



TEACHING ENGLISH TO STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: A CASE STUDY

ENSINO DA LÍNGUA INGLESA A ALUNOS COM TRANSTORNO DE ESPECTRO AUTISTA: UM ESTUDO DE CASO

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*I dedicate this work to P.O., who allowed me to rediscover
the meaning of love and empathy through the eyes of an autistic boy.*

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the experience of teaching English to a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a middle school in the Federal District, Brazil. During the first classes, the student showed great interest in English children's songs, and based on this motivation, integrative pedagogical activities were developed, focusing on the student's linguistic development. The report highlights the importance of adapting methodologies to meet the specific needs of students with ASD, such as using audiovisual resources and interdisciplinary strategies, resulting in significant advances in grammar and vocabulary. The experience emphasizes the effectiveness of collaboration between the school, family, and teacher, proposing a three-ring model to illustrate the role of each of these agents in the teaching-learning process. The conclusion suggests the need for future studies on the use of audiovisual resources and the appreciation of empathy and individualization in teaching students with ASD.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Autism Spectrum Disorder. Co-teaching, Adaptive Methodologies.

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Introduction

The article reports the experience of the author, an English teacher, in the teaching-learning process at a Middle School in the Federal District, Brazil. The focus of this account is on a student, identified as João, 16 years old, enrolled in the 6th grade, and diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). João showed little interest in academic subjects, except for foreign languages, for which he had a particular preference.

During the development of the lessons, it was identified that João had a special interest in English children's songs, especially those used to teach the alphabet and basic vocabulary. Therefore, the school administration was asked to contact the student's mother to identify his preferred songs.

Based on these songs, reverse integration activities were developed with the inclusive class, along with other individual and interdisciplinary activities, especially directed at João. As a result, the student began to show an increasing interest in the English language, achieving better performance in basic grammar and vocabulary compared to other neurotypical students.

This study is relevant for foreign language teaching to students with ASD, as it suggests that these students may, in general, show ease in learning a new language, provided the teacher adopts differentiated approaches, with an emphasis on audiovisual and interdisciplinary activities. The aim of this report is to share the experience of implementing activities directed at João and the development of new pedagogical proposals, based on this experience and research on the relevant conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

Initially, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - DSM-5 (APA, 2014, p. 32):





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Autism Spectrum Disorder is characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity, in nonverbal communication behaviors used for social interaction, and in skills to develop, maintain, and understand relationships.

It is important to note that the concept of "autism spectrum" is recent, emerging in the DSM-5. Hodges et al. (2020) explain that in this version, there was a significant restructuring in the understanding and diagnosis of ASD, with the main change being the unification of DSM-IV diagnoses related to Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD), which included: Autism Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS).

This change reflects the understanding that these disorders represent different manifestations of the same spectrum, with variations in severity and individual characteristics. The diagnostic reformulation in DSM-5, therefore, represents a significant advancement in the way autism is understood and identified, enabling a more accurate and comprehensive diagnosis.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates the global prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to be 0.76%, representing approximately 16% of the global child population. In turn, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States estimate that approximately 1.68% of 8-year-old children in that country (or 1 in every 59 children) are diagnosed with ASD (Hodges et al., 2020). Regarding the etiology of ASD, the authors emphasize that:

ASD is a neurobiological disorder influenced by both genetic and environmental factors affecting the developing brain. Ongoing research continues to deepen our understanding of potential etiologic mechanisms in ASD, but currently no single unifying cause has been elucidated.

Neuropathologic studies are limited, but have revealed differences in cerebellar architecture and connectivity, limbic system abnormalities, and frontal and temporal lobe cortical alterations, along with other subtle malformations (HODGES et al. 2020, p. S59).



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Thus, this work adopts a Historical-Cultural perspective, based on Vygotsky (2012, as cited in Paoli & Machado, 2024), according to which, although there are variations in human development due to biological differences, an organic condition, by itself, does not characterize a disability. From this perspective, disability is understood as a social construct, because it is in the social context that the individual perceives themselves and is perceived as disabled (Ibid., p. 539). Therefore, autism should be understood as a difference—similar to sexual and racial differences—and is constituted as a disability only when placed within an incapacitating social structure (Ortega, 2009, p. 553, as cited in Paoli and Machado, 2022).

