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Reflection on Action Cycles (RAC): Professional Development for Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Ciclos de Reflexão sobre a Ação (CRA): Formação Profissional no Ensino de Estudantes com Autismo

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Abstract

This study investigated a continuing education practice from the perspective of Special Education. The main objective was to develop and implement the Reflection-on-Action Cycle (RAC) as a multiprofessional training strategy. Methodologically, a qualitative action-research approach was adopted, implemented through four continuing education cycles, in addition to the application of semi-structured interviews with a multidisciplinary team during the Diagnostic Stage. The interviews were subjected to Discursive Textual Analysis (DTA), showing that, although collaborative work revealed initial relational and institutional complexities, its support promoted the strengthening of bonds and pedagogical innovation in Science teaching for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The proposal demonstrated success in promoting progressive inclusion outcomes, ensuring the right of students with autism to belong to the school environment and responding, in a situated manner, to the demands of teachers to promote inclusive processes in the daily routine of school activities.

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Keywords: Special Education. Autism. Teacher Training. Discursive Textual Analysis. Reflection-on-Action Cycle.

Resumo

Este estudo investigou uma prática de formação continuada na perspectiva da Educação Especial. O objetivo central foi desenvolver e implementar o Ciclo de Reflexão sobre a Ação (CRA) como estratégia formativa multiprofissional. Metodologicamente, adotou-se uma abordagem qualitativa do tipo pesquisa-ação, implementada por meio de quatro ciclos de formação continuada, além da aplicação de entrevistas com questões semiestruturadas junto a uma equipe multidisciplinar durante a Etapa Diagnóstica. As entrevistas foram submetidas à Análise Textual Discursiva (ATD), evidenciando que, embora o trabalho colaborativo tenha revelado complexidades relacionais e institucionais iniciais, sua sustentação promoveu o fortalecimento de vínculos e a inovação pedagógica no ensino de Ciências para estudantes com Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA). A proposta demonstrou êxito na promoção de resultados progressivos de inclusão, assegurando o direito dos estudantes com autismo ao pertencimento ao ambiente escolar e respondendo, de forma situada, às demandas dos docentes para promover processos inclusivos no cotidiano das atividades escolares.

***Palavras-chave**: Educação Especial. Autismo. Formação de Professores. Análise Textual Discursiva. Ciclo de Reflexão sobre a Ação.*

1. Introduction

The theoretical underpinning of this research is anchored in the inextricable link between two fundamental strands: Inclusive Education from the perspective of collaborative teaching—or co-teaching— (Mendes, Vilaronga, & Zerbato, 2022) and teacher education based on reflective and critical practice (Freire, 1996; Schön, 2000). To understand the schooling of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the study adopts the concept of school inclusion as an inalienable right to belonging, supported by national legislation and scholars in the field (Mantoan, 2011). However, it posits that the realization of this praxis depends on a transformation of teacher identity. Thus, the theoretical framework draws upon the concepts of the reflective teacher and the critical intellectual (Giroux, 1997; Pimenta & Ghedin, 2002)—grounded in teacher education literature—to ultimately converge on the Collaborative Teaching (co-teaching) model as the methodological and professional development strategy capable of operationalizing this transformation within the daily life of the school.

In the contemporary educational landscape, the transition from a paradigm of physical integration to the establishment of spaces where students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) truly belong represents one of the greatest challenges in their schooling. Although the Brazilian legal framework has advanced—most notably through the Brazilian Inclusion Law (Law No. 13.146/2015), which guarantees the right to quality education within an inclusive system at all levels—inclusive practice still faces significant obstacles. These are characterized by processes of covert exclusion and a lack of teacher training strategies that effectively bridge theoretical foundations with the realities of daily school life.

To overcome this gap between theory and practice, it is necessary to move away from traditional models of teacher training. As Pimenta (1999) asserts, training is not merely mechanical training, but a continuous process that takes place in reflection on action. Thus, professional development is conceived as a dialogical space, for the construction of knowledge and interprofessional collaboration, aiming at the emancipation of subjects and the restructuring of educational institutions themselves.

It is in this context that collaboration among the professionals involved in the educational processes of students with ASD becomes a mediating element, enabling the teacher to move beyond the role of a "replicator of external ideas" (Alarcão, 2011, p. 45) and become a critical intellectual. However, this research posits—in line with the arguments of Mendes, Vilaronga, and Zerbato (2022)—that this evolution does not result from imposition but rather depends intrinsically on voluntary engagement and the establishment of a horizontal partnership, a hallmark of co-teaching (collaborative teaching).

Co-teaching is understood here as a methodological approach in which the general education teacher and the special educator share direct responsibility for the planning, instruction, and assessment of a diverse group of students. The success of this format depends on multiple factors, notably the willingness of the participants; for "if one of the teachers does not wish to establish a partnership, it is impossible to develop collaborative teaching—which is why co-teaching is regarded as a professional marriage" (Mendes, Vilaronga, & Zerbato, 2022, p. 71).

Delving into the relational dimension of this partnership, it becomes evident that collaborative work only truly materializes when there is institutionalized space for dialogue and reflection on pedagogical practices. This institutional environment characterizes what is defined as a "reflective school"—that is, a "[...] school that knows where it stands and where it wants to go. It engages in reflection; it is guided by a project that shapes its actions and works as a team. It is a thinking community" (Alarcão, 2011, p. 92). Linking cycles of reflection-on-action with the premises of collaborative teaching (Mendes, Vilaronga, & Zerbato, 2022) rests on the assumption that the act of evaluating and reconfiguring pedagogical practices ceases to be a solitary exercise; thus, "[...] collaborative work is, therefore, a concept that qualifies and sustains inclusive processes within the school, forging connections with other themes in the field of education—such as policies regarding Special Education within an Inclusive Education framework and teacher training" (Pereira, 2021, p. 93).

