CHARACTERIZATIONS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN STUDENTS WITH INTELECTUAL DISABILITIES AND THEIR PEERS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present research work was to describe and analyze the interpersonal relations between students with intellectual disabilities (ID) and their classmates in inclusive school contexts. This is a quantitative and qualitative research work carried out in classrooms in the first years of elementary school. Indicators for the students with ID participation in interpersonal relations were raised through interviews with 268 students, 13 with ID. Based these results, six students with ID were chosen as targets for systematic observation sessions. It was observed that interpersonal relationships were influenced by: the role of the lead teachers and educational supporters; the ID students' social competence and their characteristics; the classroom environment. It is believed that, by means of investment in the promotion of social skills at school, it will be possible to contribute to the construction of an appropriate environment to inclusive educational practices.

Keywords: interpersonal relationships; social skills; school inclusion

Caracterización de las relaciones interpersonales entre alumnos con deficiencia intelectual y sus pares

RESUMEN

El objetivo de la investigación fue describir y analizar las relaciones interpersonales entre alumnos con deficiencia intelectual (DI) y sus compañeros de sala de clase en contextos escolares inclusivos. Se trata de investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa realizada en salas de los primeros cursos de la enseñanza básica. Se recompilaron indicadores de la participación del alumno con DI en las relaciones interpersonales, por intermedio de entrevistas junto a 268 alumnos, 13 con DI. A partir de esos resultados, seis alumnos con DI fueron electos como diana en sesiones de observación sistemática. Se tuvo por observo que las relaciones interpersonales sufrieron influencia: de la actuación de las profesoras regentes y de los apoyos educacionales; de la competencia social de los alumnos con DI y de las características de ellos; del ambiente de la sala de clase. Se cree que, por intermedio de la inversión en la promoción de habilidades sociales en la escuela, será posible contribuir para la construcción de un ambiente propicio a las prácticas educacionales inclusivas.

Palabras clave: relaciones interpersonales; habilidades sociales; inclusión escolar

Caracterização das relações interpessoais entre alunos com deficiência intelectual e seus pares

RESUMO

O objetivo da pesquisa foi descrever e analisar as relações interpessoais entre alunos com deficiência intelectual (DI) e seus colegas de sala de aula em contextos escolares inclusivos. Trata-se de pesquisa quantitativa e qualitativa realizada em salas dos primeiros anos do Ensino Fundamental. Foram levantados indicadores da participação do aluno com DI nas relações interpessoais, por meio de entrevistas junto a 268 alunos, sendo 13 com DI. A partir desses resultados, seis alunos com DI foram eleitos como alvo em sessões de observação sistemática. Observou-se que as relações interpessoais sofreram influência: da atuação das professoras regentes e dos apoios educacionais; da competência social dos alunos com DI e das características dos mesmos; do ambiente da sala de aula. Acredita-se que, por meio do investimento na promoção de habilidades sociais na escola, será possível contribuir para a construção de um ambiente propício a práticas educacionais inclusivas.

Palavras-chave: relações interpessoais; habilidades sociais; inclusão escolar

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusion at school is a widely discussed theme nowadays. So is the debate on how to search for and implement the means to realize this process. Despite the fact that the literature in the area points at the benefits of inclusion at school, it is still possible to observe a lot of obstacles so that such process can be realized successfully. For instance, lots of students with disabilities enrolled in the regular education system still experience situations of prejudice that can do damage to their development and hinder their education.

The development of competence in education is a fresh theme in Brazil. It has been incorporated by the "Base Nacional Comum Curricular" – BNCC, or National Common Curricula Base (MEC, 2017, p. 6): "Competence consists of the mobilization of knowledge (concepts and procedures), skills (practical, cognitive, and socioemotional), attitudes and values to satisfy the complex demands of everyday life, of the full exercise of citizenship, and of the world of work".

On the other hand, the theme in question had already been approached in the past, according to DeSeCo (2016), who already included, as fundamental competences, social interaction in heterogeneous groups with the so-called non-cognitive or socioemotional competences, that concretely define themselves as interpersonal relations in the BNCC.

> Exercising empathy, dialogue, the resolution of conflicts, and cooperation, while respecting each other and the human rights, with support and appreciation for the diversity of individuals and social groups, and for their knowledge, identities, cultures, and potentials without any type of prejudice. (MEC, 2017, p. 8).

