

Diversity at school: Promoting inclusion with Monica's Gang

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ABSTRACT

This article is an experience report on a workshop conducted in collaboration with a class from the Municipal School Professor Luiza de Castro Ferreira e Silva, in line with an activity proposed by the discipline of Pedagogical Practice, to address the theme of inclusive education with the community. The target audience selected was a group of 40 students, aged between 9 and 12 years. Dynamic and participatory activities were carried out, aiming to provide them with a greater understanding of some disabilities and their particularities, using, as a resource, the characters of the animation series "Monica's Gang", which have such representations. From these activities, a mural was prepared with drawings made by the children, which was exposed to the Chemistry Degree class. This experience contributed significantly to the expansion of students' knowledge about the topic addressed, thus promoting greater inclusion and respect for others.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Pedagogical practice, Disabilities, Workshop.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, there has been a period in which the practice of excluding individuals who had physical or mental differences was often observed, relegating them to the margins of society. In addition, it was common to resort to the elimination of children who were born with some disability:

The Roman laws of antiquity were not favorable to people who were born with disabilities. Parents were allowed to kill children with physical deformities, by drowning. Reports tell us, however, that parents abandoned their children in baskets on the Tiber River, or in other holy places. The survivors were exploited in the cities by "almoners", or became part of circuses for the entertainment of the wealthy (Gugel, 2008, p. 1).

However, in recent years, we have witnessed a significant change, with a growing movement of struggle and awareness for the full inclusion of people with disabilities in society. Such evolution reflects a progressive transformation in values and public policies, in which the importance of ensuring equal rights and equitable opportunities for all citizens is admitted, including access to education and work in any environment, regardless of their differences. In this context, it is crucial to recognize the importance of disseminating knowledge about various disabilities and human differences to promote greater inclusion and respect in society. An ideal environment for this is the classroom, where you can start from an early age, with children, the understanding and acceptance of diversity. According to Sanches (2005, p. 131) "Inclusive education will not be achieved if instruments different from those that have been used are not



introduced into the classroom." From the perspective of an inclusive school, it is crucial to direct a more refined look at the development of public policies:

I believe, by common sense, that we need to understand that receptive and responsible schools, that is, inclusive, do not depend only and only on their managers and educators, because the transformations that urgently need to occur in them are closely linked to public policies in general and, among them, to social policies [...] (Carvalho, 2004, p.15).

The author highlights the interdependence between inclusive schools and comprehensive public policies, stressing that the responsibility for creating receptive educational environments does not fall exclusively on managers and educators. Recognizing that urgent transformations are needed in schools, it is suggested that effective inclusion can only be achieved through broad social policies that address underlying social and economic challenges. This implies that, in addition to internal actions in schools, it is imperative that there is a significant commitment to public policies that promote equal opportunities.

The school goes beyond the mere transmission of knowledge; She is also responsible for teaching values. From this point of view, there is an urgent need to overcome the traditional education system. True education should empower students to be ethical and fair, capable of transforming the world into a more humane place (Mantoan, 2003, p.34).

In this perspective, the discipline Pedagogical Practice 2, of the Chemistry Degree course, at IFSertãoPE, proposes the elaboration and execution of didactic-pedagogical projects with methodological approaches for the education of students with disabilities and high abilities. In this discipline, in the second semester of 2023, an extension activity was required, in order to enable the application of the knowledge acquired in the course with the community, thus carrying out a concrete pedagogical action. The students were organized into groups, each with the prerogative of selecting the topics to be addressed in a workshop, the target audience to be reached and the activities to be developed. Thus, the groups were responsible for the elaboration of a detailed plan outlining the objectives and methodologies of the workshop. The plan was submitted to the evaluation of the professor responsible for the discipline, aiming at possible adjustments. Once this stage of project development was completed, the teams were encouraged to carry out the proposed activity with their target audience, thus implementing the elements outlined.