In everyday school life, early years teachers often face pedagogical loneliness when faced with the challenge of teaching students with ASD, while most special educators work in a fragmented or isolated manner. Therefore, the urgency of investigating alternatives that combine training with the real work context is justified. It was precisely this training gap that led to the idealization and implementation of the Reflection on Action Cycle (RAC) in this investigation.

The RAC was conceived as a training possibility designed to operationalize co-teaching and transform teaching through a horizontal partnership, transforming the anguish of isolation into a shared process of reframing praxis.

Thus, the question driving this research was: how can shared reflection on teaching practice—specifically within the context of science education—contribute to reframing the pedagogical practice and the schooling process for children with autism? To address this question and guide the reader through the research journey, this work is organized in a logical structure that mirrors the very process of action research. After outlining the problem, objective, and rationale, the study presents the methodology, describing the Reflection on Action Cycle (RAC). It also characterizes the study setting and participants (a multidisciplinary team, P1 through P7) and introduces the Discursive Textual Analysis (ATD) method, which transformed the data corpus from the diagnostic phase into the generative themes that informed the professional development cycles. Subsequently, the results section presents the categories that emerged from ATD, along with an analysis of the implementation of the four professional development cycles focused on science education in the early years of schooling. Finally, the text concludes by synthesizing insights on collaborative professional development and outlining future directions for a truly inclusive school environment.

2. Methodological Procedures

This study is qualitative in nature and is structured as action research (Thiollent, 2011), guided by the premise that the production of scientific knowledge must be intrinsically linked to the transformation of social and educational reality. The study investigated the contributions of implementing a continuing education process—here termed "Reflection on Action Cycle" (RAC)—which aimed to develop inclusive practices for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

The central objective of this action research is to understand how pedagogical planning organized collaboratively and reflectively can foster the (re)construction of instructional approaches aimed at overcoming the challenges of teaching children with autism in the early years of schooling. The setting for this praxis is science education in the early years—a field requiring specific forms of mediation to make scientific knowledge accessible. Consequently, "Reflection on Action Cycle (RAC)" is proposed to support continuing professional development processes.

This methodological model aims to move beyond instrumental technical training, seeking a subjective and collective transformation of school culture. The relevance of this approach is underscored by the nature of ASD—a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by unique traits in communication, social interaction, and behavioral patterns (Soares et al., 2025). Given that ASD impacts the student's overall functioning, schooling requires sensitive pedagogical strategies and specialized support which, when integrated early on, enhance essential social and academic skills.

The research was conducted at a municipal public school in Campos Borges, RS, focusing on the early years of elementary education. The group of participants consisted of a multidisciplinary team, identified as P1 through P7 to ensure anonymity: Psychopedagogue (P1), Specialized Educational Support (AEE) professional (P2), Speech-Language Pathologist (P3), Classroom Teacher (P4), Researcher (P5), Teaching Assistant (P6), and Supervisor (P7). Participant selection was based on these professionals' direct involvement in the learning process of students with ASD.

The proposal sought to break down teacher isolation by fostering communicative action and mobilizing stakeholders interested in generating knowledge about concrete actions, as advocated by Thiollent (2011). This study adopts Habermas's (2001) perspective on the theory of communicative action, understanding it as a process of social interaction in which individuals use dialogic language to achieve mutual understanding, consensus, and the coordination of educational actions, free from coercion or rigid hierarchies.

Thus, when applying this concept to the Reflection on Action Cycle (RAC), Habermasian communicative rationality materializes in the space where the general education teacher and the special education educator coordinate their lesson plans through a horizontal dialogue, validating each professional's expertise in the pursuit of a truly inclusive praxis. The study adhered to current ethical guidelines and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) under opinion no. 5.705.578.

Prior to the implementation of the Reflection on Action Cycle (RAC), the data collected during the diagnostic phase with the professionals involved were subjected to Discursive Textual Analysis (ATD).

> Discursive textual analysis can be understood as a self-organizing process of constructing new understandings regarding phenomena and discourses. [...] To this end, it moves between the deconstruction and reconstruction of new texts, implying a process of immersing oneself in the discourses so as to bring meanings to the surface and toward a whole (Moraes; Galiazzi, 2007, p. 12).

This analytical procedure enabled the deconstruction and categorization of the research participants' accounts, revealing the units of meaning that underpin their perceptions of inclusion. The use of ATD is justified by the need to transform raw discourse into robust analytical categories that served as the foundation for the generative themes of the RAC. Thus, the analysis does not conclude the process but rather acts as a catalyst, ensuring that the training cycle interventions are genuinely responsive to the actual demands and tensions faced by professionals involved in the educational processes of students with ASD.

The RAC was structured into four training cycles. Each cycle was operationalized in four weekly stages, as shown in Figure 1 and described below.

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the stages of a Reflection on Action Cycle (RAC). The cycle begins with Diagnosis, followed by Research and Planning, Implementation of the Proposal, and, finally, Reflection on Action

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

The Diagnosis serves as the foundation for curriculum planning, going beyond the mere identification of gaps by proposing that the teacher conduct an assessment grounded in the competencies and potential already demonstrated by the student. From this perspective, continuing education can provide the necessary theoretical and methodological tools, transforming the diagnostic act into an exercise in critical reflection. This process encompasses a systemic analysis of the students' context, the mapping of prior knowledge, and the characterization of learning profiles through an inclusive lens.