According to Del Prette and Del Prette (2005), the establishment of these interpersonal relations is one of the most important tasks involved in the development of children, since it is known that these relations are the basis for the amplification and enhancement of a series of social behaviors. They are also the means by which we learn how life works in society.

Concerning students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID), enrolled in the regular inclusive education system, the issue of social competence is even more crucial. According to Rosin-Pinola, Del Prette and Del Prette (2007), the greatest challenges related to the educational inclusion of students with ID consist not only of below-average academic performance. There are also difficulties arising from the need to establish good relations with peers. According to Sebastián-Heredero (2016), the general development of competences should be approached by means of the adoption of an inclusive curriculum: "Tal vez los planteamientos de un currículo inclusivo comiencen por ofrecer algo que sea útil para ellos y aplicable en su día a día y de hecho se está trabajando en ello: son las llamadas competencias básicas" (p. 19).

Batista and Enumo (2004) realized a study in order to describe and analyze the interpersonal relations of three students with ID and their classmates in three classes of the first year of elementary school. Sociometric tests were applied on the 80 students in the selected classrooms, which were classrooms attended by students with ID. Among the results, Batista and Enumo (2004) concluded that the three students with ID enrolled in the investigated classrooms demonstrated greater difficulty to get started, keep, and finish social contact with their classmates, which resulted in ostracism by their classmates.

Rosin-Pinola et al. (2007) developed a study with the objective to assess the repertoire of social skills and academic performance, in classrooms attended by students with ID. To do so, the participating students were divided into three groups: high academic performance (HP), low academic performance (LP), and students with mental disorders (MD). Thirty teachers provided answers to questionnaires of the "Sistema de Avaliação de Habilidades Sociais", or Social Skills Assessment System, regarding 120 students. The data were analyzed statistically.

As the most important result, Rosin-Pinola et al. (p. 247, 2007) observed that both the LP and the MD groups got low scores in the assessment categories related to skills such as "responsibility", "self-control", and "peer cooperation", which are essential for academic success. Another important result was that the group with mental disorder remains isolated from social interactions with classmates for a longer time, and presented more difficulties to make friends and fit in their group of classmates because of the impairment of their social skills.

Freitas and Mendes (2009) realized a research work with the objective to assess the interpersonal relations by means of a study of the interactions between a child with Down Syndrome and 14 classmates, at a Nursery Home in the city of São Carlos, SP. In order to reach the proposed objective, five video filming sessions depicting natural situations involving spontaneous play. The shooting was analyzed by means of a protocol, which assessed the interactive behaviors displayed by the children with Down Syndrome and their peers.

As a result, the authors observed that the child with Down Syndrome remained most of the time isolated from the other classmates. In addition, the interactions that the child did manage to establish with classmates were smaller and of a different quality when compared to the interactions among the kids with no disabilities. The interactive behaviors established in the school environment by the child with Down Syndrome were

mostly restricted to the relation student-teacher.

According to what has been evidenced by the presented studies, although school inclusion leads to academic and social gains, the interpersonal relations established between the students with disabilities and their peers are not significant and the students with ID still spend most of their time alone. That leaves the students with disabilities fewer opportunities to develop and enhance their social skills, which hinders the teaching-learning process.

As a consequence, the present study was based on the following research question: how are the interpersonal relations between students with ID and their peers being established in the classrooms of the regular education system? The general objective of the study was to describe and analyze the interpersonal relations between students with ID and their classmates at elementary education schools.

METHOD

The study was realized in three municipal schools located in the city of Dourados/MS, represented by the letters A, B, and C. The outline of the study comprehended two phases: 1) Survey research and 2) systematic observation of behaviors.

1st Phase: Survey Research

Thirteen students with ID participated in the first phase of the study (A1; A2; A3; A4; A5; A6; A7; A8; A9; A10; A11; A12; A13), as well as all their classmates. A total number of 268 students participated.

In the first phase, researchers used an interview that was specially elaborated for the study. In the interview, each student was required to name three favorite and three least favorite classmates to play or do school activities with. For ethical matters, in order to prevent students from acknowledging the focus of the study, other questions concerning daily stuff at school were asked, so that too much emphasis was not placed on the students' preferences.

After the application of 268 interviews, the analysis and tabulation of the collected data were realized by means of the Excel® program.