This social understanding of disability implies that the barriers faced by individuals with autism are not inherent to their condition, but rather a result of a social environment that is not adapted to meet their needs and potential. Based on this principle, the concept can be applied to inclusive education. It is not enough for the institution to adopt an inclusive model; it is imperative that the class in which the student with a disability is placed be inclusive itself. For example, João's class was inclusive because his classmates accepted him with his disability and did not isolate him. In other, not fully inclusive classes, students isolated their classmates with disabilities, as was the case of another student with ASD, who remained seated at the back of the classroom, excluded by peers. This fact suggests that, often, it is more difficult to encourage neurotypical students to include atypical students than the other way around. Frequently, the student with a disability shows a more genuine acceptance than their neurotypical peers.

Despite these challenges, they do not always represent an obstacle for autistic learners. In fact, many students with ASD enjoy studying foreign languages and leverage their hyperfocus for this purpose. In this regard, Erard (2012) and Hyltenstam (2016), as cited in Caldwell (2022), comment that "the connection between autism and linguistic giftedness has been an object of fascination for centuries". Additionally, Ralston (2016), as cited in Caldwell (2022), conducted a study in Iceland, where children preferred to communicate in English rather than in Icelandic.

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When it comes to teaching methodology, Grosso (2020) comments that the characteristics associated with ASD, such as difficulties in social communication, repetitive behavior patterns, and potential sensory issues, require specific pedagogical adaptations. In this context, Wire (2005) analyzed how aspects of social and pragmatic language, which are typically problematic for individuals with ASD, can become significant barriers in learning foreign languages.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that, given that each learner with ASD has unique characteristics and potential, a "one-size-fits-all solution" is inadequate in the educational context. That is, a single pedagogical adaptation should not be expected to be equally effective for all autistic students. On the contrary, each student should receive individualized adaptation that considers their specific condition, as well as their interests and abilities.

This individualization ensures a pedagogical approach that fosters the comprehensive development of the student's abilities, thereby promoting their effective inclusion in the school environment. In this regard, Mayton et al. (2010, p. 206) and Accardo (2015), as cited in Ghedeir (2022), state that "students with ASD are special and their uniqueness requires explicit need for teachers to identify individualized approaches to aid them achieve their academic goals".

Thus, the main challenge, especially for foreign language teachers, is to understand the unique world of each student and, from this understanding, adjust teaching methodologies to meet their specific needs. Frequently, this adaptation involves the practice of reverse inclusion, which consists of adjusting the content originally planned for the regular class to accommodate the needs of the student with ASD.

Padmadewi and Artini (2017, p. 162) highlight methodologies applicable to foreign language teaching for students with ASD, such as collaborative teaching or co-teaching, curriculum adaptation, and peer-mediated instruction. Additionally, Büyük et al. (2019), as cited in Ghedeir (2022, p. 210), add that the use of visual aids has greater appeal for these students. In this regard, Ramadhani and Bahri (2019), as cited in Maysuroh (2024, p. 165),





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support this idea by highlighting that students with ASD remain more focused with the use of visual aids.

From this perspective, Golsham et al. (2019), Zohoorian et al. (2021), and Lasintia et al. (2021) emphasize the relevance of visual methodologies such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) —a method of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) based on image exchange— for the development of social skills and vocabulary acquisition in students with ASD during second language learning. Meanwhile, Ghanouni et al. (2018), as cited in Ghedeir (2022, p. 210), and Chen (2024) suggest storytelling as an effective tool to facilitate the understanding of social and behavioral contexts, areas where students with ASD may have difficulties in interpretation. This approach is particularly useful for carrying out dialogues or role-play in foreign language teaching, as it enables practice in a controlled and dynamic environment.

Conversely, Rezvani's studies (2017, 2018) investigated the effectiveness of the Montessori Method in the development of children and adolescents with ASD in Iran, revealing that the approach positively impacted the participants' cognitive, social, and emotional skills. The Montessori Method is an educational approach based on individual autonomy and respect for one's learning pace, valuing individuality, exploration, discovery, and independence. Similarly, Susanti (2024) explores the use of the TEACCH methodology (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children) for teaching simple vocabulary to Indonesian students with ASD.

