

Sociocultural factors as enhancers of friendships of children with autism

Fatores socioculturais como potencializadores das amizades de crianças com autismo

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Summary

Social and cultural factors are the source of human development. The mediation of the other, for Historical-Cultural Theory, is extremely important for the meaning of external factors for the person. Friendship relations are a social phenomenon that brings many benefits to everyone's lives, and when it comes to the friendships of children with autism, it is necessary to pay attention to different ways of relating, communicating and supporting needs. The aim is to discuss how the mediation of others in a school environment can favor, or not, the development and maintenance of friendships in children with autism. On this topic, reports were heard from two children aged 6 and 7 years old with this diagnosis, their possible friends (indicated in their speeches), their parents and their educators. It was found in the participants' speech that the school environment is the main environment where children with autism can make friends and that meetings outside of school help maintain these bonds, with play being the main activity for forming and maintaining friendships. Families of children with autism report that more effort is placed on them to ensure that meetings outside of school occur. Children with autism presented self-reflection about their characteristics that need to be considered by would-be friends. Regarding the mediation of others, in the pedagogical field, there is a very instructional practice that does not adequately meet the purposes of friendship bonds.

Keywords: Friendship. Children. Autism. Cultural-Historical Theory.

Resumo

Os fatores sociais e culturais são fonte do desenvolvimento humano. A mediação do outro, para a Teoria Histórico-Cultural, é extremamente importante para a significação de fatores externos para a pessoa. A relação de amizade é um fenômeno social que traz diversos benefícios para a vida de todos, e quando se trata das amizades de crianças com autismo é necessário ter atenção para diferentes formas de se relacionar, comunicar e de necessidades de apoio. Pretende-se discutir como a mediação do outro em ambiente escolar pode favorecer, ou não, o desenvolvimento e manutenção de amizades de crianças com autismo. Sobre este tema foram ouvidos os relatos de duas crianças de 6 e 7 anos de idade com este diagnóstico, dos seus possíveis amigos (indicados em seus discursos), de seus pais e das suas educadoras. Foi encontrado no discurso dos participantes que o ambiente escolar é o principal meio onde as crianças com autismo podem fazer amizades e que encontros fora da escola colaboram com a manutenção desses vínculos, sendo a brincadeira a principal atividade para formação e manutenção das amizades. As famílias das crianças com autismo relatam que recai sobre elas maior esforço para que os encontros fora da escola ocorram. As crianças com autismo apresentaram autorreflexão sobre suas características que precisam ser consideradas pelos pretendidos amigos. Quanto à mediação do outro, no campo pedagógico, observa-se uma prática muito instrucionista que não atende adequadamente aos propósitos dos vínculos de amizade.

Unitermos: Amizade. Crianças. Autismo. Teoria Histórico-Cultural.

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Introduction

The topic of friendship has gained interest in specialized literature in the fields of psychology and education in recent years. Although modestly, such studies (Adams & Quinones, 2020; Daugherty, 2019; Finke, 2016; Merizio & Rossetti, 2017; Petrina et al., 2014; Valle & Ribas, 2021) developed from theoretical methods and perspectives varied, indicate the importance of advancing in the understanding of this phenomenon so observed in everyday social interactions, at the most varied moments of development. However, the topic of friendship deserves special attention when it comes to children with neurodivergent characteristics, such as a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

On the one hand, diagnostic manuals usually indicate the peculiarities of social interactions and communication of people with ASD as a fundamental characteristic for defining the psychological condition, criteria expressed in the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (APA, 2014), generally suggesting deficits in social interaction or communication. However, studies based on Historical-Cultural Theory (Baker-Rogers, 2018; Valle & Ribas, 2021; Vigotski, 2021) draw attention to different conditions of socializing and communicating, which can lead to different ways of making and keeping friends.

The literature review on friendship and autism by Petrina et al. (2014), and also the most recent one by Valle (2023), point out that the studies carried out to understand this thematic interface are primarily quantitative methodology, behavioral psychology approaches, which start from a conceptual understanding of what friendship would be based on the experiences of typical children, for example in Dovgan and Mazurek (2019), Azad et al. (2017) and Bottema-Beutel et al. (2019). What may in general, during the analysis of information have focused on behavioral deficits of children with autism, instead of exploring the diversity of behaviors, different ways of being and acting and theoretically advancing the concept of friendship including the perspective and experiences of atypical children.

Furthermore, these two literature reviews (Petrina et al., 2014; Valle, 2023) highlight the need to expand the sample of children with autism in research, as the majority were boys with high intellectual capacity and over 6 years old, in addition of not prioritizing observation in the children's natural environment, using other research tools. None of the studies were based on Historical-Cultural Theory. In the review by Valle (2023), of the 15 articles found, 6 considered the perspective of the family, 3 of teachers and 8 of children.