Second Phase: Systematic Observation of Behaviors

Based on the obtained results with the first phase of the research, researchers selected the students designated as targets of the second phase, that is, three students with highest rates of acceptance and three students with the lowest rates of acceptance: A1; A3; A5; A9; A11; A13. The students were distributed into three schools (A, B and C), and divided into six classrooms between the first and the third year of elementary school.

In the second phase of the study, systematic observations were realized by means of a protocol developed by Freitas and Mendes (2009). The protocol made it possible to observe, in a quantitative way, the register of social behaviors displayed by each target students, according to the following categories: a) Behavioral frequency (number of times the behavior is displayed); b) Behavioral direction in interactional dyads (to whom the target students' behavior is directed); c) Predominant status of the children (the target is alone - S, isolated - I, in group - G or in group in interaction - GI); d) Interaction reciprocity.

Researchers chose to realize the systematic observation by filling out the protocol form minute by minute during the sessions. To do so, the beginning of the observations was activated by the timer and then researchers started registering the behaviors in the protocol as they took place during the observations.

In order to ensure data reliability, approximately 50% of the sessions were accompanied by a research assistant, who conducted the same process of systematized observations. Thus, throughout data tabulation, during the observations with the assistant's participation, researchers took into consideration only coincidental records in the instrument.

Aiming at greater variability of behaviors in the registered samples, the systematic observations were realized on alternated days and different times for each one of the participating classrooms.

Four observation sessions of systematized observation were realized for each one of the target students, with a duration of 40 minutes per session. Five minutes were disregarded in the first sessions with each target student, so that the students could adapt to the presence of the researchers. Thus, with the four sessions, a total number of 155 minutes of observation were registered. Considering the fact that the six target students were observed, a total sum of 930 minutes of systematic observation were realized. After putting all information together, focal data tabulation was realized by means of the Excel® program. Besides that, researchers held a conference for qualitative assessments on the field observations, which will be displayed for characterization of the target students for a better comprehension of the qualitative data on the interpersonal relations established in the classroom, as well as during recess playtime.

RESULTS

The results were presented in two parts: 1) interviews and 2) systematic observations.

Part 1: interviews

The results of the first stage of the study were obtained by means of the application of 268 interviews in classrooms from the first to the third year, in which students with ID were enrolled. The interviews were realized with the students with ID and their classmates,

with the objective to identify preferences concerning classmates for the realization of academic activities and games. After the application of these interviews, it was possible to identify the rates of acceptance and rejection of the students with ID.

The rates of acceptance and rejection in academic activities and playtime are the results of the total number of indications for the student in a certain category, when compared to the total number of answers given in the classroom in which the target students are enrolled. It is also important to emphasize the fact that the results correspond to the comparison of results found only for students with ID, the comparisons were not realized with other classmates.

Concerning the rates of acceptance in academic activities, according to what can be observed in the graphic displayed an Illustration 1, six students (A1, A3, A5, A8, A9 and A11) were mentioned by their peers as someone with whom they specially liked to do school activities.

In the category related to rejection in academic activities, the data presented in Illustration 1 provide evidence that nine students (A1; A3; A4; A6; A8; A9; A10; A11; A13) were mentioned as the ones with whom their peers least appreciated realizing it activities in the classroom with.

In the category for acceptance in playtime activities, according to the graphic in Illustration 2, ten students (A1; A2; A3; A5; A7; A8; A9; A10; A11; A12) were indicated. In the last category, regarding rejection in playtime activities, seven students (A3; A9; A6; A8; A10; A11; A13) were indicated.