This article mentions the workshop developed by the group called "Elementares", in accordance with the parameters established by the discipline. The central purpose of the team was to address, during the respective execution, the following themes: intellectual, physical, visual, hearing disability and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). To carry out this project, it was decided to direct its attention to basic education students, aged between 9 and 12 years. In these age groups, the potential to catalyze significant change



and cultivate fundamental values that sustain society and shape its future through education is recognized, a perspective that is corroborated by Arendt:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to take responsibility for it and, with such a gesture, save it from the ruin that would be inevitable were it not for the renewal and the coming of the new and the young. Education is also where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and abandon them to their own resources, nor to snatch from their hands the opportunity to undertake something new and unforeseen for us, preparing them instead in advance for the task of renewing a common world (Arendt, 2000, p. 247).

Following this logic, the pedagogical strategy for this workshop consisted of the creation of a powerful explanatory slide, addressing the deficiencies that would be worked on and their representation with the characters of the animated series "Monica's Gang". The slide included not only the characters and disabilities, but also educational videos related to the content, as well as music and other resources designed to make the occasion more dynamic and engaging. During the moment, students had the opportunity to interact, answering questions and clarifying doubts, thus promoting an effective exchange between both sides. Another aspect of the workshop plan would be to direct students to carry out practical activities at the end of the presentation.

In this context, the proposed objectives would consist of: knowing the different types of disabilities, identifying the specific needs of people with disabilities, as well as understanding the importance of inclusive education and developing empathy skills. This approach provided an immersive and interactive learning experience, preparing students for a more comprehensive understanding of issues related to diversity and inclusion. Themes initially perceived as complex, but in an accessible and understandable way, for different audiences, such as children, were involved. As pointed out in the book "School Inclusion: What is it? Why? How to do it?":

Innovating does not necessarily have the sense of the unusual. The great innovations are often the materialization of the obvious, the simple, of what is possible to do, but which needs to be unveiled, so that it can be understood by all and accepted without much resistance, except those that give brightness and vigor to the debate of novelties (Mantoan, 2003, p.31).

REPORT OF THE EXPERIENCE

In the initial phase of the development of the workshop, aimed at promoting inclusion and diversity, the group chose to name it "Diversity at School - Promoting Inclusion with Monica's Class". Soon after, an in-depth discussion was held about the deficiencies to be covered. This process took into account not only the time constraints, which were between two and three hours for the execution of the proposal, but also the careful selection of the areas to be worked on. It was defined that it would be aimed at children, aiming to explore dynamics and playful activities that could bring the participants closer to the

theme in question. The areas selected, to be approached with children in the 5th grade of elementary school, were aligned with the characters of the aforementioned animation series. This strategic decision involved the presentation of these areas through an explanatory slide (Figure 1), which assigned each area (Physical, Intellectual, Hearing, Visual Disability and Autism Spectrum Disorder - ASD) its respective character from the series.

Figure 1: Slide cover worked in the workshop



Source: Prepared by the author (2024)

In addition to discussing the individual deficiencies of each character, their personal characteristics were also explored, such as being affectionate, playful and having sharp senses. This was done to convey the understanding that a disability does not fully define a person, as these characteristics show that each individual is much more than their physical or cognitive condition.

The author of the characters of "Monica's Gang", in an interview given to the website *Vida Mais Livre*, listed the reasons that led to the inclusion of characters with disabilities in his creations:

Monica's Gang is a group of characters who live and act like normal children, like our children or acquaintances. We all have friends with some kind of disability and we live harmoniously and dynamically. We learned the rules of inclusion there. Consequently, we could not fail to present, in the universe of our characters, friends from the class who also had some kind of disability. I even think it took me a long time to realize this emptiness in our stories (Souza, 2012).

Subsequent to the character's introduction, a reference video was shown, such as the character himself briefly explaining the disability he had or a related song. This feature aimed to keep students more focused, providing a variation in the teaching method, in addition to making the moment more enjoyable and fun, avoiding the monotony of just continuous speeches.