This article aims to advance the field of understanding the interface between children with autism and friendships, presenting empirical results that come from qualitative methodology and Historical-Cultural Theory, through different perspectives, expanding the sample of participants, including children of different genders. When approaching the interaction of children with ASD from a Historical-Cultural perspective, we assume that the speeches of the study participants are able to bring to discussion concepts of social and cultural factors that can function as enhancers of these children's friendships and, consequently, as promoters of their development.

Social, Cultural Factors and Historical-Cultural Theory

The Historical-Cultural Theory understands human development as a process of interaction of biological, organic, social, cultural and historical factors experienced by the person, with or without disabilities and/or disorders. Social and cultural contexts are considered central sources of this development (Adams & Quinones, 2020; Vigotski, 2021), where interaction with other people plays a crucial role in the transformation of basic psychological functions into higher psychological functions.

Through the mediation of other people, the process of meaning becomes actively internalized or appropriated by the individual: complex psychological functions appear first, and then become individual functions of the person's behavior (Vygotsky, 2018).

For Adams and Quiñones (2020), the mediation of others, in the child's context, affects the way they learn and develop and can interfere with the nature of their friendships, an important phenomenon for human development. In this sense, the authors criticize institutional practices that do not favor or prioritize interactions among children and that they are only attentive to the relationship established between the teacher and student. They emphasize that teaching should not be seen only through the prism of instruction, but must be built on social and collective interaction, in interactive moments that can enable the construction of friendships.

The authors also suggest that pedagogical practice that favors friendship must create facilitating environments for social interaction and friendship, generate opportunities for learning moral sensibilities during interactions, create moments that favor free play without adults, generate conditions for emotional support to strengthen and value relationships among children, observe emotions expressed by children (what they say and the way they behave), and train teachers through theoretical training spaces about the topic.

Friendship, Autism Spectrum Disorder and Historical-Cultural Theory

The desire to strengthen social ties by building and maintaining friendships is present in people with autism. People with this diagnostic condition sometimes feel suspicious about the effectiveness of their relationships, as it is understood that the most appropriate and reliable way to make and maintain friendships is through the ways of being and skills of people of typical development (Baker-Rogers, 2018).

In a similar way, Valle and Ribas (2021) discuss that children with autism can communicate and interact in unconventional ways, such as getting closer, observing their peers, observing the use of toys by others. It is necessary to recognize the different ways of communication and interaction for an adequate understanding of this style of development, which is not restricted to observing the child's dysfunctionality.

Studies such as Garcia (2005) report that children with autism, generally, when compared to children with typical development, find it more difficult to initiate, develop and maintain long-term friendships, and school is the main means of making friends. The daily life of a child with autism presupposes that other people are attentive and available to carry out new forms of interaction, exchange cultural experiences, approach each other with empathy, accept the unusual and, thus, produce alternative and favorable paths for their biopsychosocial development (Valle & Ribas, 2021).

However, Finke (2016) indicates that it is important that interactions among children do not always depend on adult mediation, which is in line with studies by Adams and Quiñones (2020): free exploration is one of the main moments for imaginary games, in addition to helping children learn more about values and attitudes when adults are not nearby.

Cultural development can be considered as the main way to compensate for the deficiency, which was not possible through biological means, as it promotes obstacles in development and disrupts the normal balance (Vigotski, 2021). In this way, cultural development drives alternative paths, replacing and superimposing functions, leading development towards a new system of balance. Understanding the friendship relationship as part of cultural development, it is understood that it is a phenomenon that can also provide alternative ways to compensate for something that was not possible biologically, as in the case of children with autism.

Objective

Understand how the mediation of others in a school environment can favor, or not, the development and maintenance of friendships of children with autism.

Method

A Case Study was carried out, part of a broader research, based on qualitative methodology and using Grounded Theory (Creswell, 2014), to develop

a general explanation about friendships of children with autism from their perspective.

Initially, an exploratory study was carried out in a school, with the observation of three complete classes per day, for three days of the same week, totaling at least 9 hours of observation per day, aiming to select the most favorable moments for children to interact. After carrying out the exploratory study, the following were carried out: (1) conversation with the two children with autism and their possible friends; (2) interviews with children's parents with autism, the main teacher, two assistant teachers and an intern; (3) observations in moments of free interaction and classes, lasting 12 weeks and frequency between once and twice a week, for a period of one to four hours a day. In this article, the participants' interviews and the researcher's observations recorded in a field diary will be analyzed.

The study met all Brazilian ethical standards for carrying out research with human beings in the area of Human and Social Sciences (CONEP, MS, Resolution 510/2016). It was approved by the Research Ethics Committee in Human and Social Sciences (CEP/CHS) of the University of Brasilia, opinion number 4,923,830. The participants' names and the school were kept anonymous.