Illustration 1. *Rates acceptance and rejection of students with ID in academic activities.*
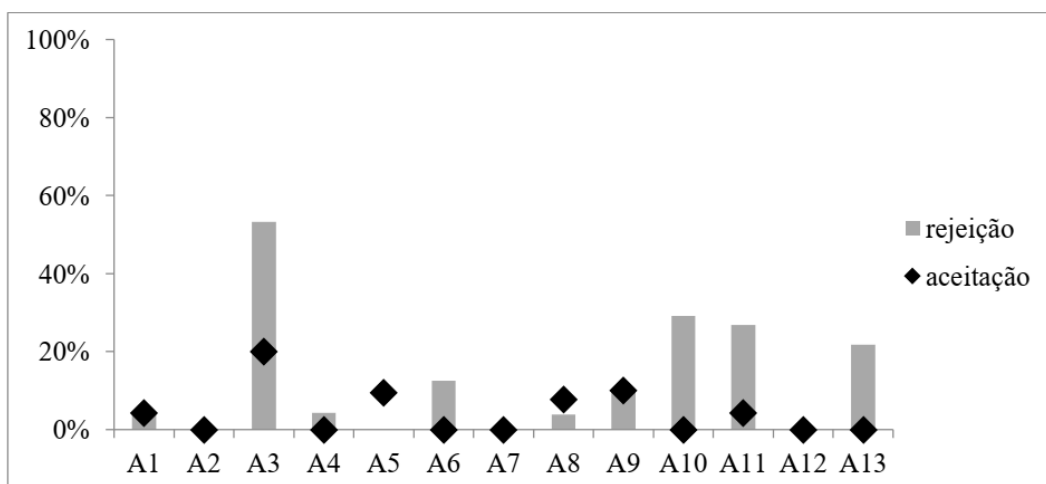
Rejeição: rejection; Aceitação: acceptance
Source: Master's dissertation defended by the author.

Illustration 2. *Rate of Acceptance and Rejection of Target Students During Playtime Activities.*
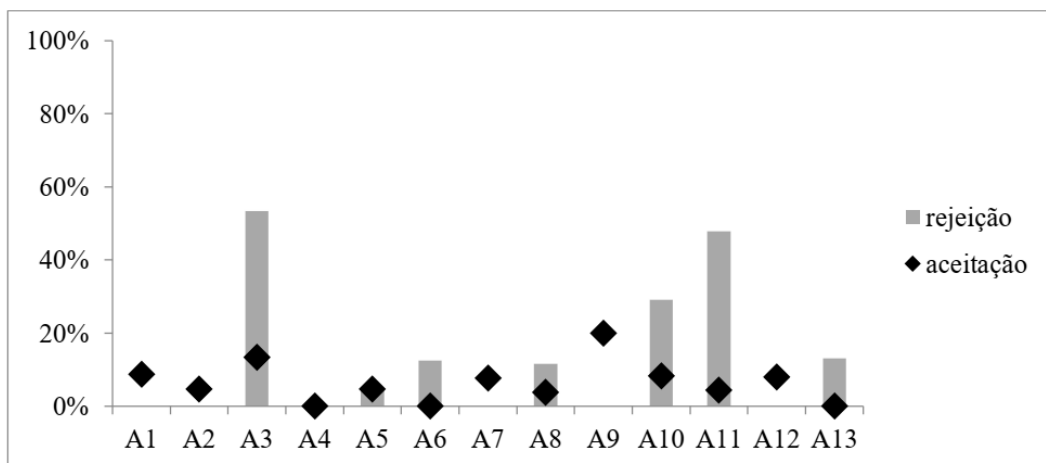
Source: master's dissertation defended by the first authors.

It is possible to observe by means of the results that, out of the 13 assessed students, 10 (A1, A2, A3, A5, A7, A8, A9, A10, A11, A12 and A13) were mentioned in the acceptance categories, concerning their preferences at playtime. However, 6 (A1, A3, A5, A8, A9 and A11) were indicated as accepted peers for academic activities. Thus, some students, who had been mentioned as mates for playtime, were sometimes not accepted for academic activities at the same time.

When it comes to rejection, nine students were mentioned (A1, A3, A4, A6, A8, A9, A10, A11 and A13) with classmates did not enjoy realizing academic activities with, and seven classmates (A3, A5, A6, A9, A11, A12 and A13) with their peers did not like to play with, while most of them were mentioned in the two categories. All students with ID were indicated for at least one category.

In the acceptance category, the most indicated students to realize academic activities were: A1; A5; A8 and A9. Concerning acceptance for playtime, the most indicated students were: A1; A3; A9; and A10. On the other hand, in the rejection categories, students A3, A10, A11 and A13 were indicated as least accepted for academic activities and students A3, A10, A11 and A13 for playtime activities. Totally, four students with higher rates of acceptance (A1, A3, A5 and A9) and for students with higher rates of rejection (A3, A10, A11 and A13) were selected for the second phase of the study.

Considering that some students were selected for more than one category, a total number of seven students were elected as target for the second phase of the research: A1; A3; A5; A9; A10; A11 and A13. However, at the beginning of the procedures for Phase two, researchers found out that student A10 had been diagnosed as dyslexic, and it was no longer considered a student with ID. The participants of the second phase of the research, therefore, were students A1; A3; A5; A9; A11; and A13, 5 male students and one female student.