Moreover, Zohoorian (2024, p. 283), based on research with Iranian students, also recommends the use of the Total Physical Response method, which is based on verbal commands to which students respond physically, such as through gestures or movements, facilitating the understanding and memorization of new words and grammatical structures. From another perspective, Buss and Giacomazzo (2019, p. 658) report in their experience within Santa Catarina's public school system the importance of co-teaching in special education, defining co-teaching as a "dual-teaching model, where two teachers—the second teacher and the lead teacher—work together, aiming for the same goal, the students' learning."





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Finally, target language music is a widely used playful resource in foreign language teaching. It contributes to creating a more engaging and accessible educational environment, promoting student engagement and content assimilation. Interestingly, no scientific articles were found on the use of music with autistic students.

However, in this teaching experience, videos and songs were employed as strategies to motivate João and facilitate his learning of the English language, as evidenced in the following account.

Experience Report

The Participants

Next, the main figures of this report, the key events, and the analysis of the experienced situation will be presented.

The student

João was a 6th-grade student at a middle school in Brasilia. He required permanent assistance from a special education aide, as well as constant mediation from teachers, both in the classroom and within the school environment. Until the previous year, in Elementary School, he had only one teacher, but starting this year, he had several teachers, each responsible for a specific subject. At school, João received support in the Resource Room, which had highly qualified professionals to assist students with different disabilities. Additionally, he took Ritalin daily.

The Resource Room report indicated that João processed information more slowly, but in subjects of interest to him, he was able to meet the pedagogical objectives. Otherwise, he would even reject the teacher's presence. João displayed hyperfocus on topics that interested him and frequently placed images of characters he admired, such as those from the *Little*





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Einsteins program, on his desk. Moreover, he enjoyed listening to the show's theme song, which helped him stay focused and feel more comfortable in the school environment.

João exhibited articulatory speech disorders, and at times, his speech became difficult to understand, which made oral expression, especially in a foreign language, challenging. He did not participate in group play and sometimes showed emotional outbursts of frustration, along with difficulties in interpersonal relationships. He also could not tolerate changes in routine and, when copying from the board, wrote exclusively in uppercase letters, requiring more time to complete tasks. Additionally, João received medical and psychological support.

The family

João's mother, a PhD candidate in Education and a specialist in ASD, closely monitored all of her son's school activities. She reviewed his homework and provided constant feedback to the teachers, either in person or through thank-you notes attached to the completed assignments. Additionally, she regularly visited the school, where she frequently gave lectures on autism, and actively participated in school activities, always being available for consultations with the teachers.

The school

The school had good physical infrastructure, with classrooms equipped with Smart TVs, whiteboards, lockers, and air conditioning. Additionally, it had a specialized team for supporting students with various disabilities.

João's special education aide was a permanent staff member with extensive professional experience, holding a degree in History and having an intermediate proficiency in English. She provided significant support to both João and the teacher during classes.





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The teacher

The teacher, a temporary teacher, had experience in the public school system and was qualified in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. He had experience working with students with disabilities and making curricular adaptations, although he had little experience in working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The Teaching Experience

The experience with João began with the first moments of approach, during which he showed moderate interest in the English language. Some situations, which later were discussed with João's guardian, stand out as examples of his behavior and the difficulties he faced.

In one episode, on a rainy day, the sound of the metal roof scared João, causing him to leave the classroom when the aide was absent. The teacher, unsure of how to proceed, was conflicted between holding him by the arm or letting him leave. If he had held him, there was a risk of João reacting aggressively; if he had let him leave, there was a risk of him getting hurt. After this moment of indecision, João returned to the classroom on his own.

In another situation, when the English class had already captured João's hyperfocus, he didn't want the class to end. When the teacher turned off the TV and released the class, João refused to leave the room. The aide informed him that the class had ended, but João, emphatically, replied in a loud voice: "It's not over." The aide had to insist until João agreed to leave the room. In subsequent lessons, João started paying close attention to where the teacher placed the remote control, especially because he liked the songs played during the class. If the remote was left on the table, João would fix his gaze on it, showing his intention





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to grab it. Consequently, the teacher started storing the remote in the cabinet immediately after use.