Context

The research was carried out during a period of return to face-to-face classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which there were some health restrictions recommended by the World Health Organization, such as social distancing, fewer children per class, avoiding sharing of personal objects, continuous use of a face mask. The school was chosen by convenience sample, it belongs to the private education system in Brasilia, Brazil, and serves students from Kindergarten to High School.

Participants

For this research participated 6 children, their guardians, the head teacher, two assistant teachers and an intern. Among the children, reported by

fictitious names, two were diagnosed with ASD (focal children of this study) and were enrolled in the first year of Elementary school I, belonging to a regular education class that meets the perspective of inclusive education. Manuela was 7 years old with a diagnosis of ASD, and Bernardo was 6 years old, diagnosed with ASD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and High Abilities and/or Giftedness (HA/G). The other participating children - Giulia, Marcela, Gabriela and Caio - were classmates, selected because they met the criterion of proximity to the two focal children of the research.

At the time of the research, Manuela had been at school for eight months and was in the first year of elementary school, in an inclusive class with another child also diagnosed with autism and her peers with typical development, totaling 22 students. During her life, Manuela has had homeopathy and occupational therapy, but at the moment she was only in speech therapy and psychotherapy, to help with learning and social and emotional issues. For her parents, Manuela is a girl who likes and wants to interact, but needs mediation. She is affectionate, likes to play with dolls, communicates orally, however she uses phrases apparently out of context and repetitive at various times. She understands commands from teachers and peers well, but is still learning to control her impulses.

Bernardo's parents reported on his excellent memory and taste for following sequences and cognitive inflexibilities. He has had in-depth knowledge of topics of interest since he was little. His diagnosis was concluded during the course of the research with a neuropsychologist who indicated ASD with HA and ADHD, the other previous professionals only pointed out the suspicion. For his parents, Bernardo is a happy, active, sociable child, with hyperfocus that alternate and last for a long time, generating strain on his relationships. He plays with other children, but at times he isolates himself and watches videos on his cell phone alone. Parents believe that he gets tired of noisy and agitated interactions, in addition to having difficulty understanding subjective things and understanding things literally.

Manuela's classmates, who participated in this study, who interacted and were most sought after by her, were named Giulia, Marcela and Gabriela. Coincidentally, they were all female. Gabriela is a girl who invites Manuela to play a lot, almost whenever Manuela is alone she goes after to invite her to do something together, she has good communication, she is friendly, outgoing and patient. Marcela is very close to Giulia, they are part of a group of girls who always play with dolls and "mommy and daughter" together, something that interests Manuela. Marcela is more welcoming and patient, but she doesn't invite Manuela to play as much as Gabriela, nor does Giulia. In turn, Giulia is a girl that Manuela looks for a lot, and that she hits the most when she has impulsive episodes at school.

The child who interacted the most and was picked up by Bernardo was named Caio. He is a boy who speaks softly, has similar play and conversation interests to Bernardo's, he is delicate and respectful towards his peers, has good communication skills, is introverted, and does not have much physical contact when interacting with other children. All the children were from the same class.

Bernardo and Manuela's parents were also participants. Bernardo's parents are married, live together and have a daughter younger than him. Manuela's parents are married, live together and have a son older than her. In relation to the educators participating in the research, they were the children's main teacher, who is the same for everyone, the two assistant teachers of the class and the intern who is exclusively responsible for monitoring Manuela, to help her in the daily life of the school with behaviors and also pedagogical issues.

Research instruments and procedures

Semi-structured conversation sessions were held with children with ASD and those who interacted most with them. The choice of children who were possible friends of the child with ASD was made by the researcher together with the educators, as they noticed greater interaction demonstrated by the time they played together during classes and free moments. The conversation was carried out

individually so that it was possible to obtain more details, provide a greater feeling of security and confidentiality and avoid exposing the children. All conversations were guided by a semi-structured script and recorded on video and audio. To facilitate mediation between the researcher and participants, a sheet of paper was used, containing a photo of all the children.

Two moments of information collection were carried out with the participant Manuela, as the first was analyzed by the researcher as not satisfactory for obtaining the information she needed, she did not maintain a dialogue or express it in other ways. In the second moment, dolls were also used to conduct a game involving characters who would be possible friends. The selection of dolls was based on the familiarity that Manuela had with those toys, in addition to being part of her daily routine, they made her socially more comfortable. The researcher's interaction approach with the child changed to favor the information construction process.

The objective of these meetings was to understand who the children identified as friends, what this relationship was like, what they characterized as friendships, what they did together, whether they needed help from adults to make friends or not, what this help would be like, and also to get to know other topics that arose during the conversation.

A semi-structured interview was carried out with each couple of parents of children with ASD, via recorded video call, via a free and online platform, with an average duration of 70 minutes. With the educators, the interviews were carried out in person, recorded in audio with the help of a cell phone voice recorder, also once with each one, guided by a semi-structured script the same for all professionals, lasting average of 52 minutes.