Part 2: systematic observations

The qualitative results found by means of the systematic observation of the target students (A1; A3; A5; A9; A11 and A13) provided a survey of the data that will be presented in the following parts of this article and during the discussions.

All students participating in the research had a diagnosis for ID and attended the multi-functional resource rooms (MRR) in their schools. Among the target students, 3 (A1; A3 and A13) were provided with educational support in the classroom. A9 Did not possess personal educational support, but shared the support provided to a classmate.

The Results of the observations will be displayed based on the proposed categories in Freitas and Mendes protocol (2009).

In the assessment of the status of the students, it was possible to observe, according to the graphic displayed an Illustration 3, that the predominant status in all four observed sessions was the Isolated category, which indicates that the student remained away from their classmates for a longer period, and display no interaction with them. Thus, four of the six students have had this status as the most observed: A9 presented 67% of the total time isolated from interactions with classmates; A1 and A13 remind isolated during 60% of the total time; A11 stayed isolated during 59% of the total time. It is also important to highlight the fact that A3 state the least amount of time (18%) in an isolated way.

Student A5 was the one who presented most often

Illustration 3. *Graphic of the frequency status of target students in the focal observations.*
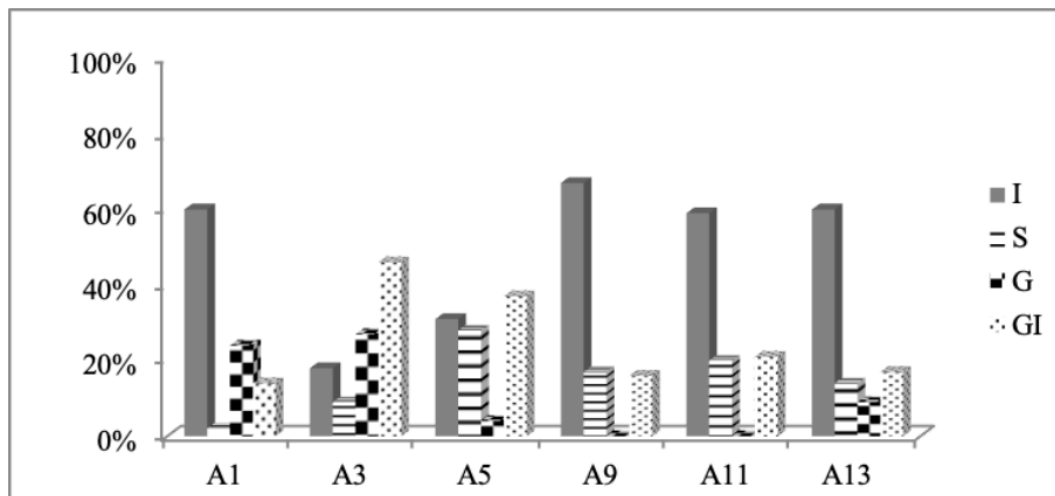
the Alone status (S), which indicates that she was away from her classmates. It corresponded to 28% of the total observation time.

The second most recurrent status during the observations was the In Group IN Interaction status, characterized by episodes in which the student is closed to other classmates and engaged in an activity. Student A3 and student A5 were the ones who remained in this status most often, with respectively 46% and 37% of the total observation time. Students A1 and A9 were the ones who least presented GI status, with respectively 14% and 16% of total observation time. The In Group category (G), which indicates that they close to classmates, but without social interaction, was the least observed category in the sessions.

Concerning the interactional initiatives, students A1, A9, A11 and A13 obtained, in the direction of the target student to classmate (ÇA-Ç), a greater number of ignored initiatives than of acknowledged initiatives, respectively, 83%, 77%, 62% and 73%. Student A3 obtained a total sum of 51% of ignored interactional initiatives, a number that was close to the 49% of acknowledged initiatives.

When it comes to analysis of direction Ç-ÇA (behaviors of classmates towards the target child) acknowledged and ignored interactional initiatives, according to the graphic displayed an Illustration 4, it is important to emphasize that the classmates of A5 obtained 70% of acknowledged initiatives, in contrast with 30% of ignored initiatives by A5. Then, the classmates of A3 obtained a total some of 56% acknowledged initiatives in contrast with 44% of ignored initiatives. The classmates of A1, A9, A11 and A13 obtained more ignored acknowledged ones.

