

Creativity and inclusion: potential encounters between Art and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)¹

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ABSTRACT

This work explores the relationship between art, human development, psychology, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) from the perspective of cultural-historical theory. Based on bibliographic research and experience reports, the investigation grounded in Vigotski's theory conceives ASD as a human condition. It highlights the importance of considering the individual as a social being and disability as a limitation in contact with social barriers and ableist conceptions. The study emphasizes that development and learning occur through social interaction, mediation of signs, and internalization of meanings. The discussion addresses the structuring of social environments to embrace diversity, in addition to theoretical concepts, educational practices, and legislation on the rights of people with ASD. Art is emphasized as a mediator in this process, concluding that bonding, mediation, and interaction intertwined with art are essential to enhancing the development of children with ASD.

KEYWORDS: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); Art; Cultural-Historical Psychology.

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Criatividade e Inclusão: Encontros Potenciais entre Arte e Transtorno do Espectro Autista

RESUMO

Este trabalho explora a relação entre arte, desenvolvimento humano, Psicologia e o Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA) sob a perspectiva da teoria histórico-cultural. Baseado em pesquisa bibliográfica e relato de experiência, a investigação fundamentada na psicologia de Vigotski que concebe o TEA como uma condição humana. Destaca a importância de considerar o sujeito como ser social e a deficiência como uma limitação em contato com barreiras sociais e concepções capacitistas. O estudo enfatiza que o desenvolvimento e a aprendizagem ocorrem pela interação social, mediação de signos e internalização de significados. A discussão aborda a estruturação de ambientes sociais para acolher a diversidade, além de conceitos teóricos, atuação educacional e legislação sobre direitos das pessoas com TEA. Destaca-se a Arte como mediadora desse processo, concluindo que vínculo, mediação e interação imbricados à Arte são essenciais para potencializar o desenvolvimento de crianças com TEA.

PLAVRAS-CHAVE: Transtorno do Espectro Autista (TEA); Arte; Psicologia Histórico-Cultural (PHC).

Creatividad e Inclusión: Encuentros Potenciales entre Arte y Trastorno del Espectro Autista

RESUMEN

Este trabajo explora la relación entre el arte, el desarrollo humano, la Psicología y el Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA) desde la perspectiva de la teoría histórico-cultural. Basado en la investigación bibliográfica y el relato de experiencias, la investigación fundamentada en la teoría de Vigotski concibe el TEA como una condición humana. Destaca la importancia de considerar al individuo como un ser social y la discapacidad como una limitación en contacto con barreras sociales y concepciones capacitistas. El estudio enfatiza que el desarrollo y el aprendizaje ocurren a través de la interacción social, la mediación de signos y la internalización de significados. La discusión aborda la estructuración de ambientes sociales para acoger la diversidad, además de conceptos teóricos,

prácticas educativas y legislación sobre los derechos de las personas con TEA. Se destaca el Arte como mediador de este proceso, concluyendo que el vínculo, la mediación y la interacción entrelazados con el Arte son esenciales para potenciar el desarrollo de los niños con TEA.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA); Arte; Psicología Histórico-Cultural (PHC).

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized as a developmental disorder that typically presents signs related to: deficits in communication and social interaction; restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior; interests; and activities (Côrtes; Albuquerque, 2020). Currently, the diagnosis of ASD is primarily clinical and based on criteria established by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - 5 (DSM-5) of the American Psychiatric Association and by the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems - 10 (ICD-10) of the World Health Organization (Côrtes; Albuquerque, 2020).

The fact that Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has various manifestations complicates the diagnostic process. There are no biomarkers that can indicate what is specific or pathognomonic to this condition, as seen in some other syndromes, and it cannot be detected through blood tests or genetic material collection. Moreover, since it is a disorder that presents challenges in the interaction of children, adolescents, and adults with both the internal and external worlds, interventions for those with ASD require the knowledge and participation of a multidisciplinary team to provide comprehensive attention to the individual's needs (Côrtes; Albuquerque, 2020).

Regarding the field of Educational Psychology, from a historical-cultural perspective, the focus is on studying what is presented as typical and atypical, considering development as unique and personal (Dainez, 2017) and the relationships established between individuals and their environment.