The purpose of the conversation with these adults was to encourage dialogue about child friendship and to better understand the context of the child's relationships within the school and family environment, seeking to identify whether they had friendship, how it began, how it was maintained and whether was characterized. Also, what was,

in their view, the role of the adult at school and at home as a mediator of friendship among children, the difference between a friendship and another relationship with colleagues and whether they believed in the possibility of the children who were the focus of the study having some friend.

Information analysis

The thematic analysis (Barbato et al., 2016) of the conversation with the children was carried out by listening carefully and repeatedly to the video-recorded situations. The information was organized based on the transcription of each response, forming a table, with the questions placed at the top of the columns and the fictitious name of each participant being recorded in the first line, for the researcher's private analysis use. From this stage, the senses and meanings that participants presented for the following themes were identified: indication of their best friends, difference between colleagues and friends what characterizes a friendship and how they make friends.

The audios of the interviews with parents and educators were listened to numerous times and analyzed thematically in a way adapted to psychology (Barbato et al., 2016). The excerpts that converge with the objective of this study were transcribed for private use during the researcher's analysis and used to form a figure that summarizes the information, which will be presented later.

The researcher's field diary was used in a complementary way, selecting excerpts that enhance the analysis of information about how the school environment and the mediation of others can favor, or not, the development and maintenance of friendships of children with autism. These excerpts recorded in the diary were placed in a digital document for the researcher's private use, and were used throughout the discussion, complementing and refining the results.

The results found were discussed in light of the existing literature, cited above.

Results

From the analysis of the conversation sessions with the children, emphasizing their opinions and experiences, we identified semantic elements that, grouped by criteria of meaning and meaning, formed four themes: indication of their best friends; difference between colleagues and friends; what characterizes a friendship; how they make friends.

Next, in relation to the interviews with the educators and parents, in addition to the notes from the researcher's field diary, we created a figure summarizing the information and matching information with the existing literature. The synthesis presented in the figure was made aimed at the objective of this article. This choice of presentation of the result is due to the scarcity of theoretical references on the friendship of children with autism to be used in the analysis of information and, also, as the Grounded Theory predicts, the constant interface between researcher and act of research supported the construction data and information analysis, producing a general explanation about how the school environment and the mediation of others favor the development of friendships in children with autism (Creswell, 2014).

The presentation of the results is organized into two parts: results from conversations with children and results from interviews with adults.

Results from conversations with children

In relation to the speech of the participating children and the theme defined as "Indication of Your Best Friends", we identified that all children, without exception, indicated and named who their friends were and also who their best friends were. Bernardo and Gabriela even indicated who was not their friend. It is noteworthy that Gabriela indicates that Bernardo and three other classmates are not her friends, but Bernardo indicates that they are all his friends, except two classmates (but does not mention Gabriela as not a friend, that is, there is no reciprocity in the relationship between these two children). Caio indicates by name that Bernardo is his friend, as well as another child who lives in his

residential complex. Regarding the girls, Giulia recommends Marcela, Manuela, Gabriela and 5 other children in the class as her friends.

When dealing with the second topic, entitled “Difference between colleagues and friends”, only Caio said he did not know this difference. The other children bring to their speech the relevance of playing together: Bernardo reported that classmates are those who attend class together, while friends are those who play together and best friends accept their games. For Giulia “her friends don’t say things she doesn’t like”. Marcela argues that they are special people to each other, they are nice, they joke and choose to play while Gabriela argues that friends always say yes and play different things.

The centrality of play remains in relation to the theme “What characterizes a friendship”, in which all children described activities and scenarios in which this activity is present, defining what friends do together. For Bernardo, friends play in the park, also because of the ideas he has and allow for the rule changes he proposes. Caio reiterates this opinion, stating that he usually plays what Bernardo likes and creates, with another friend, on the contrary, they create the game together. The girls indicated many games that they share, mentioning tag and hide and seek, as rule activities and others that involve more aspects of imagination such as mom and daughter, doll, stroller. For Gabriela, friendship increases when she invites the child to play, gives or lends a toy. For the participants, at school, the moments in which friendship manifests itself would be: playing in the park, on the lawn, leaving class (because they play), computational thinking class, when they sit together in class.

Regarding theme 4 - How they make friends - the participants positioned themselves as follows: Bernardo would like help from adults to make friends and considers that the pandemic has changed his way of making friends, which became different from others. Caio would like help, but he doesn’t know how and reports that he usually invites other children to play and thus builds friendships. Giulia reports that she would like help from adults to

make friends and that they could say ‘it’s okay to make friends with people the child doesn’t like’ - and although she signals this request for help, she says that her way of making friends is no different of others. Marcela, Gabriela and Manuela say they don’t need help from adults to make friends. For Gabriela, the only child who needs help from adults for this would be Bernardo, because he has fewer friends. Marcela and Gabriela report that their ways of making friends are different. In this way, Marcela reports that she invites the children to play and Gabriela highlights that she talks, plays and makes rules flexible.

