research or intervention?

The second phase involved a more detailed analysis of articles on the school inclusion of people with autism spectrum disorder in the contexts of basic education and higher education. To this end, we chose a set of articles on this topic and included them in the relevance test based on Azevedo (2010). The test consisted of the following questions to check the credibility of the studies to be selected: (1) Does the study cover the research question? (2) Are the objectives adequate? (3) Is the methodology adequate to achieve the results? (4) Are the results presented in accordance with the objectives? (5) Does the topic addressed correlate with the object of this research? (6) Will this article be included in the review? We considered texts that obtained at least five positive responses.

In addition to the questions above, we used guiding questions to facilitate the identification of relevant points in the texts selected for this phase: (1) What is the definition of school inclusion used in the text? (2) What is the place reserved for the subject of inclusion? (3) Who are the agents responsible for the school's inclusion of autistic people?

3. Results and Discussion

The results indicated 186 (100%) potentially relevant articles, of which 23.11% (N = 43) were duplicates. Thus, the primary analysis was carried out based on 143 articles. After reading the titles and abstracts, we selected 97 articles for the first phase: mapping publications on ASD in the different areas of psychology developed in Brazil (see Figure 1).
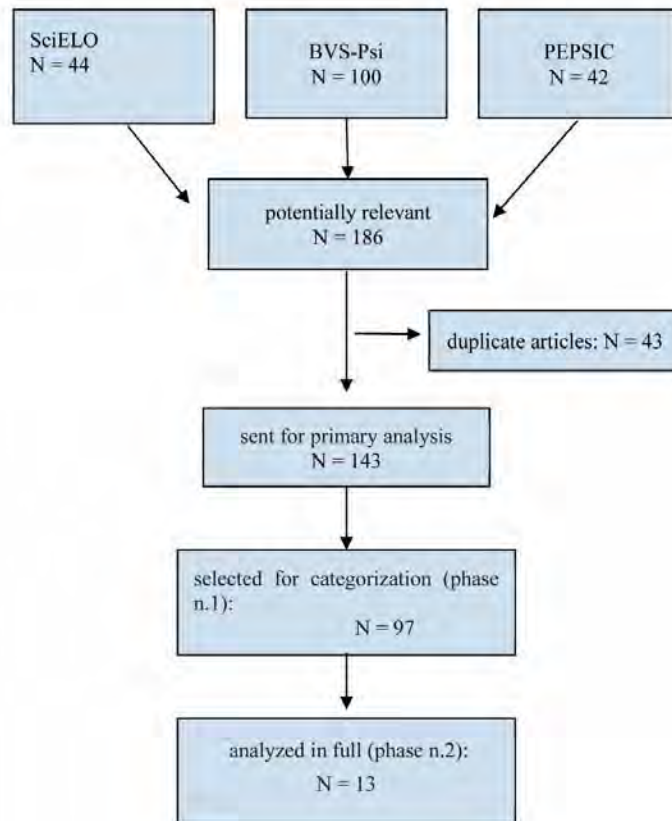
Figure 1. Flow Diagram of Integrative Review

3.1 Mapping of Publications on ASD in Different Areas of Psychology in the Brazilian Context

The analysis of the first phase indicated the predominance of productions guided by psychoanalytic approaches at 49.48% (N = 48), followed by studies associated with behaviorist theory and dedicated to behavior analysis at 15.46% (N = 15). Articles with research or review reports supported by the psychometric approach represented 10.30% (N = 10) of the productions listed in this phase. Other approaches, such as cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, historical-cultural psychology, social psychology, and phenomenology, represented 24.74% (N = 24) of the articles selected for the first phase (N = 97). Regarding the type of production, research reports represented 48.45% (N = 47) of the sample, followed by theoretical studies at 22.68% (N = 22), literature reviews at 16.49% (N = 16) and experience or intervention reports at 12.37% (N = 12).

Publications related to research, experiences, and reviews supported by psychoanalysis focused on issues relevant to autism clinics, taking into account themes such as language and psychic organization in autism, as well as topics associated with the experiences of mothers of children with ASD (e.g., Bialer & Coelho Júnior, 2018; Kowara & Carniel, 2021; Smeha & Cezar, 2011). Articles in the field of behaviorism, in turn, addressed topics related to teaching and modeling behaviors, especially verbal behaviors (e.g., Levy et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2018). It is worth highlighting the presence of articles on the involvement of parents of autistic children in the teaching and rehabilitation processes (e.g., Sanchez & Baptista, 2009; Silva et al., 2019). Finally, articles related to the psychometric approach include studies on the psychometric quality and validity of instruments used in the psychological assessment of children with suspected ASD (e.g., Prata et al., 2019; Steigleder et al., 2021).

3.2 Psychology in School Inclusion Processes for People With ASD

The literature in which the school inclusion of autistic people emerges as a theme or context of research or intervention represents 14.43% (N = 14) of the total articles selected. This percentage reveals the somewhat fragile presence of psychology in the areas of research and intervention on the school inclusion of autistic people. Analysis of the texts highlighted three perspectives and modes of action in promoting school inclusion, as explained below.