From this perspective, where development and education intertwine, understanding disability as a human condition means questioning how social environments are structured, organized, and designed to accommodate and address personal specificities. According to Buiatti (2013), difference should be the starting point, diverging from the viewpoint that disability is considered an illness that must be treated to be cured. “The reasoning assumes that difference is real, constitutive of being human; it is not something negative that prevents the individual from positioning themselves, sharing, and experiencing” (Buiatti, 2013, p. 87). The universalization of human development is laden with labels, stigmas, and normalizing and ableist conceptions, imposing limiting barriers on individuals that are both political and social.

It is emphasized, therefore, that disability is a dialectical concept in which difficulties can materialize depending on circumstances and social relations, either as disabilities or as potentialities that open up new perspectives and possibilities for the development of individuals (Dainez, 2017).

For Vigotski (1991), the determination of the elements of historicity and culture in human development serves as the foundation for understanding the construction of the psyche. Concerned with the development and learning of people with disabilities, he established a defectology laboratory in 1925. According to the author:

The defect becomes the starting point and is the main driving force of the psychic development of personality. The defect establishes the point of the ultimate goal toward which the development of all psychic forces tends and provides guidance for the process of growth and formation of personality (Vigotski, 1995, p. 9).

This concept is replaced by another that examines the dynamics of the development of children with disabilities, based on the fundamental

position that the "defect" has a dual influence on their development. On one hand, it is a deficiency and, acting directly in this way, creates obstacles and difficulties. On the other hand, precisely because it causes limitations in development, it stimulates the search for alternative paths of adaptation. Thus, the new perspective aims to take into account not only the particularities of the child but also their qualities and, above all, a positive portrayal of their personality. The development of higher psychological functions becomes possible through forms of cultural development, whether in the sense of mastering traditional means of culture (writing and speech) or in the sense of the internal refinement of the psychological functions themselves (attention, memory, logical reasoning, abstract thinking, concept formation, free will, *etc.*) (Vigotski, 1995).

According to Vigotski (1999), art maintains a profound connection with material reality, a perception that led him to consider the potential for human development in the early years of the 20th century. From this perspective, art is intrinsically related to life and its complex cultural and historical relationships. Therefore, it can be understood that the content of a work, as well as the choice of an artistic style, represents interpretations of reality (Baroque, 2014). However, it is important to emphasize that an artistic creation cannot be an exact reproduction of objective reality; it is, in fact, a representation of what has been perceived, assimilated, and internalized by the creative individual.

From this perspective, Vigotski (1999) emphasizes the importance of establishing a close connection between Psychology and Art, arguing that both reflect the society that generated them and represent complex psychological traits of cultural diversity.

Thus, the present work is grounded in the historical-cultural approach and aims to present art as a cultural, humanizing, and mediating reference for the care of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which enables the development of higher psychological functions and triggers a qualitative leap in their consciousness. Through a literature review and an experiential report, this study sought to answer the following

questions: How and why could psychologists use art in their work with children with ASD? What are the possible intersections between art(s) and disability(ies)? Finally, how does Historical-Cultural Psychology understand this movement: art as mediation?

After reviewing the literature, this research revealed difficulties in finding studies on the role of art with children with ASD, highlighting the need to explore and better understand the potential of art in the teaching-learning process for this population.

Methodology

This work employs qualitative research methodology, which resulted in a structure divided into two parts. The first part refers to bibliographic research, which allowed for the construction of a text based on a careful reading grounded in Bardin (2011), where content analysis led to the exploration of the material and its subsequent categorization. The search was conducted in book chapters, theses, and scientific articles, using the descriptors: “Vigotski”, “Art”, “Historical-cultural psychology”, and in legal documents, encompassing the themes: ASD, inclusion, and disability. The second part delves into an experiential account of the project “Autism, art, and culture”, carried out in 2022.

In the following sections, the text will address the bibliographic research subdivided into the analysis categories: “Autism and legislation: public policies for inclusion and accessibility”; “Historical-cultural psychology, human development, and individuals with ASD”; and “Art, historical-cultural psychology, and support for individuals with ASD”.

After the bibliographic review, the experiential account and final considerations will be presented. The account pertains to experiences within the project “Autism, art, and culture”, which works with children and adolescents with ASD, coordinated by the psychologist who conceived it, in partnership with a faculty member from the Federal University of Uberlândia in the undergraduate Psychology program. The project includes

students from this program as interns and also as extensionists. This account will describe the experience of the student as an intern, being supervised and guided respectively by the psychologist and the faculty member.