During the conversation mediated by a game with dolls, Manuela named her dolls Gabriela and Marcela, who, in the story, they were playing a game in the park.

Regarding help from others, it was noticed that the majority of children said they did not want or need help to make friends. However, those who declared the need for this support highlighted conflict resolution as the time when they most needed help. Regarding the conducive environment for making friends, the park and the moments where they could interact freely were highlighted by the children. It is important to point out that they realized that there were different ways of making friends among the children in the class, but the responses that attributed to playing as an ideal time to make friends were unanimous.

It can be seen that for children there is a differentiation between friends and best friends, with best friends considered by them as more special and who play together when invited. In the children’s reports, it is evident that both Manuela and Bernardo have reciprocal friendship, with Manuela having better friendships with Gabriela and Marcela, and Bernardo with Caio.

By carefully analyzing the children’s responses, it is possible to notice some particular characteristics in the way Manuela and Bernardo maintain and form friendships. In Bernardo’s speech, when referring to colleagues who did not participate in the study and who he said were not his friends, he

points out that choosing a child, naming him as a friend, playing together, following rules when playing proved to be very important criteria. Caio commented that sometimes Bernardo says that it is not possible to play catch and kill when he is interested in playing something else, and Caio's way of dealing with this situation is to first play what Bernardo proposes so that he later accepts it. Playing tag catches a killer.

Regarding Manuela, Bernardo pointed out that her way of making friends was different because she no longer hit her classmates as she used to do before, even though talking to her, creating different moments with other students, giving her space and giving her gifts with stickers were important requirements to help her make friends. Giulia said that although Manuela was not her best friend, because she gave hugs and her attitude of not threatening the end of the friendship justified her considering her a friend, even though Manuela's way of making friends was by hitting or, most of the time, giving hugs from colleagues. Gabriela has a different opinion that, for her, Manuela's way of making friends was to build something, show it to her colleagues, stay close to them to pay attention to her, just as she herself did.

Gabriela reported that she and Manuela got closer, because she herself proposed games to calm her current friend in nervous situations, unlike other children who, sometimes, when Manuela was nervous, did not treat her well. Finally, another story that shows a little about Manuela's way of relating is Marcela's, who pointed out that what she liked most about Manuela was her attitude of following her wherever she went and wanting to stay in front of her in the queue.

Results from interviews with adults

From the interviews analysis with parents and educators, excerpts were separated with two themes: (1) influence of the environment on the development process and maintenance of friendship; and (2) the role of school educators and parents in the process of developing and maintaining the friendship relation. From the analysis of information

across all sources, Figure 1 was produced, which illustrates the synthesis of the data. However, the results are considered to be part of a whole, of a unit, as was analyzed and discussed.

In items where there is a reference, it means that the information found coincides with what was previously said in the cited literature.

Theme 1 was not in the semi-structured interview script, however during the speeches, mainly from the parents, it was observed that there was an important theme that converged with the research objectives, so it was considered as an additional theme. About this subject, families highlighted a feeling of lack of closeness between the families of other children, and the promotion of school and non-school events that favored this closeness. Furthermore, the teachers mentioned that they did not see Bernardo and Manuela going to the classmates' house, which could facilitate friendships, as it is the case with other children.

About theme 2, the interviewees spoke about different and similar roles of educators and parents in the process of developing and maintaining the friendship relation. Regarding the role of educators, the responses were around mediating so that children could play together, meet new children and have the opportunity to make new friends, with examples of: mediating so that a child is not left alone, asking another child to call them to play; tell them to play with a specific child so they can have the opportunity to learn about other interesting things; changing people from a group, or activities, to interact with other people; mediate conflicts; think of alternative solutions.

Parents, for teachers, would have the role of talking to their children, for example: instructing their children about the particularities of neurodivergent children's behavior in the class; talk and help to deal with good things and frustrations, talk about caring for others, affection, not just punishing; and instruct and encourage maintaining a cycle of friendship and understanding that conflicts are normal. For parents, their role is to take the initiative to invite other parents to come to their house, visit the homes of people who have children

of similar ages, seeking to mediate interactions, if necessary.

The functions in common between parents and educators that appeared most frequently and in common between these two groups were: providing meetings with other children, mediating interactions and acting as a reference person for children to look up to. However, other significant responses emphasized the importance of adults in general: establishing dialogues with children about the characteristics of a neurodivergent child; advise that they do not retaliate against undesirable behaviors from the child with autism; promote possibilities for playing together, inserting each other into the cycle of friendship; praise and show other children the qualities of children with autism; explain that all children demand attention, but sometimes differentiated, so that children feel the need to welcome and approach others in a natural way.