A few days later, João grabbed the teacher's arm at the end of the lesson and led him to the Math classroom. He refused to enter without the teacher accompanying him, which resulted in the teacher invading the Math class. The aide then managed to distract him, allowing the teacher to leave the room.

Later, João's mother explained that this behavior showed great affection for the teacher but also highlighted João's need to continue working on controlling his impulses and frustrations.

It is worth emphasizing the availability of all parties involved to support João's development. One example occurred on a Saturday afternoon when the teacher was preparing music activities for the following week and realized he did not know which songs João preferred. The teacher then contacted the vice-principal, who promptly asked João's mother. Within minutes, the songs, in MP3 format and not just their names, were sent via WhatsApp to the teacher. This collaboration enabled the development of reverse inclusion activities, based on João's interests and involving the rest of the class.

Regarding the lessons, João did not communicate much verbally, but when he did speak, his oral responses, though somewhat unintelligible and quiet, were correct. In writing, he demonstrated mastery of the content.

The teacher used educational songs available on YouTube to develop listening comprehension, aiming to help students grasp content such as the days of the week, months, and verbs. On some occasions, João brought a song he liked, and the arrangement was to





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listen to it at the end of the lesson. During the music sessions, he sang softly and became visibly happy when the musical part began.

To teach grammar, illustrated activities were developed to facilitate understanding. Since João showed no interest in Mathematics, interdisciplinary activities were prepared, addressing numbers in English, in collaboration with the Math teacher, who also knew English (see Illustrations 1 and 2).

It is worth noting that João's mother followed up daily on what happened at school through phone calls with the aide and maintained constant communication with the school's administration.

When English became João's hyperfocus, the teaching process became much smoother. With the aide's support, the classes proceeded calmly, without additional incidents of impulsivity or kidnapping. In this context, it is important to highlight the aide's work, which, at times, involved acting as a co-teacher or teaching assistant, helping João with activities and reinforcing the content in an individualized manner.

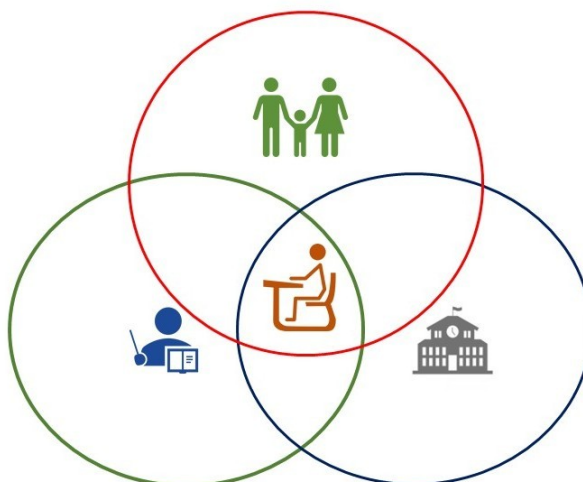
Later, the teacher suggested to João's guardian that João apply for a slot at the Inter-School Language Centers in the public network due to his passion for English. This led João to start English classes in the after-school period, achieving great results.

To illustrate the effectiveness of João's learning process, a model based on a triad of rings is proposed, aiming to graphically represent the participation of the different actors involved in this process in the context of special education (Figure 1).





Figure 1: Triad of the teaching-learning process
Balanced Triad



Source: own elaboration

The model consists of three rings, symbolizing the essential elements to ensure an effective teaching-learning process: the family, the school, and the teacher.

The first ring represents the family, or the student's guardians. They are the ones who seek specialized support both within and outside of school and closely monitor the student's progress. Active family involvement is essential to ensure the student receives the necessary support in all areas of their education.

The second ring corresponds to the school, which must be inclusive and have a Resource Room equipped with specialized professionals, as well as trained special education aides to assist students. The school is also responsible for guiding and training teachers, providing the infrastructure, equipment, and tools necessary for the successful development of educational activities.