Autism and legislation: public policies for inclusion and accessibility

Since 1990, various international policies, such as the Jomtien Declaration, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Salamanca Declaration, advocate for inclusive education for all, including individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It is crucial that children, adolescents, and adults have their equal access to education guaranteed (Cabral; Marin, 2017).

Brazilian legislation regarding ASD is governed by Federal Law n° 12.764, which establishes the “National Policy for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders”. By officially recognizing individuals with ASD as people with disabilities, this law ensures access to treatments, inclusive education, social protection, and equal opportunities in the workplace.

In addition to these broader public policies, it is worth highlighting some legislation that regulates more specific daily issues, such as Law n° 13.370/2016, which reduces the working hours of public servants with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); and Decree n° 7.611, which addresses special education, Specialized Educational Assistance (AEE), and other provisions.

The AEE is a support service whose main function lies in the identification, development, and organization of pedagogical resources and accessibility measures, aiming to eliminate barriers that may hinder the full participation of students in educational activities, taking into account their individual and specific needs (Brazil, 2011).

This assistance plays the role of complementing and/or supplementing the education of students, with the purpose of promoting their autonomy and independence both within and outside the school environment.

Bringing a greater focus on the right to basic education and, in particular, on the right to vocational education, as stipulated in the sole paragraph of section 3 of Law n° 12.764/2012, the education system must enroll students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in regular general education classes, ensure access, and provide special education services, including Specialized Educational Assistance (AEE) and professional support. When the need arises to support these students in communication activities, social interaction, and assistance in carrying out curricular activities, the school must provide a specialized professional to work with the teacher in all school activities. In other words, the educational system must offer organized support services in such a way that students with ASD have opportunities for personal and social development that take their potential into account and do not limit their participation in certain environments and activities due to their disability. In this process of school inclusion, the dialogue between regular education, other services and school activities, and AEE is fundamental (Andrighetto; Gomes, 2020).

When addressing accessibility from the perspective of inclusive education, a thorough analysis of the concept is necessary, as the effective guarantee of access must encompass the entire journey, from the student's departure from home to the school environment, as highlighted by the accessibility law of 2004.

Buiatti (2013) divides the concept of accessibility into six dimensions: architectural; communicational; instrumental; methodological; pragmatic; and attitudinal. In the context of education, all the aforementioned items are interconnected, and both the State and support teachers, as well as students, must adhere to the principles of equity. It is certainly crucial to ensure that students have access to all the tools provided by accessibility legislation; moreover, inclusive education must aim to define specific goals to meet the individual needs of students and to focus on the initial and ongoing training of educators.

Ableist attitudes hinder the education of many individuals, as they reinforce the notion of incapacity, whether due to physical or intellectual conditions. Therefore, the promotion of accessibility must encompass all dimensions, as what limits these individuals are not their biological conditions, but rather social barriers (Vigotski, 2004). These include the lack of architectural structure, tools and utensils to enable autonomy and learning, accessible means of communication, among others.

Historical-cultural psychology, human development, and individuals with ASD

Psychology, a science that focuses on the study of the psyche and human behavior through various theoretical approaches, has sought to identify, reflect upon, and clarify moments and stages of individual development. This text will not discuss the various approaches within the field of Psychology; rather, it will focus on understanding the historical-cultural approach, which will be analyzed in detail.

Considering historical-cultural psychology as the theoretical foundation of this work, it is understood that humans are social beings, whose development is constructed through interaction with others and connection to their own nature. A being that, by principle, does not possess properties that ensure, by itself, the attainment of what qualifies it as human (Abrantes; Facci; Martins, 2020).

Thus, the process of appropriating exclusively human traits requires the acquisition of the material heritage embodied in historical-social practice. Assimilation, in turn, intertwines between the levels of interpersonal (interpsychic) and intrapersonal (intrapsychic) relationships; that is, it is established based on the fact that human objectifications are available to each individual through the mediation of another person via educational processes (Abrantes; Facci; Martins, 2020).