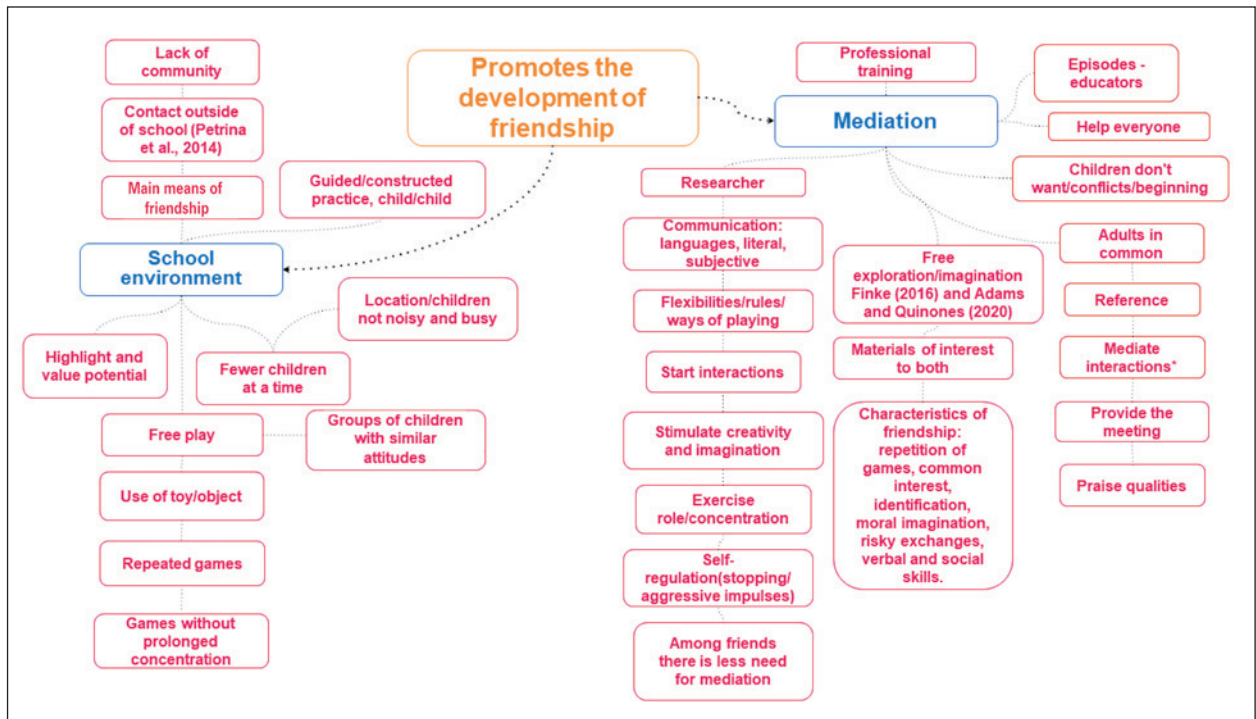
Discussion

Influence of the School Environment on the Process of Development and Maintenance of a Friendship Relation

Analyzing the information from the children's reports and also that from family members/professionals (Figure 1), it is concluded that for Manuela and Bernardo the school environment is a main way to make friends, as also seen in Garcia (2005). In the children's speeches, in the conversation with them, most of the friends' names who were from school were highlighted, only Caio mentioned a friend outside of school. Similarly, in the parents' speech, when identifying their children's friends, most of them were from school. The way that Manuela's parents identified who her potential friends were by naming their own dolls with the children's names, most of them from their current or previous school, just as she herself named them in conversation.

Figure 1

Diagram about how the others' mediation and the school environment favor the development of friendship



Note. Valle's broad search data (2023)

Contact outside of school was highlighted by parents and educators as something that strengthens the bond between children and can promote friendship. However, the educators mentioned that invitations to meet outside of school did not happen with Bernardo and Manuela, but with other children. This is in line with the information brought by the parents of these two children about making a lot of effort so that the children have a social cycle outside of school, both by inviting friends to their homes and by going to the homes of people who have children, but who it had to be their effort and not something natural.

This data is in line with that of Petrina et al. (2014) that children with autism meet fewer other children outside school. This unilateral effort by children's families with autism could be alleviated with meetings promoted by the school that promote closer ties among families. As mentioned by participating parents and seen in Daugherty (2019). Bernardo's parents reported a feeling of lack of community. The context of the Covid-19 pandemic may have influenced the few moments of interactions among families provided by the school. On the other hand, Bernardo's parents' report was not biased by this context because he had been studying at this school for years.