DISCUSSION

By means of the results of the first part of the research, it was possible to observe that most of the students obtained higher rates for rejection than for acceptance, both in academic activities as in play time, just like in other similar studies realized previously (Casado, 2012; Baleotti, 2006).

Batista and Enumo (2004) emphasize that the non-acceptance of students with ID by their classmates is a symptom that school inclusion is not happening, since there is no social exchange that is beneficial for students with and without disabilities.

The results of the first part of the research indicate that the interpersonal relations between students with ID and their peers may not be satisfactory, since they were indicated as more rejected than accepted by their classmates, which might have an effect on the development of plans for the classroom, according to the considerations of the BNCC.

Concerning academic development, Del Prette and Del Prette (2005) explain that the interpersonal relations are intimately related with the processes of teaching and learning, because interpersonal relations are the foundation for children to learn to successfully live in society, while learning how to behave in every environment and making every environment conducive to development. Consequently, the results of the present study deserve attention because non-satisfactory interpersonal relations in the school environment might negatively influence the development of academic skills.

As means to better analyze the presented results by means of systematic observation of target students, the discussion will be divided into 2 topics.

The influence of educational support (ES) and of the lead teachers in the interpersonal relations in the classroom

Students A1 and A13, who presented 60% of the Isolated status, were also physically isolated from

Illustration 4. *Graphic of acknowledged (I*) and ignored (I) interactional initiatives in the directions ÇA-Ç E Ç-ÇA.*
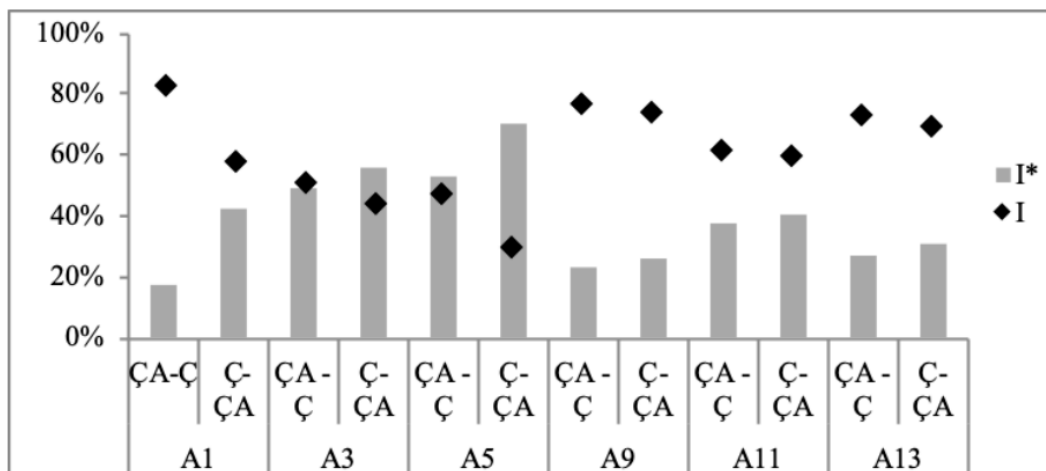
Source: master's dissertation by the author.

their classmates, sitting in the back of the classroom between the wall and their educational support. Their interaction with classmates was invariably mediated by their educational supporters, who would allow or tonight communication between students, and even controlled the times when students were supposed to stand out from their desks, even when there were other students walking and chatting around the classroom. During recess, it was also possible to observe that the educational supporters looked after students A1 and A13, interfering in their interpersonal relations with classmates. Similar results were described in the study conducted by Matos and Mendes (2014).

Student A3 was also provided with educational support, although along the session's researchers observed situations that were much different from the ones experienced by A1 and A13: A3 spent 46% of the observation sessions in the In Group In Interaction status (GI).

A3 was also part of dynamic classroom, just like the one in which A1 and A13 were inserted. In four of the observations, A3 was sitting on the front desk, with classmates by his side or behind him, while the teacher's desk was right in front of him. In two other sessions there was also the presence of a classmate sitting by his side.

The educational supporter of A3, throughout all sessions, worked in an articulate way with the lead teacher. Both the lead teacher and the educational supporter encouraged the student to realize the tasks, without preventing him from moving around the classroom, to chat or to borrow things from classmates, since other students also displayed the same behavior.