According to Vigotski and Luria (2007), symbolic operations create a psychic field that possesses a completely new composition and is

independent of immediate material experience. Both authors recognize that this process of inclusion unfolds in a long journey of children's semiotic development:

If we acknowledge the role of signs in the development of higher psychic functions, it will be a logical consequence to incorporate external symbolic forms into the functional system, such as verbal communication, reading, writing, calculation, or drawing. These processes have traditionally been considered auxiliary to internal psychic processes and separate from them. However, from our perspective, we believe they should be included with the same classification as the others in the system of higher psychic functions. Our position is to fundamentally regard them as specific forms of behavior constructed in the sociocultural development process of the child, which constitute the external line of development of symbolic activity, coexisting with the internal line, represented by the cultural development of constructs such as practical intelligence, perception, and memory (Vigotski; Luria, 2007, p. 48).

According to Pino (2005), Vigotski sought an explanation for the social and cultural nature of higher psychological functions, grounding his inquiry in historical and dialectical materialism, and ultimately found it in semiotic mediation, attributing to symbols an instrumental psychological value analogous to the role tools play in the relationship between humans and nature.

Both types of psychological functions must be acknowledged: the elementary functions, of biological origin, characterized by immediacy that, by itself, elicits an immediate reaction to a situation, a natural mechanism of humans, entirely and exclusively determined by external environmental stimulation; and the higher functions, distinguished by the mediating

presence of the sign, which, reversing the immediacy, turns back to the subject itself, acting upon its consciousness (Vigotski, 2002).

According to Vigotski (2002), from the earliest days of a child's development, their activities acquire a unique meaning within a system of social behavior. In other words, from birth, the child is immersed in a world filled with symbolic and affective meanings that vary significantly depending on the social group and culture to which they belong. In agreement with the author, Oliveira (1992) asserts that living in society enables the child to recognize and conceive distinct meanings for their experiences, which will subsequently allow them to move and interact in various ways with their surrounding environment, thereby developing multiple functions and social skills.

Palangana (2001) postulates that, for Vigotski, human nature is essentially social from the very beginning, as it is through interaction in common practical activities that individuals create and recreate symbols such as language, thereby constituting and developing themselves as subjects.

Vigotski attributed to signs the role of “psychological instruments”, directed towards the individual, organizing psychological operations:

The invention and use of signs as auxiliary means to solve a given psychological problem (remembering, comparing things, reporting, choosing, etc.) is analogous to the invention and use of instruments, but now in the psychological realm. The sign acts as an instrument of psychological activity in a manner analogous to the role of an instrument in work (Vigotski, 1999, p. 70).

Therefore, language, counting systems, schemes, drawings, maps, gestures, among other types of communication existing in different social groups, are considered signs (Kretzschmar, 2007). These are intermediary elements that allow individuals to organize thoughts and behaviors, as well

as to understand the world and disseminate culture. They enable psychic activities such as comprehension, comparison, and representation, among others (Oliveira, 1992).

In this sense, the internalization of mediated signs is considered a fundamental pillar in historical-cultural psychology, as the theory posits the dissemination of a culturally formed symbolic universe as a fundamental principle of its approach to human development (Abrantes; Facci; Martins, 2020).

Mediation, in turn, carries the expectations of reciprocal relationships between individuals and the possibility of knowing and learning (Duarte, 2000). Within this principle, there is a theoretical consistency that demonstrates that social interactionism is an extension of dialectical historical materialism, as mediation creates the possibility for the rearticulation (recreation) of reality. According to the author himself, reality is established as a link between symbols, activities, and consciousness interacting within society. Mediations are fundamental for achieving higher functions.

Regarding the field of school and educational psychology, it is considered that Vigotski studied processes that emerge as typical and atypical, recurrent and idiosyncratic during development, in order to understand the specific aspects of human beings (Dainez, 2017). In his writings, Vigotski proposed a possibility of working with individuals with disabilities that distanced itself from the biomedical guidelines of the time, based on comparison, personal recovery, and belief in incapacity (Dainez, 2017), founded on five basic principles:

The integrity of the person, the intertwined social-cultural-organic-biological-affective-cognitive dimensions, is an aspect that leads us to consider disability as not determinative of development. 2) The complexity of human psychic functioning, which is shaped by the multiplicity of relationships among psychological functions, by the plastic, dynamic, and flexible nature of the brain, which

presents alternative ways to meet socially produced objectives. 3) The heterogeneity of processes, that is, the various modes and pathways of human constitution. To think that development is heterogeneous due to its structure, dynamics, possibilities, and conditions contributes to decharacterizing the child from a generalized categorization based on disabilities. 4) The specificity, which means having in view the knowledge of disability to establish educational pathways, with a focus on creation. 5) The prospective orientation, which encourages thinking about new projects for social organization and support, sustaining potential forms of participation for children with disabilities in culture, school activities, and labor (Dainez, 2017, p. 2-3).