Proceeding with the definition of the methodologies to be applied, choices of activities were made after a discussion among the participants about the most appropriate ones, based on the study and the presentation of the slide. Subsequently, only three activities were selected, taking into account the time

required for their execution and the need to be available for discussions and clarification of doubts at any time, without time becoming an obstacle.

The preparation of the didactic materials for the workshop was meticulously planned for children. In this context, the slide, which played a central role in the introduction of the theme, was designed in a captivating way, including drawings and animations about Physical, Intellectual, Hearing, Visual Disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder – ASD, as previously mentioned.

The group of participants began the event by singing a presentation song entitled "Who are you" from the Strength and Victory Ministry, with the aim of promoting familiarization between the members of the group and the students, in addition to creating a welcoming environment, encouraging them to feel free to turn to any of the members in case of doubts during the performance of the tasks.

The presentation of the slides began with a question about the participants' previous knowledge about disabilities. Then, the team members gave an explanation, complemented by an informative video. The dynamics of the presentation consisted of stimulating reflection through questions, providing a space for participants to share their ideas with colleagues. Subsequently, one of the team members detailed the content covered (Figure 2), followed by the exhibition of an educational video pertinent to the theme addressed. The selected videos were carefully chosen, taking into account the students' ability to understand; all activities were customized by the team, incorporating characters from the series "Monica's Gang".

Figure 2: Team explaining the topic



Source: Prepared by the author (2024)

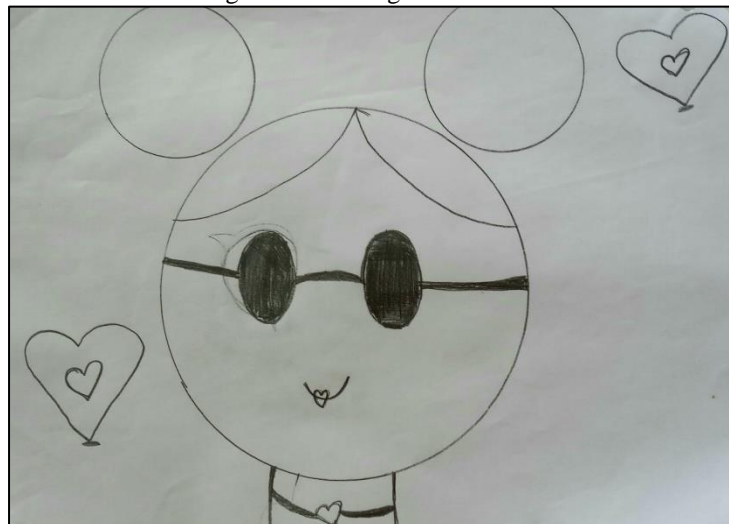
The activities started, after the explanation using the slides, began with a drawing proposal, in which each child received a blank sheet of A4 paper to express, through drawing, something that they had learned during the conversation or that had been remarkable during the presentation, which could be a specific character or other relevant element (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Drawing on the theme



Source: Prepared by the author (2024)

Figure 4: Drawing on the theme



Source: Prepared by the author (2024)

The second activity proposal consisted of a word search game (Figure 5), in which the words to be found were related to the theme. In total, 11 words were made available distributed horizontally, vertically and diagonally, with no backwards words. This activity was conceived by one of the participants in the group with an intermediate level of difficulty, appropriate to the age group of the students.

Figure 5: Inclusive word search



Source: Prepared by the author (2024)

The third and last activity consisted of a Quiz (Figures 6 and 7), with the purpose of evaluating the concepts assimilated by the children during the workshop. In addition, questions about the practice of inclusion in daily life and about specific disabilities were included, in order to verify whether the participants understood the topics addressed and whether they were able to adopt inclusive behaviors. The Quiz comprised not only multiple-choice questions, but also questions that required written answers. In all, seven questions were presented. After the conclusion of the Quiz, a thank you message prepared by the team was displayed, reinforcing to the students the importance of their participation and highlighting that they are unique and special individuals.

Figure 6: Front of the Quiz worked

Quiz: Conhecimentos sobre inclusão

1. Luca é cadeirante e precisa ir para o andar de cima, qual a melhor forma de acesso?
 Obs: Circule ou marque um X no que você acha que está correto, pode ser mais de uma alternativa!