During Diagnosis, the central issue guiding RAC1 was formulated and sent to research participants via WhatsApp messaging app: “How can the teacher communicate the presence and characteristics of a classmate with autism to the class, while fostering understanding and inclusion?” The professionals' responses to this question formed the initial corpus for analysis using ATD. Within the context of teacher training, the diagnostic stage aimed to support reflective processes to identify the barriers educators encountered in implementing inclusive practices. This initial identification was crucial, as it allowed the challenges to be problematized and addressed through a search for theoretical and methodological frameworks to help overcome them.

The discrepancy between a student's current level of development—understood as their prior knowledge—and the expected learning objectives (i.e., what needs to be taught) shapes the pedagogical pathway. The RAC fit squarely within this context, serving as the methodological tool used to organize intervention strategies that enabled the professionals participating in the study to overcome barriers identified in the inclusion process. Therefore, continuing education aims to equip teachers—working in coordination with other school professionals—to use diagnostic analysis (which may take up to a week to complete) as a fundamental basis for developing the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), thereby ensuring the effectiveness and success of inclusive pedagogical practices.

Following the completion of the diagnostic stage, the research and planning stage ensued. This phase was characterized by the active investigation of resources and strategies to address the learning barriers identified during the diagnosis. It was in this context that collaborative work became more evident, driven by peer-to-peer sharing of experiences, reflective and reciprocal listening, constructive criticism of pedagogical practices, and the exchange of teaching materials and theoretical frameworks.

Thus, the Research and Planning Stage (which could last up to a week) did not constitute isolated acts, but rather an interactive process of collective construction. In this context, the strength of the established interprofessional ties was directly proportional to the quality and effectiveness of the pedagogical intervention strategies devised. “We understand that quality teaching exists when educational actions are grounded in solidarity, collaboration, and the sharing of the educational process with everyone directly or indirectly involved in it” (Mantoan, 2011, p. 61).

Once the pedagogical plan had been co-constructed, the Proposal Implementation Stage involved carrying out the teaching plan (spanning a one-week application period). The initial approach prioritized organizing activities within a large-group setting, aiming for maximum inclusion and resource optimization. However, pedagogical effectiveness required flexibility. If formative assessment results indicate that the expected learning objectives have not been met, instructional differentiation is employed, manifesting as tiered levels of support:

1. Small-Group Adjustment: Implementation of practices and activities in subgroups, allowing for targeted intervention on specific skills or the consolidation of concepts.
2. Individualized Application: As a last resort, and to address strictly unique needs, individual intervention is carried out, ensuring the student receives highly specialized support to overcome persistent learning barriers.

This flexibility strategy embodies the principle of equity, ensuring that the level of support provided is proportional to the student's needs while maintaining a commitment to full inclusion in the regular classroom environment whenever possible.

Following the execution of the teaching proposal, the Reflection on Action Stage began. In the week after implementation, the professionals involved in the educational process engaged in a critical, shared analysis of the intervention, facilitated by the researcher/trainer. It was acknowledged that no single professional possesses absolute knowledge, and that initial ideas can often appear vague or disjointed. However, the true meaning and subsequent refinement of the practice emerge precisely from this analysis—as posited by Schön (2000), who emphasizes the importance of experimentation-in-action for the collective understanding of the work. Once all the previously described stages were completed, a cycle was formed: the Reflection on Action Cycle (RAC).

3. Results and Discussion

The initial challenge that triggered the first training cycle (RAC1) arose from a concrete and pressing pedagogical issue: the classroom teacher's difficulty in addressing the topic of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) with the other students. The focus of RAC1 was established based on the questions raised by the students and the subsequent communication barrier the teacher faced in answering them. The central issue guiding the training cycle emerged from responses to an initial inquiry sent via WhatsApp at the start of the Diagnosis. This inquiry served as a starting point for

the co-construction of awareness-raising and collaborative teaching strategies. This need arose from the various questions posed by classmates who interacted with the student with autism, whom they perceived as "different."

Once the behavior of the student with ASD—manifested through shouting, indifference toward teacher-led activities, inappropriate classroom behavior, episodes of spinning around, hand-flapping, and laughter without apparent cause—began to draw the attention of classmates, the research participants identified a need to explain the situation in its entirety. It was also deemed important to address the matter due to the "need to shape a generation capable of meeting the demands of a knowledge society, the profile of which is defined by differences" (Mantoan, 2011, p. 59).

Once the assessment was complete, the difficulties teachers faced in the classroom became evident—specifically, explaining why students with autism differ from their peers and conveying that, regardless of a classmate's disability, it was important to understand each individual's needs in order to strengthen bonds and foster inclusion.

Upon completion of the diagnostic stage, Discursive Textual Analysis (DTA) was conducted, guided by a cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction of the texts sent via WhatsApp messaging app. The initial phase consisted of unitarization—a process in which the responses underwent successive readings to identify and extract statements carrying meanings relevant to the phenomenon under study. From this process, 20 units of analysis emerged.

Categorization was subsequently carried out, grounded in the constant comparison of textual elements sharing semantic affinities, enabling the grouping of meanings into progressively abstract sets. Table 1 summarizes this process, highlighting the transition from raw data to the analytical metatext.