Thus, it is emphasized that disability is a dialectical concept in which, depending on the conditions and social relationships that arise, deficits can materialize as incapacities or as possibilities for creating something new throughout the education and development of a child (Dainez, 2017).

Another important concept from the author is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD, which became known through the work of Vigotski, identifies the space between actual development (what a person can do independently) and potential development (what a person can do with the assistance of others). When stimulated within the ZPD, individuals tend to internalize the activity performed with help and no longer require it, and changes at this level indicate development (Vigotski, 1999). Thus, the mediator can achieve potentials as long as they articulate their practice with differentiated projects, utilizing resources that can promote accessibility.

The social model of disability emerged from meetings and critical research by organizations of people with disabilities, who opposed the hegemonic biomedical model (Diniz, 2007). Vigotski referred to this aspect as secondary disability, in contrast to primary disability, which is

characterized by organic limitations. Secondary disability arises from the obstacles imposed by the environment in the face of primary disability. This distinction is important because the author recognizes that society is based on an ideal type of individual with certain physical, intellectual, sensory, and social capacities, which creates barriers for those who transcend these limits (Santos; Tavares, 2017).

To this day, being an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) involves beliefs and myths of a separate world, of being an aggressive and non-interactive person. This exists in the social imagination and directly affects how society perceives individuals with ASD, their development, and learning. Such perceptions and ideas about difference contribute to the existence of attitudinal barriers towards these individuals.

It is recommended that the school environment should be based on the concept of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), respecting the needs of these students and ensuring that the meaning conveyed by the other side is understandable and stimulating for their entry into culture, in fact (Santos; Tavares, 2017).

Art, historical-cultural psychology, and support for individuals with ASD

Art, as a cultural object, has the power to evoke contradictory emotions, which, when overcome, allow for a qualitative advancement in psychological structure (Barroco; Superti, 2014). Thus, it is through this superior function that Vigotski (1999) believes that human beings reinterpret and combine experiences from previous lives, resulting in new possibilities for action in the world.

From this perspective, art reflects life and its cultural and historical implications, with the content of the work and the artistic style serving as interpretations of reality. However, an artistic creation cannot faithfully reproduce objective reality; it represents what has been perceived and internalized by the artist (Barroco; Superti, 2014).

In light of this, it is understood that it has the power to alter the human mind, proposing a new form of psychic organization, reinterpreting the material acquired through the senses, enabling humanization and the condition of a singular subject. Art promotes the encounter of the biological with the cultural, whose characteristics are exclusively human and have been constructed over time through work and activity (Barroco; Superti, 2014).

From this perspective, Vigotski (1999) emphasizes the importance of an intimate relationship between Psychology and Art, arguing that both express the society that generated them and represent complex psychological traits of cultural diversity. Furthermore, art enables an individual to adequately appropriate these human traits.

Therefore, the invitation that Vigotski (2004) extends to society is to see art as a social technique of feeling that expresses culture, conceptions, values, and opinions of a specific time and social class, and, beyond that, as a means that incorporates the most intimate rearrangements of the subject.

In contemporary art, especially from the second half of the 20th century onwards, there has been a profound transformation in aesthetic standards. With the emergence of “avant-garde of the avant-garde” performance (Goldberg, 2006), artistic practices have increasingly focused on expression rather than form. This does not mean that form has been neglected; rather, the primary challenge in artistic creation is to discover this expressive force. According to Suely Rolnik (2004), this force is divided between creation and resistance.