It is clear then that it is necessary to give even greater importance to promoting practices in which friendship within school is considered as a form of inclusion for children with autism, as it is the place in which most of their friendship interactions occur. However, jointly, practices that promote the school community, such as the more active children's participation and families at school, favor the strengthening of bonds among those involved, greater chances of transferring the emotional relationship outside the school, in addition to the feeling of support for parents Daugherty (2019).

As in Merizio and Rossetti (2017) and Adams and Quinones (2020), this research showed that play is the main way to form and maintain children's friendships, which highlights the importance of being present in everyday life of children. More specifically, it was reported by the children themselves

that they considered playing in the park and lawn with a playroom as more favorable for making friends, that is, free play. The educators, in their speeches, highlighted the use of objects of interest to colleagues to facilitate the beginning and duration of interactions.

Bernardo and Manuela use different resources to make and maintain friendships, as seen in conversations and interviews, and it can be provided with different aids to highlight what each person has to offer, as well as perfect certain skills, to have inclusive practices. more effective. In inclusion, it is important to consider the particularities of each child with autism (Valle & Ribas, 2021).

For example, for Bernardo, it is important that the school considers providing moments in which he interacts with fewer children at a time and without much noise, and also that he can be seen by others through his leadership, creativity and topics of interest. For Manuela, it is necessary to consider the mediation of others to start and maintain some games, having at times structured games by the educator and with a short duration of time, due to her difficulty with prolonged attention. In addition to encouraging other children to notice their highlights, through planning something that shows their emotional exchanges, proposals for group games that consider their particular way of playing and providing more games with objects/toys.

Finally, a pedagogical practice built in social and collective practice was not observed, but rather in an instructive way. This is an important point, because for Adams and Quinones (2020) it is important to pay attention to the relationship established between educators and students, as interactive teaching encourages the development of friendships. However, it was not possible to delve deeper into this topic in this study, it is suggested that future studies can do so.

Mediations by Educators, Parents and/or other Children, as Facilitators of the Process of Development and Maintenance of a Friendship Relation

The others' mediation was one of the social and cultural factors that received great prominence

in the research as an essential part of inclusion and which could promote the development and maintenance of a friendly relationship in the school environment, especially the educators' mediation, which received emphasis in Adams and Quinones (2020), by the research interviewees and researcher.

It can be argued that most children do not want or need help to make friends. With the exception of Bernardo and Giulia, who said that adult mediation is interesting in moments of conflict resolution and helps to talk and start friendships with children who are not friends. In the speeches of the educators and parents, summarized in Figure 1, it is observed that mediations received great emphasis and in a similar way, considering the role of the adult in general to be important to mediate children's interactions and act as a reference person for children mirror each other.

Still on the role of all adults in helping in the process of developing and maintaining friendship, it was highlighted by the adults interviewed that it is necessary to provide children with meetings, encouraging coexistence outside of school, in their social environment, and to encourage playful invitation among them. Also, to value and make clear to other children the positive characteristics that children with autism have, highlighting that everyone has difficulties and support needs, even if different, so that there is a natural interest in approaching and welcoming children.

According to Adams and Quinones (2020), mediation in this moment of social interaction is important because it can affect the way the child learns and develops. Based on what was observed by the researcher, it is argued that in order to more specifically help the two research participants with autism, the other's mediations should be aimed mainly at helping: (a) communicate (use of verbal languages or not and literal and subjective understanding); (b) with cognitive flexibilities in rules and other ways of playing; (c) with negotiations; (d) playing, initiating interactions and thinking about play alternatives that encourage the child with autism to play a role, but that do not require

prolonged attention; and (e) to stimulate creativity and imagination during play. In isolation, it would be interesting for Bernardo to undergo mediation to interrupt less and be more attentive when interacting with others, and for Manuela to help control her aggressive impulses and help the children around her understand her way of communicating.

Available materials that are easily accessible and interesting for children with and without autism encourage interactions (Finke, 2016). In this study, it was found through the teachers' reports and the researcher's observation that toys/objects of common interest facilitate interactions and games to happen more spontaneously for children. However, it is important that parents, educators, or other children, be aware of different ways of playing, communicating and using the object/toy (Baker-Rogers, 2018; Valle & Ribas, 2021). The role of the mediator at this moment is important for the significance of factors external to the organism to be internalized (Vygotski, 2018).

In order to promote the maintenance of friendship, it is important that people with different skills are present in moments of interaction Finke (2016). Bernardo and Manuela's parents reported that the adult's help is important for the game to start, but that the adult can move away when the children no longer need so much help. According to what was observed by the researcher, it is in fact believed that for research participants, this mediation is necessary mainly to interact with other children who are not friends or to enhance an existing relation, because among children's friends use their skills more and there is less need for mediation.

The educators in the interview emphasized the importance of parents always talking to their children about their characteristics, especially neurodivergent children, in order to encourage care for others and deal with conflicts.