Table 1 – Number of units of analysis and categorization of participants' responses to form the analysis corpus

Initial number of units of analysis in each category	Initial category	Intermediate category	Final category
5	A - Naming the Diagnosis as an Act of Ethical Literacy and Recognition.	Ethical Transparency as Mediation between Visibility and the Protection of the Student with Autism (A+B=13).	The Praxis of Inclusive Mediation: The Ethical-Symbolic Unveiling of Autism in Daily School Life (A+B+C+D=20).
8	B - The Ethical Dilemma Between Identity Protection and Institutional Silencing.		
5	C - Play-based Mediation as a Strategy for Translating and Embracing Difference.	Play as an Interface Language: Symbolic Mediation in the School-Family Dialogue (C + D = 7).	
2	D - Horizontal Dialogue between School and Family: Dialogic Relationships for Inclusive Praxis.		

Source: Authors (2026).

The organization of the 20 units of analysis served to deconstruct the initial texts, allowing the elemental components of the phenomenon under study to come into view. At this stage, reconstruction takes place: the drafting of the metatext. This process is inspired by both phenomenology (drawing on statements from the diagnostic interview) and hermeneutics (interpretation); a new understanding emerges from immersion in the data, linking the findings of the diagnostic phase with the goals of pedagogical innovation and the transformation of attitudinal barriers.

3.1 The Praxis of Inclusive Mediation: The Ethical-Symbolic Unveiling of Autism in Daily School Life

Naming the diagnoses brings together discourses that advocate replacing euphemisms with the correct terminology: autism. For early-years teachers, using the precise designation is not merely a technical matter but a pedagogical act that breaks down stigma. This approach aligns with the thinking of Paulo Freire, for whom "respect for the autonomy and dignity of each individual is an ethical imperative, not a favor we may or may not grant one another" (1996, p. 59). By naming the condition, the teacher lifts the indifference of invisibility and initiates a process of "reading the world" with the class, transforming a sense of otherness into shared knowledge and respect for the other's identity.

The dilemma between protecting identity and institutional silencing reflects the tension between safeguarding the family's privacy and the pedagogical need for mediation. Concerns regarding labels are highlighted by P1: "...explaining exactly what autism is. I don't treat it as something exclusionary because I believe it is very important for people to normalize it." The fear that the diagnosis might overshadow the child (stigma) points to a form of silencing that can hinder understanding among peers. The analysis suggests that teacher training needs to equip educators to handle disclosure ethically—in a way that does not label but rather informs students to foster inclusion.

However, it is evident that this process faces the dilemma of fear of labeling, which often immobilizes the school in a stance of silence—as highlighted by P1 in the following excerpt: "And so the child's family wouldn't be exposed, they were afraid to explain the situation to the class." Overcoming this hesitation requires understanding that ethical transparency is not a matter of excessive exposure, but rather an act of pedagogical courage. By naming the diagnosis, the institution demystifies the student's condition and protects them from isolation caused by a lack of understanding. "The exercise of clarity requires courage to break the silence..." (Freire, 1994, p. 32).

The effectiveness of this transparency is intrinsically linked to the medium employed, establishing play as a fundamental interface language. In this context, play-based mediation is not merely a distraction, but a system of meaning-making essential to childhood. According to Kishimoto (2017, p. 108), toys and play function as mediums that enable the child to "understand the world and themselves," acting as a welcoming strategy capable of translating complex concepts into the child's universe. Complementing this view, the inclusion of symbolic elements resonates with socio-interactionist theory. As Vygotsky (1998, p. 126) points out: "The creation of an imaginary situation is, from a theoretical perspective, the first step toward the child's liberation from situational constraints." Thus, role-playing and the use of symbolic objects—such as dolls—create a "safe space" where the child can explore socio-emotional relationships. This process facilitates not only eye contact but also the development of empathy, allowing the play-based medium to act as a bridge between the abstract and lived experience. This symbolic mediation does not end in the classroom; it extends to the horizontal dialogue between school and family.

By using play-based approaches to explain autism, the teacher offers a "translation" of reality that facilitates understanding among the families and the class. As the ATD results indicate, this shared language—whether in person or via instant messaging—establishes a dialogic relationship for inclusive praxis, wherein the play-based resource serves as a mediating object that bridges the knowledge held by teachers and families. As P4 highlights: "Children notice differences; what we need to do is teach them to respect them."

The praxis of inclusive mediation reveals that addressing autism within the daily school routine requires the teacher to assume the role of an "organic intellectual" of inclusion. In the context of special education, this means that technical mastery alone is insufficient; the teacher can act as a coordinator who lends meaning and cohesion to the struggle for the right to learn. Consequently, the teacher's role demands training that fosters ethical transparency and an "interface language." As Freire (1996, p. 38) emphasizes, "educational practice is all of this: affectivity, joy, scientific competence, and technical mastery in the service of change." Thus, the organic intellectual of inclusion is one who transforms technique into a tool for emancipation, ensuring that playful support and mediation serve not merely as protocols, but as genuine bridges to knowledge.

The final category indicates that teacher training regarding autism must be a process of constant reflection on practice, ensuring that the diagnosis serves as a starting point for dialogue rather than a destination leading to stigma. As Freirean logic concludes, educating for inclusion is, above all, an act of freedom built through communion among individuals and the critical interpretation of their realities. Thus, "no one educates anyone else, nor does anyone educate themselves: people educate one another in communion, mediated by the world" (Freire, 1987, p. 39). This final category encapsulates the teacher's approach: while transparently naming the condition—thereby transcending the fear of labeling—they use play as a bridge to establish a genuine dialogue with the family.