When considering the relationship between art and disability, the presence of the other as a sensitive body capable of expression stands out (Silva; Valle, 2021). Art illustrates the constant possibility of transformation in existence, emphasizing the need to adapt to each moment and highlighting the importance of flexibility. Furthermore, it provides varied sensory experiences, such as sounds, textures, colors, and movements, which can assist in the inclusion of individuals with

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), stimulating their brains and allowing them to perceive the world in a unique way. The introduction of new possibilities can thus contribute to overcoming difficulties (Borges; Probst, 2015).

With children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a specific outcome in artistic productions is not necessarily expected. Instead, the focus is on experimentation without attachment to meaning. What stands out are the attentive observations, particularly through eye contact and tactile interactions. Through art, it is possible to facilitate the development of meaningful experiences, triggering a new understanding of the world, and highlighting a sensitive and creative approach that seeks to promote personal construction from this sensitive perspective. Furthermore, it enables the creation of new learning tools that value aspects often overlooked by educational approaches more oriented towards rationality (Borges; Probst, 2015).

Exploring the intersection of art and ASD: the “Autism, art, and culture” Project

The “Autism, art, and culture” project is funded by Federal Law n° 8.313/91, which promotes cultural incentives – the Rouanet Law – and was conceived by a psychologist and a psychotherapist, based at the “Mundo Circo” Institution in the city of Uberlândia, MG.

The purpose of this initiative is to provide a playful environment aimed at promoting activities that involve artistic experience, allowing children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) the opportunity to explore and enhance themselves through interaction with elements of various existing artistic expressions, without the strict pedagogical concern of teaching techniques and concepts. Five workshops are offered: visual arts, capoeira, musicalization, circus, and dance. They are structured and designed to engage children, stimulating interaction with materials in a playful and meaningful way. By coming into contact with

cultural components, they can expand their higher psychological functions (Buiatti *et al.*, 2022).

The professional internship in the Psychology⁵ course aims to promote interventions between psychology and art for children and adolescents with ASD, as well as to understand the context of these individuals and their families through care and support services. Thus, it is expected to enhance the student's professional training process when working with people with disabilities, grounded in the historical-cultural approach to human development and learning.

The study and research of the author Vigotski (1999; 2002; 2004; 2007) and several scientific articles that address the theme served as the main foundation for our case discussions, group studies, and action planning. This group includes interns and extension workers from the project, coordinated by the institution's psychologist and a faculty member of the University, totaling 15 individuals. Meetings occur weekly, lasting three hours. Their reflections are based on the idea that the psychological and cognitive development of human beings results from a socio-historical process that primarily encompasses mediated learning.

Following this line of thought, it is understood that the child comprehends the external world and subsequently internalizes it, provoking a continuous process of creating meanings and senses, thereby strengthening and forming themselves as subjects. In this phase, the adult plays a crucial role in the type of learning that the child will acquire. Their role is, in a sense, that of an educator, that is, a facilitating and promoting agent of the pedagogical process, guiding their children/students/patients to develop potentials that enable them to appropriate scientific and abstract knowledge.

⁵ The Professional Internship is mandatory in the Psychology Course, forming part of the curricular component. It has norms and guidelines duly described in three main areas, namely: Clinical and Social, School and Educational, and Management Processes. The internship presented in this text falls under the line: School and Educational Psychology, with a total workload of 210 hours. For more information about the professional internship in the Psychology course, please visit: <https://www.ip.ufu.br/graduacao/psicologia/saiba-mais/estagio-profissionalizante>.

The workshops are conducted by art educators⁶, and psychology students assist with the activities. Each workshop accommodates three to four children. The collaborative approach facilitates the organization and development of interventions that can encourage and promote the development of motor skills, reasoning, creativity, and socialization. The practices are designed and planned for each child while also considering the group, reflecting individual cases and specific needs.

The good relationship between the art educators and interns enhances the joint creation of more effective workshops. In addition to the activities with the children, there are supervision sessions with the course instructor from the Psychology program and the supervising psychologist responsible for the project. In this space, cases are discussed, aiming to learn to reflect critically by relating demands, verbal expressions, and behaviors, thus gaining a better understanding of the participants. During supervision sessions, there is also a study of texts and scientific articles to consider the care of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), grounding the historical-cultural psychology and art.