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The third ring represents the teacher, who needs continuous professional development to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This is a significant challenge, given the wide range of disabilities, including Autism Spectrum Disorder, with each student possessing unique characteristics. A generic training is not enough; the teacher must make an effort to understand each student individually and identify the best way to connect with them. The goal is to motivate the student in the subject, promoting a state of hyperfocus, which in turn facilitates the learning process.

Typically, the triad is not perfectly balanced, as illustrated in Figure 1. The family must be present and monitor the student's progress; however, in many cases, they do not find a truly inclusive school, which leads to the family making an excessive effort to educate the student (see Figure 2). On the other hand, the family may not be as present or involved as ideally required, or may lack the financial resources to cover medical reports and treatments (see Figure 3). In such cases, the school and the teacher end up assuming a greater workload, but without genuine support from the family, leading to limited student progress.

As for the school, it may lack the necessary resources to properly serve the student, be negligent, or fail to provide the necessary support and guidance to teachers, such as trained and sufficient special education aides or adequate support from the Resource Room. In turn, teachers may not be adequately prepared to make the necessary curricular adaptations and may be forced to improvise, leading to teacher overload (see Figure 4).

In some cases, both the student and the family may refuse to accept the disability and refuse to participate in adapted activities. This situation sometimes occurs with students with intellectual disabilities. At João's school, there was a student with intellectual disabilities who rejected adapted activities but was unable to perform conventional ones.

Finally, to illustrate the case of a non-participative student, the student is represented with a smaller icon at the center of the intersection of the rings (see Figure 5).



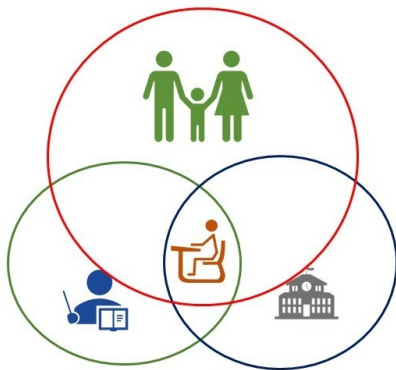


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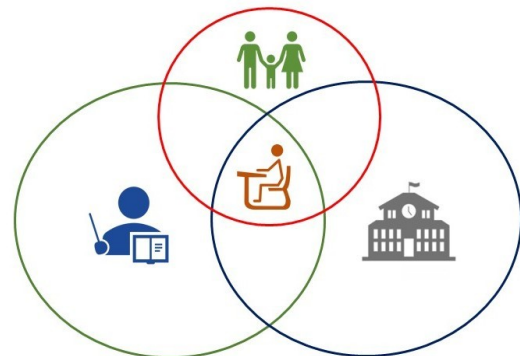
In all these situations, the rings of the triad become unbalanced, overburdening one or more of the involved elements.

Figure 2: Triad of the teaching-learning process
Unbalanced – overwhelmed family



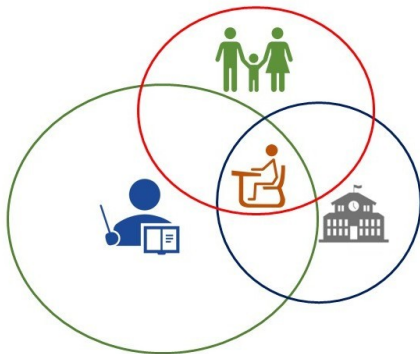
Source: own elaboration

Figure 3: Triad of the teaching-learning process
Unbalanced – low involvement family



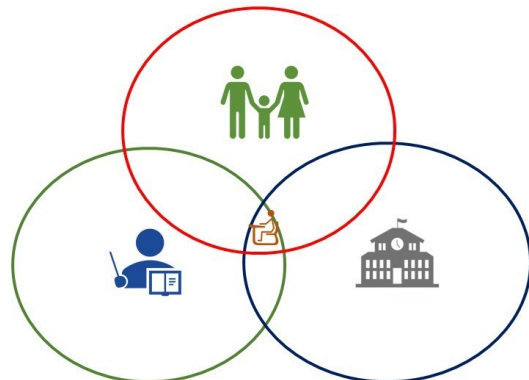
Source: own elaboration

Figure 4: Triad of the teaching-learning process
Unbalanced – overwhelmed teacher



Source: own elaboration

Figure 5: Triad of the teaching-learning process
Unbalanced – unmotivated student



Source: own elaboration

In this specific case of the experience report, the three rings were balanced and intertwined effectively, forming a collaborative network.