Thus, autism is revealed not as a pathology to be concealed, but as a difference to be mediated symbolically and ethically. The teacher becomes the facilitator of a network where the student's protection is achieved not through silence, but through the quality of dialogue and the appropriate use of forms of expression (such as play), ensuring that school and family move forward together in interpreting the child's world.

According to Freire (1996, p. 23), “I like being human because, even knowing that the material, economic, social, political, cultural, and ideological conditions in which we find ourselves almost always create barriers that are difficult to overcome in fulfilling our historical task of changing the world, I also know that obstacles do not last forever.” Freire focuses not only on the existence of difficulties but also on the fact that they do not persist indefinitely. Obstacles become inversely proportional to the acquisition of knowledge: the more professionals involved in educational processes learn about ways to teach people with autism, the greater the integration, collaborative work, and results.

3.2 Development of Reflection on Action Cycles (RACs)

Based on the identification—during the diagnosis phase—of the challenge the classroom teacher faced in explaining the presence and characteristics of the student with autism to the class, the initial focus shifted to the need for raising awareness and fostering inclusive communication. Consequently, the teacher attempted to use visual aids depicting routines (going to the restroom, washing hands, sitting down, etc.) to encourage the student with autism to participate in lessons and interact more fluidly.

Initially, the training cycle focused on the students' adjustment and the promotion of positive social interaction. This stage of the training centered on planning how the research team would organize itself to carry out the work, defining the agreed-upon activities, the implementation methods, and the types of reinforcers that could be used to foster harmony within the group. As a result of the Research and Planning Phase, the co-construction of the "Story Time" strategy at RAC1 was established.

After selecting materials aimed at raising awareness, the research team—at P4’s suggestion—chose the book “O fone que não toca música” ("The Headphones That Don't Play Music") by Thaís Cardoso and the doll "Milu" (serving as a playful, symbolic element), which was created by the researcher (Figure 2). The story centers on the transformative friendship between two children: Eric, a boy with autism, and Ana, a neurotypical girl. It also addresses themes of bullying and social exclusion, highlighting the importance of understanding and support from classmates. Through the bond between Ana and Eric, the work conveys an important message about diversity and the power of friendship to break down barriers. The lesson's primary objective was to foster empathetic understanding regarding the characteristics of autism—such as the use of noise-canceling headphones—and the expressive behavior of the student with autism, aiming to promote harmonious interaction and respect for differences.

Figure 2 – Book cover and doll shown to the students

Source: Image prepared by the authors (2024).

During the proposal implementation phase, the students sat on the floor in a circle and listened to the story told by P4. They listened and tried to imagine how important the noise-canceling headphones were to their classmate,

attempting to grasp the context by observing the object in use. Earlier in the school year, when he first started attending class wearing headphones, his classmates had wondered why he was listening to music during lessons. Later, they tried on the headphones themselves and realized no sound came out, remarking, "I hear silence." The story felt very real to the children, as they encountered similar situations daily—though they did not always understand them. It was as if a character from the story were present during the storytelling session. After reading the book, the researcher/facilitator discussed with the students how people with autism might behave; she explained why they felt comfortable wearing noise-canceling headphones and the meaning behind their repetitive movements. Afterward, P4 placed the doll and the book at the front of the room, near the board, and instructed the students to make a drawing in their notebooks.

Following the Proposal Implementation Phase, the Reflection on Action Stage was conducted. At this point, P4 shared their impressions, highlighting that students with ASD understand everything literally—seeing no middle ground—and feel a need to maintain a routine. Playful elements were frequently incorporated into the activity through various classroom games, though success was limited. These efforts, led by P5, P1, and P3, primarily aimed to improve the socialization of the student with autism.

However, the turning point occurred when the classmate's autism was addressed openly, using the story of Eric and Ana. From that moment on, the dynamics of the students' interactions became much smoother. Although P1 and P3 offered observations from a greater distance—having not been present during the immediate implementation of the initiative—they fully agreed with the outcome. The consensus among all the professionals was that open, direct communication about autism was the most effective strategy for fostering inclusion within the class, as an inclusive school requires "a shift in attitude and perspective" (Mantoan, 2011, p. 30).

RAC2 originated from a specific challenge identified and diagnosed at the conclusion of RAC1. Despite successfully raising awareness about diversity among students, the professionals participating in the research found that this effort was insufficient to ensure the retention and effective engagement of the included student within the classroom. This observation led to the development of the theme for the second cycle: "The Reinforcers That Make Me Want to Be Here."

With the Diagnosis already established by the end of RAC1, the starting point for the new cycle focused on a professional inquiry into which reinforcers could be implemented. The goal was to boost the students' intrinsic motivation and desire to participate—particularly that of the student with autism within the school setting—by focusing on adaptation and a genuine sense of belonging. A student with ASD needs to enjoy going to school and, like any other learner, want to learn. What would drive this child and make them want to go to school every day? What motivations—which would certainly need to be cultivated over the years—would ensure these children did not view school as a barrier or an obstacle? Gradually, ideas began to emerge (as part of the team's work) for the second training cycle.

The agenda for the first RAC2 meeting focused on a specific question: What are the most effective reinforcers for children with autism in the classroom setting? What evidence could the team bring to the discussion? This search for evidence was framed by the understanding that motivation is a universal principle of behavior.

According to Sella and Ribeiro (2017):

> It is important to clarify the distinction between the terms reinforcer, reinforcement and reinforcement. The term reinforcer is related to a stimulus produced by the person's response. The term reinforcement refers to the procedure, that is, the presentation of a reinforcer when the response occurs. Reinforcement refers to the procedure of presenting consequences when a response is emitted and also to the process of increasing the probability of the response occurring again (Sella; Ribeiro, 2017, p.75).