3.2.1 Training, Adaptation, and Adjustment

The experimental behavior analysis studies selected sought to model the behaviors of children with ASD (Silva et al., 2020). In the same way, studies that emphasized practical applications aimed to train parents and teachers to support autistic children in the schooling process (Benitez & Domeniconi, 2018). Both studies sought to correct behaviors and attitudes that were considered inappropriate. According to the perspective adopted, inclusion results from the adaptation of autistic people to the rules and demands imposed on schoolchildren. Individuals with ASD integrate into schooling through the adoption of behavioral repertoires adjusted to social and pedagogical expectations.

The analyses do not consider the unique situation of the autistic individual, who does not appear as a central element. The protagonism of the person with ASD is not the focus of the discourses and practices associated with the studies mentioned. However, the potential of the strategies identified in the articles to facilitate practical repertoires for people with ASD, their families, and teachers stands out.

3.2.2 Inclusion Resulting From Interaction With Atypical and Neurotypical Peers and Adults

This group of publications highlights research from the historical-cultural approach based on the thought of Lev Vygotsky. In this perspective, we understand the individual as a social being growing in a system mediated by elements of culture and history. Throughout life, we relate to people, objects, institutions, norms, rules, regulations, and other elements bonded by social and cultural signs (Vygotsky, 2006). Martins and Monteiro (2017) analyzed social interactions between autistic children and typical adults. The research aimed to identify the opportunities for adults to give meaning to children's actions to create better conditions for sense-making in these children's daily school lives. Instead of inclusion resulting from the acquisition of behavioral repertoires designed to convert an autistic child as much as possible into a typical one, these studies focus on relationships based on a feeling of belonging guaranteed by respect and acceptance.

According to the Martins and Monteiro (2017), in general, autistic children are viewed for what they cannot be or do. The emphasis is on their flaws. However, the highlighted study drew attention to the fact that autistic children at school have the possibility of being seen for what they do and can do. The authors identified some attempts by autistic children at contact and interaction with others. Throughout the research, interactions mediated by explicit and implicit gestures indicated a search for personal contact, in contrast to the hegemonic discourse that disseminates the idea that people with ASD live in isolation.

Articles that incorporate research and interventions conducted within the framework of the socio-cultural approach consider the possibility of autistic subjects receiving meaning from their actions in relationships established with others (especially parents and teachers). In this exchange between neurotypical and neurodivergent, there may be repositionings of the self. Thus, just as an atypical child may have their ways of acting, thinking, and feeling denied, they may be included via participation in relationships mediated by language and cultural signs associated with helping and caring. This understanding suggests that inclusion arises from shared social constructions inspired by compassion and social commitment (Pacheco & Freire, 2021).

Inclusion becomes a political and social project made possible by guaranteeing democratic rights. Relationships emerge as a primary context for school inclusion processes. In the words of Martins and Monteiro (2017): "shifting the focus of studies on autistic people to the relationship means looking no longer at the subject's difficulties themselves but at how their actions are interpreted/meant by others" (p. 222). However, inclusion in this perspective becomes a challenging task, especially if we consider the influence of the parents' and teachers' conceptions about inclusion in the relationship between them and the children with ASD. (Lemos et al., 2016).

The studies that are grouped according to the theoretical framework mentioned above reposition autistic persons and the people with whom they live. The complexity and richness of social relationships constructed and situated historically, socially, and culturally are valued. Autistic people, as well as neurotypical people, are seen as agents of transformation. From this point of view, school inclusion should involve a set of objective and subjective changes carried out by repositioning relationships established in the contexts of development and learning.

Although this perspective indicates a progressive stance committed to transforming social reality, gaps are observed within the institutional dimension of school inclusion processes. The challenges of including people with ASD or any other attribute of difference relate to the institutional devices that may enable or prevent the school inclusion of an autistic student (Nascimento, 2019), as we will see in the following subsection.

3.2.3 Emergence of Autistic Singularity and School Inclusion

This subsection lists studies based on socio-analysis and psychoanalysis, topics that are associated with the educational, social, or clinical fields. These articles point out possibilities for the emergence of the autistic subject

in their singularity (Bialer, 2015; Nascimento et al., 2015). The possibility of existing uniquely in a traditionally normative social and institutional world dedicated to control and homogenization arises from care and acceptance and, at the same time, depends on ruptures, reinventions, alliances, and transformations in the individual, institutional, political, and social dimensions (Silva, 2015).