A notable experience involved working with a child, an eight-year-old boy, who initially appeared introspective and isolated from the group. However, he showed a deep interest in visual arts, and the approach was to engage in activities alongside him, sitting next to him, reflecting on the use of materials, interacting, and encouraging him to think about possibilities. The individualized attention fostered the development of a bond and trust, which over time led to more communicative behavior. The artworks were part of the activities; paintings and materials were created, thus expanding his interaction with the group as well. This experience underscored the importance of individualized support and the creation of a welcoming environment.

⁶ The art educators are professional artists hired to develop their modalities within the project. As previously mentioned, this initiative is funded by the Rouanet Law and has the autonomy to manage its costs and expenses. In total, there are six art educators, all of whom were duly invited to participate by the project coordination due to their qualifications and extensive artistic experience in the field.

Another significant experience involved the creation of the "anger box," inspired by a discussion with the internship supervisors. We developed this resource with the specific aim of addressing a particular need. We named the tool as such due to the frequent episodes of irritation exhibited by the child in question, who often threw objects, particularly juggling balls, with considerable intensity and without awareness of the force he exerted. To assist in this situation, we covered two cardboard boxes with Kraft paper and affixed a colored EVA circle to each, corresponding to the colors of the juggling balls available at the institution. The proposal was for the boy to throw the balls into the boxes of the corresponding color, providing him with a practical exercise in motor control and precision. The possibilities for variation in the game were vast; for example, gradually increasing the distance between the child and the boxes to develop his perception of distance and the force needed to hit the target. The intention was for this approach, in conjunction with the other workshops he attended, to help the child become familiar with the notion of their own strength, potentially empowering them to self-regulate over time.

An interesting situation involved a child who exhibited great sensory sensitivity in their feet. One day, during a visual arts workshop, they saw another child participating in an activity with charcoal, something they typically avoided due to an aversion to any irregular texture. Driven by the bond with this child and the support of the interns and the art educator, they decided to take off their socks to experiment. This initial step led them to explore new experiences and confront their initial aversions, demonstrating how connection can foster development and acceptance of new meaningful experiences.

It is worth noting that some of the children and adolescents who frequent this space are served by other public and/or private services, further assisting them in their formation and development process. Moreover, when combined with the project's experience, we act as a strong support network. This network involves all the professionals who serve the participants in the city's services (public or private), such as psychologists,

speech therapists, occupational therapists, doctors, among others. We seek to communicate with them as we observe the needs for dialogue regarding guidance and the exchange of experiences.

The Autism, Art, and Culture project truly reveals itself as a world of possibilities for those who have the opportunity to participate. The initiative provides the ability to create, transform, and experience the most beautiful manifestations of art and culture. Interns are able to understand how mediation and playfulness play fundamental roles in the process of child development and learning, which reinforces the relevance of this playful space in enhancing desired skills such as creativity, expression, enjoyment, and imagination.

Utilizing art as a mediator involves a diverse set of knowledge, all aimed at creating meanings, exercising the human capacity for constant evolution (Buaitti *et al.*, 2022).

Conclusion

Based on the internship and research, we identified several significant aspects that must be considered in the teaching and learning process for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Among these, meaningful learning and appropriate language play a fundamental role in working with this population. It allows children to engage in relevant, personalized, and practical experiences. By creating an environment that meets individual needs and encourages active involvement, meaningful learning helps to maximize each child's potential, promoting personal development.

Learning and experiencing content that makes sense stimulates a deep understanding of the subject matter. Instead of memorizing isolated information, children with ASD are encouraged to connect new concepts with their prior knowledge and experiences, which helps to build a solid foundation of knowledge and develop critical thinking skills. However, we understand that the act of looking at the student and their particularities,

and considering how to organize the lesson (or workshop) based on their needs, is a movement that transcends traditional work.

We also recognize the role that art can play in working with children with ASD, considering that the spectrum is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, social interaction, and behavior in individuals. Therefore, the challenges are complex, and in this context, art can serve as a differentiating factor in the personal development of these individuals.

In this work, art is highlighted as an intrinsically meaningful form of expression. It provides a platform for non-verbal communication, allowing children with ASD to express themselves through various forms of communication. Thus, this audience can share their thoughts, emotions, and perceptions with the world in a free manner, unencumbered by the traditional constraints of language. Furthermore, artistic creation involves a range of cognitive and motor possibilities that can be beneficial for personal development, such as fine motor progression, attention to detail, and creativity.

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