P1 suggested organizing the activity with the class by having each student state their preferred reinforcer, with one being offered to the class each day—taking all classmates into account. This way, everyone would have access to reinforcers, not only the student with autism. Strategies such as awarding stars or allowing the child to choose a toy are ways to provide rewards and encourage the student to participate more. According to Khoury (2011):

> There are different types of events used to positively reinforce behavior. For example, primary reinforcers are events or stimuli essential for survival (air, water, and food). Secondary reinforcers can be classified into five basic types:

> tangible (toys, trading cards); edible (sweets, fruit, cookies); activities (watching a movie, playing video games, free time); social (praise, smiles, applause); and physical (tickling, hugs, kisses, touch) (Khoury, 2011, p. 60).

In contrast to the pursuit of material or tangible reinforcers, the final evaluation of the intervention cycle demonstrated that the most potent and effective reinforcer for the engagement and participation of the child with autism was the affectivity expressed during social interactions with peers and the teacher.

Engagement can be considered a key issue in educational processes. One of the multidisciplinary team's initial concerns was how to ensure that a child with autism wanted to go to school and felt motivated to engage in the activities. It was observed that, while most students recognized the need to complete the tasks, they did so with greater enthusiasm whenever the class earned a reward. According to Mantoan (2011), inclusion requires schools to offer diverse learning options, treating differences not as deficits to be corrected, but as a "range of opportunities" within a flexible curriculum that embraces everyone.

In this process, the role of the mediator/teacher is vital yet never isolated. This professional's training must be aligned with the student's specific needs without relieving the other teachers and the school staff of their responsibilities. As Capellini (2014) argues, the effectiveness of inclusion lies in collaborative teaching—a model requiring fluid communication and mutual cooperation. According to Capellini, “collaborative work entails professionals sharing the planning, execution, and evaluation of activities, ensuring that support for the student is a collective endeavor” (Capellini, 2014, p. 45). When the school staff and the family work in unison, they become effective mediators of reinforcers and behaviors, enabling precise observation of how the student's skills are managed and developed, thereby transforming the school into an environment of cooperation and genuine growth.

Following the implementation of RAC2, a reflection and analysis meeting (Reflection on Action) was held via Google Meet. Participants included P1, P2, P4, P7, and P5, creating a space for discussion among the professionals. Of the various topics addressed, particular attention was given to difficulties regarding the classroom behavior of students with autism and the obstacles they faced in keeping up with the curriculum in a regular classroom setting.

There was extensive discussion regarding the importance of tailoring Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to the unique needs of each child, thereby establishing a curricular approach that is distinct and differentiated from the planning designed for other students. Furthermore, the significance of collaborative work and co-teaching was emphasized, given that the effective implementation of the diverse pedagogical strategies outlined in the IEP relies directly on the integration and continuous communication among teaching staff. A lack of mutual awareness regarding the strategies employed by colleagues hinders the holistic and synergistic development of the teaching-learning process, underscoring the imperative nature of collaboration.

As stated by Capellini (2014), the diverse expertise of professionals completes a complex and multifaceted puzzle within the inclusive process. From the perspective of collaborative teaching, it is argued that this form of support should be understood as a "partnership between general and special education professionals," in which responsibility is shared for "planning, instructing, and assessing a diverse group of students" (Capellini, 2014, p. 12).

This perspective aligns with recent studies by Oliveira and Mendes (2022), which emphasize that the success of collaborative teaching depends on a culture of authentic partnership, where the co-construction of pedagogical strategies replaces isolated teacher practice. Thus, integrating diverse professional perspectives not only addresses immediate issues but also establishes the necessary foundation for the mainstream school to become truly inclusive.

The institutional analysis was deepened when the researcher/trainer asked P7 about the existence of systematic monitoring practices for other students with ASD at the school and about the consolidation of collaborative work among teaching teams. The supervisor indicated that such practices were not institutionalized and stated that the ongoing intervention proposal represented the first initiative of interprofessional integration of that magnitude observed at the school.

The lack of institutionalization of inclusive pedagogical practices highlights a common challenge across school systems: the need for the philosophy of inclusive education to be formally enshrined in the Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP). As Veiga (2022) points out, the PPP is not merely a bureaucratic document but the school's identity project.

Consequently, if collaborative practices are not woven into its structure, inclusion efforts tend to be episodic and fragmented rather than becoming consolidated as an institutional culture (Glat & Pletsch, 2021).

However, the analysis of P7 not only confirmed the inadequacy of interprofessional communication but also elucidated that one of the main institutional challenges to effective inclusion lay in the resistance to—or non-acceptance of—the diagnosis by some families, which directly impacts adherence to intervention plans.

It is observed that family involvement is a critical factor in the student's teaching and learning process, whether or not the student has autism. Specialized literature highlights the active responsibility of the families of students with special educational needs. According to Nascimento (2012, p. 48), it is imperative that the family seeks "information and knowledge regarding the child's specific disorder from qualified institutions, organizations, and/or professionals, and disseminates this knowledge." This statement underscores the inextricable link between the family, the school, and the professionals involved in mediating the teaching and learning of the child with autism. Furthermore, Mendes et al. (2025, p. 4) highlight that "...children whose families are more directly involved in their school lives perform better compared to those whose parents are absent".