ESCADA
 RAMPa
 ELEVADOR

2. Dorinha quer ler um livro, o que ela deve usar?






LIVRO EM BRAILE
 ALFABETO EM LIBRAS
 ALFABETO EM JAPONÊS

3. André é autista, então:





PODEMOS BRINCAR JUNTOS COM ELE
 ELE TEM QUE BRINCAR SOZINHO

Nome: _____

Source: Prepared by the author (2024)

Figure 7: Quiz verse worked

Quiz: Conhecimentos sobre inclusão


Obs: Responda a pergunta de acordo com que aprendeu e a sua opinião.

4. O que significa ser inclusivo? Você acha que é importante incluir todo mundo?


5. Como podemos ajudar alguém que está se sentindo excluído ou sozinho na escola ou em outro lugar?

6. Aprendemos com as diferenças? Por quê?

7. Você acha que é possível ser amigo de alguém que tem opiniões ou gostos diferentes dos seus? Por quê?



VOCÊ SABIA QUE É ÚNICO E ESPECIAL? ESTOU FELIZ QUE ACEITOU APRENDER MAIS UM POUCO SOBRE DIFERENÇAS E RESPEITO, OBRIGADA POR PARTICIPAR!



Source: Prepared by the author (2024)



RESULTS

In the first activity carried out, using the slides, some questions were asked directed to the children. These questions explored their understanding of the concepts of inclusive education, in addition to questioning whether they were familiar with the different disabilities presented. It was observed that the children demonstrated considerable knowledge in relation to these issues, which suggests an effective approach to inclusion in the School where the workshop was held. In this context, it is crucial to synchronize the content with the target audience and adapt the teaching resources to ensure better understanding and participation:

If the resource is not in tune with what is being presented, the student triggers a mental zap. He changes the channel, disconnects from the teacher in front of him. He is still physically in the classroom, but his mind travels far away. (Heerd 2003, p. 69)

Still from this perspective of didactics and improvement of the approach to diversity, Carvalho mentions that it is extremely necessary to have a greater need for a greater

[...] Awareness of the meaning of diversity in education, avoiding the risk of contributing to greater inequality, as we do not diversify the offers, even though we have equal access to common education as our purpose. This is certainly one of the most complex tasks because it is not easy to reconcile in the pedagogical practice in the classroom; equality, attention to the diversity of students and collective and individualized communicative actions according to the specific needs, interests and motivation of each one" (2004, p. 150-151).

In this sense, addressing issues in the classroom or proposing tasks accessible to all students is a complex and challenging mission, since there is an intrinsic diversity among them. Thus, it is essential to undertake in-depth studies to determine the most appropriate approaches that meet this variety of needs. Such an undertaking requires the elaboration of explanations and activities that are pertinent and adaptable to the student public studied.

Thus, the materials and methodology used to analyze the theme of diversity in the school were meticulously adapted to the specific class of students in question. As a result, a remarkably positive and surprising response was obtained, since all members of the target audience were able to successfully complete all the proposed activities. In addition, a significant portion of the students demonstrated engagement by sharing their opinions and knowledge related to the theme.

During each activity, a team member was always available to provide explanations, clarify doubts and dialogue with students, ensuring a welcoming and conducive environment for learning. After completion, time was set aside for participants to share their answers, drawings or impressions on the topic, promoting an enriching interaction. The event was largely rewarding and educational for all involved.



Regarding the children's drawings, it was evident that they were all able to understand the message that the group was trying to convey about inclusion and the way to deal with diversity. This was noticed when observing that they illustrated different people, wrote meaningful sentences on the topic and demonstrated empathy and respect in practice.

In the second activity, the words "disabilities", "differences", "diversity", "empathy", "friendship", "love", "autism", "wheelchair user", "kindness", "inclusion" and "respect" were highlighted. Upon finding these words, they were emphasized in order to promote a better understanding of the meaning and how it would apply in practice. This led to the third and final activity, which was the quiz; Not only some specificities of disabilities were addressed, but also gestures and empathetic attitudes in everyday life, using situations as examples.