Friendship is a complex phenomenon and could not be otherwise when it comes to people with autism, emphasizing that it has been discussed and studied recently. Understanding the role of the adult who favors this type of relationship is

not simple: the mediators of these children need to be willing and sensitive to understand the reality of the other's way of being, acting, thinking, without disregarding unconventional ways (Valle & Ribas, 2021).

The role of the educator is very important in promoting friendship at school, mainly through generating moments of free interaction and providing emotional support with opportunities to learn about moral issues, in addition being important that the teacher has knowledge about peer interaction and friendship (Adams & Quinones, 2020). It is therefore essential that school environments provide continued training for their professionals on the subject, as well as conditions for them to be emotionally well in their workspace, as in order to provide a welcome and emotional support it is necessary to feel welcomed in their work environment.

The limitations of this study involve the inability to generalize the results to the entire community of people with autism. The Spectrum involves people with different characteristics and levels of support, in addition to the presence of comorbidities being very common and having differences when analyzing such aspects and also those of gender, ethnicity and age. Furthermore, in this study only two cases were analyzed using interviews and observation by the researcher. It is important that future studies can expand the sample of participants and diversify research instruments. Future studies can delve deeper into the different ways of being, acting, interacting, communicating and making friends of people with autism, in addition to carrying out a longer-term longitudinal analysis to understand changes throughout the life course.

In relation to pedagogical practice, it was not observed as Adams and Quinones (2020) suggest, favoring friendship, being built in social and collective practice. However, as it was not possible to delve deeper into this topic, it is suggested that future studies can analyze this aspect in more detail.

However, as this is a recent field of study and it is necessary to delve into detail about the factors involved to better understand the friendships of children with autism, the qualitative case study

methodology, based on Grounded Data Theory, proved to be appropriate.

Considerations

It was possible to advance scientific research on the friendship relations of children with autism, through different perspectives, considering the observation of the child's natural context and innovating with the use of Historical-Cultural Theory, mainly when discussing social and cultural factors that favor friendship. It was possible to see the importance of expanding studies with neurodivergent participants, as the friendship relations of children with autism were qualitatively different from those of other children. This study can be considered as an initial path for future theoretical-methodological deepening of research on friendship relations, avoiding stigmatizing practices and recognizing different ways of communicating and interacting Valle and Ribas (2021).

It was found that external factors, such as interacting with fewer children at a time, favor the development of friendship, in addition to discussing how the school environment and the mediation of others can promote the development of friendship in children with autism, considering the particularity of each one. It was noticed that participants with autism use different resources to make and maintain friendships, strengthening the idea that inclusion needs to have an individualized perspective.

Also, in this study it was evident that school for children with autism is the main way of making and keeping friends, the difficulty of contact outside of school with colleagues and/or friends and the family effort to do so and the feeling of lack of community generated in this situation. Furthermore, it is through play that friends are recognized, as in Merizio and Rossetti (2017) and Valle and Ribas (2021), and that friendships are initiated and maintained. Therefore, when considering friendship as an essential part of everyone's inclusion, the even greater importance of having inclusive practices in schools that aim to develop and maintain friends

and bring closer relationships among families stands out. Practices that can facilitate the development of such relationships at school were discussed, and also about contact outside of school among children being something that strengthens their bond and can encourage friendship.

Finally, it is believed that for people with autism, the study provides reflection so that they can understand their own ways of making and maintaining friendships, understanding that different characteristics can also be considered friendship, which can generate better self-acceptance and a feeling of belonging. belong to a group.

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Appendix A – Script for conversations with children with ASD and their possible friends

1. What is the difference between a colleague and a friend for you?
2. Which of these children in the photo do you consider your friend? What do you do together?
3. Do you feel like you need help from an adult to make friends?

1 Appendix B – Script for interview with parents

1. When did your child receive the diagnosis and what specifically is this diagnosis?
2. What are his/her characteristics? (Difficulties, skills, stereotypes...)
3. What types of monitoring/treatment does he do today?
4. What is his/her routine like?
5. What is the difference between a colleague and a friend at her/his child's age?
6. Do you consider your child to have a friend?
7. How do you characterize friendship at this age?
8. How do you believe his/her friendship begins?
9. What do you notice that your child does with his/her friends?
10. What is the role of adults in the friendship of children at this age?

Appendix C – Script for semi-structured interviews with educators

1. Which moments do you think your student finds it easiest to participate in the school routine and which moments do you find most difficult?
2. What is the difference between a colleague and a friend at the age of your students?
3. Do you consider your student with ASD to have a friend?
4. How do you characterize friendship at this age?
5. How do you believe his/her friendship begins?
6. What do you notice he/she does with his/her friends?
7. What is the role of adults in the friendship of children at this age?



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