Supporting this perspective, Silva and Souza (2024) point out that systematic family involvement and the establishment of a shared routine for exchanging guidance and information between parents and teachers have direct, positive implications for academic success. Thus, contemporary research reaffirms that close communication between caregivers and the educational institution is essential for enhancing performance and reducing barriers in the student's learning journey.

The triad comprising the school, the family, and the multidisciplinary team relies on the family as an essential component. The family unit holds contextualized knowledge about the student—who spends most of their time in this environment—and the caregivers are familiar with the most effective intervention strategies for the majority of situations. According to Silva et al. (2024, p. 16), "A lack of family structure and interest can lead to a lack of supervision and school support, negatively affecting both the child's educational and personal development and hindering their future opportunities." Therefore, family collaboration with the school and the team working with the child is of utmost importance for the success of the interventions.

It is also worth noting that the process of continuing education within the context of inclusion is not limited to the student who is the target of Special Education; rather, it encompasses the entire institutional framework that must be (re)organized to provide the necessary pedagogical support. Striving to improve the quality of the school's professional development process goes beyond merely holding meetings; it demands intense, ongoing communication among professionals. It also requires epistemic flexibility regarding initial assumptions—often entailing the re-evaluation, backtracking, and replanning of actions within a constant cycle of improvement.

According to Capellini (2018)

> The support network, essential to the success of the inclusive school, is a dynamic network shaped by the needs of daily school life and involving various inclusive social entities. Understanding the dynamic nature of the support network means understanding that society as a whole must be inclusive and and must be committed to addressing the needs involved in building an inclusive school. (Capellini, 2018, p. 244).

Inclusion efforts begin to yield results when they succeed in engaging the community, transcending the boundaries of the school.

RAC3 was guided by the central premise that "students with autism require a specific educational plan," focusing on the implementation and formalization of necessary curricular adaptations. The transition to RAC3 was preceded by a phase of organizational restructuring and staff adjustment at the school, which called for changes in the research methodology. The start of the new academic year coincided with the retirement of P4—a key figure in previous cycles—and the integration of the researcher/trainer into the institution's staff as a special education teacher.

This shift in the positioning of the actors and the reconfiguration of the team brought about a dynamic change in the process. Although the methodological structure of the RACs remained unchanged, an initial reorganization of interpersonal and professional relationships became imperative. Consequently, preliminary activities focused on re-

establishing connections, strengthening bonds of trust and collaboration, and fostering the engagement of the new group of professionals, with the aim of ensuring full buy-in and a willingness to participate actively in subsequent cycles.

RAC3 focused on organizing the IEP by following the cycle's methodological stages. Although developing an IEP had become a standard pedagogical practice at the school participating in the study, at RAC3 it was structured as follows: the process began with a diagnostic assessment of the student (Diagnosis), aimed at identifying their current developmental level, prior knowledge, and specific learning needs. This was followed by a search for theoretical and methodological references (Research and Planning) to support the teaching process.

Recognizing that the effectiveness of the IEP depends on the engagement of the entire school community, the document was structured collaboratively: it was developed through direct coordination between the classroom teacher and the Specialized Educational Support (AEE) teacher/researcher, while also incorporating input and shared responsibility from other educational stakeholders, school administrators, and—crucially—the student's family, thereby ensuring a comprehensive support network for its subsequent implementation. The subsequent stages involved implementing the IEP (carrying out the proposal) and reflecting on the action taken in light of the results, culminating in the restructuring of elements that met with less acceptance or engagement from the student. Over the course of the intervention, the methodological sequence of the training cycles became normalized and incorporated as an institutional practice.

Closer collaboration and dialogue among multidisciplinary team members proved to be predictors of improved pedagogical outcomes. Holding strategic meetings during work hours—thereby avoiding individual overload—alongside conducting school-based studies and collaborating on the creation of adapted materials, brought professionals closer together and resulted in richer, higher-quality educational work. The perception of genuine collaboration, as opposed to a system of prescriptive monitoring (characterized by constant demands), acted as a catalyst for strengthening interpersonal bonds and fostering active listening in the workplace. Consequently, there was a significant increase in affective connection and, notably, in interprofessional empathy.

Work mediated by affectivity is crucial for awakening the human dimension of teaching practice, establishing an intrinsic connection between professionals and the pedagogical development process. As Freirean logic indicates, this dimension is inseparable from scientific rigor, for "affectivity is not excluded from the capacity to know" (Freire, 1996, p. 143). Inclusive interventions yield substantial returns that transcend quantitative performance metrics, manifesting in the affirmation of the teacher's centrality as an active subject within the educational process.

This observation was reiterated in RAC4, confirming the findings from RAC2, which identified warmth and affectivity as the most potent reinforcers for optimizing interactions and fostering sustainable engagement. At the conclusion of RAC3, the teachers' meeting for the activity reflection session fulfilled the role of critical analysis essential to praxis. As Freire (1996, p. 38) teaches, "in the ongoing professional development of teachers, the fundamental moment is that of critical reflection on practice," allowing successful elements to be validated and adjustments for the subsequent cycle to be identified through the lens of transformation and mutual acceptance.

RAC4 was initiated in response to an emerging pedagogical need identified by a teacher, aiming to foster the participation and engagement of a student with Level 3 autism in her classes. Addressing the observed gap in the student's engagement with the class, the cycle focused on planning an inclusive, universally designed instructional activity.

Observing the students' evident interest in olfactory stimuli, the intervention hypothesis focused on utilizing this sense (smell) as a sensory reinforcer and an attractive element to spark interest and foster the engagement of the included student.