The first three questions of the quiz were intended for the children to reflect on situations that would best fit according to the disabilities addressed. The first question was formulated as follows: "Luca is in a wheelchair and needs to go upstairs. What is the best way to access?" Three alternatives were provided, each accompanied by images to facilitate understanding. Options included an elevator, stairs, and ramp, and children didn't necessarily have to tick just one of them. The second question addressed the following situation: "Dorinha wants to read a book. What should she wear?" Dorinha is a character in the animated series "Monica's Gang" and is visually impaired. The available alternatives were a book in Braille, alphabet in Libras or alphabet in Japanese. Finally, the third question aimed to determine whether or not the children could play with André, an autistic character. The children's responses and interactions were very positive.

The other questions involved written answers. The first asked: "What does it mean to be inclusive? Do you think it's important to include everyone?" The children could express what they learned from the explanation and give their formed opinion on the subject. Some responses highlighted that "To be inclusive is to be together with everyone and respect everyone". The fifth question was, "How can we help someone who is feeling left out or alone at school or elsewhere?" The responses were quite positive, with the children suggesting that if someone is alone, they should invite them to participate in something and play. In the sixth question, he was asked: "Have we learned from differences? Why?" All children answered affirmatively, highlighting that each individual has something special and unique to offer. Finally, the last question was: "Do you think it is possible to be friends with someone who has different opinions or tastes than yours? Why?" Again, all the children responded positively, arguing that everyone is different and has something to contribute.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education brings numerous benefits to students with and without disabilities. The coexistence of students promotes the development of social

skills and the construction of meaningful relationships and more diverse and contextualized learning opportunities, promoting a more dynamic and inclusive environment.

The Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDBEN), No. 9,394/96, in article 58, recommends that education for people with disabilities should preferably occur in regular education. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to address diversity and inclusion issues in classrooms, so that all students know how to be inclusive and respectful, if they have a colleague or even a school employee with a disability.

At the end of the workshop, each child received a souvenir (Figure 7) prepared by the team as a form of thanks, followed by listening to the song "Normal is Being Different", performed by the group Grandes Pequenos. The "Elementares" group expressed its gratitude for the warm welcome provided by the school and the teachers.

Figure 7: Souvenirs for participants



Source: Prepared by the author (2024)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This experience was especially significant as it contributed in a crucial way to improving communication skills with people. In addition, she was fundamental to develop a posture as a future teacher, since we are following this path of training. In addition, this experience allowed us to improve didactics and creativity, transforming the proposed theme into a unique and enriching moment in terms of knowledge.

The objectives outlined for the workshop were fully achieved, proving its effectiveness. First, the students demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the different types of disabilities, showing a deeper appreciation of the individual needs associated with each of them. Then, through a practical and participatory approach, the participants were able to accurately identify the specific needs of people with disabilities, fostering a sharper sensitivity to their particular demands.

In addition, the workshop allowed a substantial reflection on the intrinsic importance of inclusive education, evidenced by the expansion of students' understanding of the barriers faced and possible



solutions for more effective integration. Finally, the activities conducted not only stimulated the development of empathy skills among the participants, but also consolidated an environment conducive to the practice and improvement of these skills in the educational and social context. Thus, each outlined objective was achieved in a tangible way, promoting a significant advance in understanding and addressing issues related to inclusion and diversity.

Participation in this workshop, which is configured as an extension activity, offered students the opportunity to transcend the physical limits of the institution, allowing them to explore and put into practice the knowledge acquired. This experience is of paramount importance, as it made it possible to understand the uniqueness and wonder of the teaching process. In addition, the ability to provide memorable moments not only for the group, but also for each child, who constituted the audience of this work, is genuinely exciting and engaging. It is moments like these that reaffirm the value of the effort dedicated to studies and renew the determination to persevere, even in the face of challenges.



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