Nascimento et al. (2015), reports an experience of therapeutic support carried out with a 6-year-old child diagnosed with ASD who attended a private school. She did not establish direct contact with people. She just repeated words, probably heard in other contexts, and tried to communicate with them. At first, the therapeutic support sought to understand the disconnected statements to understand what that child wanted to express. The work of the therapeutic companion was similar to that of an interpreter. Alongside that professional, the child made more appropriate use of language. Words that had been displaced earlier began to be more precise, with connections between meaning and sense. Thus, the therapist proposed to signify the desire expressed by the child through clinical management based on the logic of care. These interventions encouraged the child to move and circulate throughout the school rather than being restricted to the dual care models traditionally promoted in private clinical offices. It was an innovative and stimulating action that supported the child's desire for circulation in the physical space at the school. The work allowed for a more constructive insertion of the child into the symbolic universe. Specific activities aimed at recognizing the body and self-image also added to the repertoire of reported intervention techniques.

The school inclusion of people with ASD cannot occur without opening spaces for this population to express themselves based on what they want, think, do, and feel. It is not uncommon for inclusion programs to neglect the demands of their target audience. Bialer (2015) analyzed the biographies of fourteen autistic people to analyze their experiences of school inclusion. The author found that, invariably, experts in the field of autism place themselves above autistic people and are not open to listening and participating in so-called inclusive practices. In many biographies, the authors complained about the authoritarian power of specialists who were not sensitive enough to help by listening and caring. One of the autistic men whose biography was analyzed said, "the pain of feeling like an object of study when experts spoke of him as if he had no understanding of what they were saying, but trapped inside the encapsulation, he was unable to use his mouth to speak or his hand to write to tell how well he listened and understood everything that was being said" (Bialer, 2015, p. 486).

In several biographies, the authors criticized the lack of sensitivity and attention. Many criticisms were reserved for educators, who could have been more flexible and creative in understanding the different ways children with autism had of expressing themselves while learning and developing (Bialer, 2015). In general, the school inclusion of autistic people could be more consistent if institutions were open to new things. Through textual, artistic, and musical productions, for example, persons with ASD could assert themselves as subjects, students, or intellectuals.

Silva (2015), in turn, problematized control and governance strategies of life, inspired by the thinking of Michel Foucault and based on the analysis of institutional developments in a specific situation involving the inclusion of an autistic child into a regular educational institution. Having difficulty progressing in the initial grades of elementary school, the child was an 11-year-old student who studied with 5-year-old students. The case raised discussions, conflicts, and a search for solutions to alleviate tensions for the people involved. Amid relationships between family, school, and health institutions, the researcher observed the complexity of forces linked to a demand for school inclusion. In this specific case, the author reported some episodes in which teachers, parents, and managers found themselves entangled in power relations that hindered the implementation of the inclusion of the student. Parents asked that the school accept demands that went beyond the sphere of education and involved institutions from the field of health. School professionals, in turn, complained about the child's parents for not adhering to the use of a medication prescribed by the neuropsychiatrist who was monitoring the student.

Silva (2015) followed the developments of the demand for school inclusion and invited us to look at the complexity of this diagram of forces in which interests, desires, knowledge, and actions circulate. School inclusion in this manner is a project that requires changes in the ways of thinking about education. The author proposed a mode to understand education as a field of effects, differences, and paradoxes. Silva (2015) glimpsed school as a space of openness to the different. Inclusion could only occur through ruptures in the face of positions and practices that focus on the control and management of life, to the detriment of the freedom necessary to develop uniquely in a field of possibilities of existence.

4. Conclusions

Research and practices on ASD and school inclusion, developed in different areas of psychology from Brazil, indicate relevant aspects of this topic. We cannot talk about Brazilian psychology, rather, psychologies, given the diversity of approaches and theoretical-methodological resources adopted by professionals and researchers from

different parts of the country. On the one hand, we can see the predominance of theoretical studies or reports from psychoanalytic research, which propose a look at the autistic subject as a subject of desire and language. These studies support professionals and researchers interested in expanding possibilities to care for people with ASD. On the other hand, there is the strength of strategies based on behaviorism, especially in modeling behaviors and training parents and teachers of autistic people. The reduced quantity and scope of articles that use this approach, in opposition to the more numerous psychoanalytic articles, do not match the predominance of techniques and the behaviorist approach in the context of clinical practice. This discrepancy suggests a split between psychology promoted in scientific and academic contexts and the psychology developed in everyday clinics, schools, and other spaces.

In the texts that focused more closely on the inclusion of autistic people in school, we observed that the three perspectives identified could support the development of practices and even public policies to achieve access to regular educational spaces for people with ASD. The three viewpoints identified from the analysis of the articles (second phase) show the potential of the psychologies promoted in the Brazilian context. Although all identified proposals are relevant, we cannot avoid pointing out the risks of assuming a perspective based on specialisms that can lead professionals and scholars to a blind spot that conceals the particularities and desires of people who demand care, belonging, and respect in school inclusion processes.

Future research should expand theoretical and practical dialogues based on different approaches that reflect the cultural diversity and historical contradictions present in the country. We seek a plural psychology focused on internal and external dialogue to develop research about ASD with urgency, parsimony, ethics, and commitment.

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Authors' contributions

All authors – Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing (original draft, review, and editing).

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Obtained.

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The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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