The classroom teacher and the specialized educational support (AEE) teacher/researcher researched reference materials to inform the organization of the lesson plan and subsequently reflected together on their findings. The plan was then structured and implemented by both of them. Their joint participation throughout the entire process—including implementation—facilitated a mutual understanding of the challenges, strengthened their interprofessional bond, and fostered robust, contextualized learning for everyone involved.

The post-action reflective process is fundamental, as it allows professionals to analyze what could have been done differently, the challenges faced, what turned out as expected and what did not work, as well as to revisit expectations regarding what is considered correct. This dynamic of self-analysis underpins the evolution of the teacher,

for, as Alarcão states: "The reflective teacher is one who systematically and critically analyzes their own practice, transforming lived experience into conscious pedagogical knowledge" (Alarcão, 2011, p. 41).

This premise resonates with contemporary studies such as those by Libâneo (2020) and Imbernón (2022), which reaffirm critical reflection on practice as the central axis of continuing education, transforming the daily school routine into a permanent space for research and knowledge production. Consequently, continuing education ceases to be an isolated event and becomes a daily exercise in inquiry. By revisiting their actions, teachers not only refine their techniques but also develop the intellectual autonomy to navigate the complexity and uncertainty inherent in the school inclusion process. Only through this systematic analysis of intervention outcomes is it possible to achieve continuous improvement or, if necessary, a complete reformulation of pedagogical strategies.

According to Freire (1996, p. 17), “critical teaching practice—which entails thinking rightly—involves a dynamic, dialectical movement between doing and thinking about doing.” Freire emphasizes this movement because teaching and learning rely on such dynamics. This is reflected in the author’s highlighting of the unfinished nature of learning, wherein the teacher—as a critical professional—must be prepared for change and for accepting difference. Teaching is more than merely transferring knowledge; it is about “creating the possibilities for its own production or construction” (Freire, 1996, p. 21).

In highlighting the full importance of the RAC, the relevance of the "unfinished nature"—including that of the human being—becomes evident; as Freire stated in *Pedagogy of Autonomy*: “Where there is life, there is unfinishedness. However, only among women and men has this unfinishedness become conscious” (Freire, 1996, p. 21). The unfinished nature of the work within the inclusive process guides the drive to constantly improve and to remain engaged in a larger project: that of transforming realities.

There are various ways to approach a single teaching proposal, just as diverse content can be addressed through the same instruction. Schön (2000) cites two approaches: one involving the exact reproduction of what was taught, and the other consisting of alternatives devised by the learner while experimenting with modifications to that repeated sequence.

> Recreating the educational model refers primarily to what we teach our students and how we teach them, so that they may grow and develop into ethical, just, and revolutionary beings—people who must reverse a situation we have been unable to fully resolve: changing the world and making it more humane. (Mantoan, 2011, p. 60).

At RAC4, the primary objective was to consolidate collaborative work as an institutional practice. The team's operational dynamics underwent a process of adjustment and self-organization to meet the needs of all stakeholders, resulting in the prioritization of a welcoming approach and affective connection over the cycle's methodological rigidity.

Training sessions were integrated into teachers' individual planning periods—within their scheduled working hours—thereby optimizing time and minimizing workload. Furthermore, the evaluation of teaching plans was institutionalized, becoming part of the discussions held during student progress meetings. This structural reorganization was subsequently incorporated into the participating school's Political-Pedagogical Project (PPP), formalizing collaborative practices.

With the conclusion of the four training cycles, the creation of adapted materials became a collaborative and routine practice. There was significant improvement in interprofessional communication and the quality of the work carried out at the school from an inclusive perspective. Although the canonical stages of the Reflection-on-Action Cycle were not strictly followed, methodological flexibility was adopted to address the pressing, concrete needs of those involved in building inclusive education within that context.

4. Conclusion

The course of this research demonstrated that teacher training—being a continuous and ongoing process—found a highly relevant, structured methodological sequence in the Reflection on Action Cycles (RAC). Analysis of the responses from the initial diagnostic stage revealed the participants' lack of resources for raising awareness about autism. This finding drove the continuation of the training process through the RAC dynamic. Furthermore, as the

research progressed, it became evident that the value of active listening and interprofessional support transcended the rigidity of the methodological sequence itself. Creating a space for dialogue—grounded in an affective approach where the voices and knowledge of all participants are validated—proved to be an essential strategy for breaking down barriers and mitigating prejudice, fear, and insecurity.

To ensure the work's effectiveness, it was crucial to make the methodological timeframe of the RACs flexible, adapting them to the realities of the school community. In this regard, the RAC served as a vital support structure, based on the premise that professionals involved in inclusive education require not only material resources but, above all, human support and spaces for ethical sharing.

The study led us to conclude that true professional development lies not in external instruction, but rather in the internal and subjective transformation of educators committed to the inclusion of individuals with ASD. Reflections within the research context proved to be fundamental tools—not only for gathering contextual data but also for validating the professionals' voices—thereby facilitating, through attentive listening, a more effective pedagogical intervention.

The structure of the training initiatives, designed based on identified needs, enriched the work environment by strengthening interpersonal relationships, enhancing professional bonds, and boosting performance. Although collaborative work primarily requires technical competence and availability, interpersonal affinity proved to be a factor that heightened both job satisfaction and success.

In short, the RACs transcended the mere reproduction of instructional models; they represented human transformations that enabled professionals to pause, re-evaluate, and reorganize their practices—grounded in an analysis of the actual context—thereby constituting, in essence, processes of change.

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