Final Considerations

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This study reported a successful experience in teaching English to an autistic student in a school in the Federal District, Brazil.

First, the theoretical framework on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was reviewed, including various relevant studies on teaching English to autistic students in different countries. These studies investigated the application of various teaching strategies, such as co-teaching, curriculum adaptation, peer-mediated teaching, storytelling, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), role play, and the TEACCH, Montessori, and Total Physical Response methodologies.

Next, it was found that, although a school may be considered inclusive, classrooms with students with disabilities are not always inclusive. This occurs because, within an inclusive school, the student may be excluded by their peers. Furthermore, it was pointed out that, in some situations, a student with ASD may be more inclusive than neurotypical students. It was also noted that there is no single adaptation for all; each student requires specific adjustments based on their capabilities.

In the described experience, music and videos were used for teaching English, a practice that is underexplored in the specialized literature but essential for foreign language teaching.

Subsequently, a three-ring model was proposed to illustrate João's teaching-learning process. The school had a specialized team for supporting students with various disabilities. The school's infrastructure, especially the presence of a Smart TV in the classroom, significantly facilitated the English lessons. Additionally, the special education aide, at certain times, played the role of a co-teacher, which significantly contributed to João's successful teaching-learning process.

Although this model is not outlined in the guidelines of the *Secretaria de Educação do Distrito Federal*, the practical experience suggests that it would be an effective approach to support students with disabilities.





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The student's mother closely monitored all his school activities, providing constant feedback to the teachers. Moreover, as a specialist and trainer in the area, she trained the teachers and guided João's teacher.

Finally, although the teacher was a temporary employee without a stable contract with the school and lacked prior experience in working with students with ASD, he was able to establish effective collaboration with the family and the school, creating an inclusive and productive learning environment for João. He quickly developed an empathetic relationship with the student, and his subject, English, became João's hyperfocus. In this context, empathy should be understood in a broader sense, not only as understanding but also as an act of affection and admiration for the effort of overcoming demonstrated by the student.

Certainly, the student with ASD perceives the attitude of the teachers and responds in their own way. One should not assume that, because the autistic student is not communicative, they do not perceive the attitude of the teacher or the aide.

An example of the balance between the three rings was the situation when the teacher, preparing materials on a Saturday afternoon, relied on the availability of the vice-principal to request information about João's preferred songs, and the promptness of João's mother to provide immediate feedback. Situations like these are indeed rare in public schools.

In the future, further studies will be needed on the use of audiovisual resources with students with ASD, without assuming that, because they do not communicate expressively, these students cannot benefit from such materials.



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Illustration I. English Activity (Own creation, 2024)

Illustration II. Mathematics Activity (Own creation, 2024).

Verb To Be Activity

I am
He, she, it is
We, you, they are

Completar as frases com o verbo to be.

1. He _____ a boy. 
2. You _____ in my house. 
3. They _____ from Germany. 
4. It _____ my dog, Rex. 
5. We _____ happy. 
6. He _____ very tall. 
7. Anna _____ in the garden. 
8. We _____ good friends. 
9. My cat _____ black and white. 
10. The sun _____ yellow. 
11. I _____ hungry. 
12. You _____ doctors. 
13. She _____ beautiful. 
14. Tom _____ strong. 
15. My mother _____ sad. 
16. I _____ angry. 
17. My car _____ new. 
18. We _____ at school. 
19. It _____ cold. 
20. They _____ tigers. 



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WORD-ADDITION

Activity

Complete as palavras e some a quantidade de letras em cada. Depois, some o número total de letras de todas as palavras. Exemplo:

BATH + _____ = BATHROOM	<u>8</u> +
STA + _____ = STAPLER	<u>7</u>
ER + _____ = ERASER	<u>6</u>
SUM	<u>21</u>



Eight + (plus) seven + six = (equals) twenty-one.

How much is 8 +

7

6

It's

21

HIGH + _____ = _____	_____ +
CAL + _____ = _____	_____
PEN + _____ = _____	_____
BA + _____ = _____	_____
SUM	_____



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