During the observation at recess of A3, his educational supporter went into the teachers' lounge with the lead teacher, and the student was free to play around with classmates with no supervision. Such fact might contribute in a decisive way for the good relationship observed between A3 and his classmates.

Interpersonal relations and social skills

In the status of A3, it was possible to observe that the student spent more time in interactions with classmates than most of the target students. He was included in a dynamic classroom in which students interacted all the time. The target student himself had a good relation with a classmate, who would sit by his side during some of the observations. However, A3 obtained a total sum of 51% of ignored initiatives. No matter how hard he tried to relate to some classmates, he would always be ignored for displaying inappropriate behaviors such as talking too loud or interrupting classmates when they were engaged in an activity.

Del Prette and Del Prette (2005) affirm that children with ID might have personal limitations that will impair both cognitive access and processing of stimuli by the social environment, and more difficulty to provide socially competent responses to different situations. The authors add that, for a socially competent performance, it is necessary that the child identify the demands of the social environment and, equipped with this information, managed to elaborate and monitor their own behavior.

Student A5, who had been indicated in the first phase of the research as the second most accepted student for the realization of academic activities, confirmed in the second phase have her situation of more established interpersonal relations with classmates. The status category in which she presented the most frequency was the In Group In Interaction (GI) category she was the only one to obtain a greater number of acknowledged interactional initiatives then ignored ones by classmates (ÇA-Ç). When compared to the target students, A5 also stood out for responding to approximately 70% of the interactional initiatives by classmates.

The classroom of A5 was a dynamic environment where the children word free to walk to their classmates' desks and realize tasks together. This student would sit down with a group of classmates and at various moments of the observation she had the company of a classmate to help her do the task, with the encouragement of the teacher for these activities in collaboration. The teacher of A5 moved around the classroom all the time, checking whether all students were engaged in the realization of tasks, in addition to providing students with guidance when required to do so.

According to Del Prette and Del Prette (2005), a developed repertoire of social skills is essential for the construction of harmonious interpersonal relations among the children. According to the authors, search skills are the basis for the development of these relations, skills related to communication, expressiveness and articulation that contribute to making friends in a respectful, positive environment.

In the first part of the study, Student A9 obtained the highest rate of acceptance my classmates for playtime, with the general index of 20% of the total number of responses by classmates. On the other hand, in the category for academic activities, he obtained 10% of the total indications for acceptance as well as for rejection.

In the second part of the study, by means of systematic observation, it was possible to observe that A9 obtained 67% for the Isolated status (I), and was the target student who most classified into this status. In other words, this student remained during most of the observations away from classmates and without presenting any interaction.

Unlike the other classrooms, the class of A9 was made up of students with little interaction, since in the observed classes the tasks demanded that they stayed most of the time copying and the lead teachers spend a lot of time making the students quiet down. As a result,

among the assessed classrooms, the class of A9 was the most restrictive for the establishment of interpersonal relations, which might have influenced his isolation during most of the systematic observations.

By means of the systematic observations, it was possible observe that most of the arrangements in the class of student A5 could have also been used for improving interpersonal relations of students A9, A11 and A13. For example, there could have been educational activities to be done in collaboration for the benefit move certain interpersonal relations between the target students and their classmates.

Based on the results of this study, it is possible to observe that the interpersonal relations of the assessed students in the second phase of the study are not being developed enough. That does not mean that school inclusion is not taking place. It means that, based on what was observed, the classroom environment as a whole needs to go through modifications that will benefit not only the interpersonal relations between students with disabilities and their classmates, but also the relations among all students, including the professionals working at the school.

In addition, it was possible to observe that many factors influenced in the establishment of social interactions. One of these factors is position in the classroom, the management of the lead teacher, the help of the educational supporter in the classroom, the characteristics of the student with ID, the social competence of the students with ID, and the social competence of their classmates.

It was possible to observe how lead teachers and educational supporters cast a direct influence on the establishment of interpersonal relations for students with ID. It is important to highlight them necessity for other studies on the interpersonal relations established between students when ID with teachers, educational supporters, and classmates, and between educational supporters and teachers.

The research was conducive to a comprehension that, for the improvement of the practice of school inclusion, it is necessary to develop research works on indicators of how students with ID are included, in order to provide contributions to every reality, A new culture of school inclusion can be built in the long term. In addition, it is expected that the results of the present study might contribute to the development of socioemotional competences, and in a concrete way, according to the conclusion reached by this study, social and interpersonal competences.

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