

## WHAT DOES ONE CHILD DO FOR ANOTHER IN POST-PANDEMIC TIMES? RESULTS OF A SURVEY

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### Abstract

In 2022, a group of 20 researchers carried out, in schools of São Paulo, Brazil, an interventional and qualitative study of 13 ASD children in inclusive education aged 2 to 6 years. These researchers were guided by psychoanalytic references and instruments and had a question in their minds: what does one child do for another? The research was based on the “Function of Siblings”, a notion theorized by J. Lacan about peer relationships. According to this author, peer relationships are a source of identifications and collaborate in the psychic constitution of the subjects involved. The objective of the research was then to investigate the accuracy of the APEGI instrument in detecting and following-up the effects of the Function of the Sibling on the changing of the subjective position of children with ASD in schools. As this study was held in a post-pandemic moment, the research also intended to be an auxiliary in the direction of allowing a relaunch of the role of the siblings in the school – a role that was absent during the pandemic. The APEGI (Psychoanalytic Monitoring of Children in Schools, Groups and Institutions) is an instrument that allows the recording of the psychic movements of children in general, and was validated in previous research. The researchers organized small groups to monitor the interactions between a child in inclusive education and their peers, and were guided in their intervention by the principles of Therapeutic Education, a set of interdisciplinary treatment practices based on psychoanalysis. In APEGI there are 5 axes, which intersect and reciprocally determine each other in their function of producing the constitution of the subject. The methodology of the research was predominantly the case study, with a secondary survey of quantitative elements from the study of monitoring indicators. After an average of 9 months, 26% of indicators of the first axis, the “Function of the Siblings”, previously absent became present. In the other 4 axes, the portion of indicators which became present were: 19% in “Paternal Function”; 18% in “Presence of a Subject”; 16 % in “Body Image” and 10% in “Play and Fantasy”. Articulated to qualitative evaluations, these results show that the follow-up was effective and well detected by APEGI. They point to a partial post-pandemic school reintegration of those children, due to an encounter of their peers and to a consequent change in their subjective position.

**Keywords:** *Psychotherapy, special education, peer relationships, post pandemic times.*

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### 1. Introduction

In 2022, a group of 20 researchers carried out, in schools of São Paulo, Brazil, an interventional and qualitative study of 13 children in the autistic spectrum – ASD children – and in inclusive education, aged 2 to 6 years. These researchers were guided by psychoanalytical references and instruments, and had a question in their minds: what does one child do for another?

To carry out this study, and to investigate the accuracy of the APEGI instrument – Psychoanalytical Monitoring of Children in Schools, Groups and Institutions (Kupfer and Bernardino, 2022) – in detecting changes on the subjective position of the children, the researchers knocked on the doors of many schools and organized small groups to follow the interactions between a child in inclusive education and its peers in a general education classroom. The duration of this follow-up was 9 months on average, a period in which 10 meetings were held. Group interventions followed the principles of Therapeutic education, a set of theoretical-practical operators supported by the contributions of psychoanalysis to education (Kupfer, 2000; Lerner et al, 2016).

As this study was held in a post-pandemic moment, the research also intended to be an auxiliary in the direction of allowing a relaunch of the role of the siblings in the school – a role that was absent during the pandemic – by seeking to identify the impasses in the social bond that generate effects of exclusion, as well as investigating and elaborating possible interventions to dissolve them in favor of inclusion. The main objective was then to demonstrate that the APEGI instrument could be able to detect and follow the effects of the function of the sibling on the changes of the subjective position of children with EE in schools in post-pandemic times.

## **2. The research context: challenges faced in post-pandemic times**

The covid-19 pandemic was, as has been said on numerous occasions and in abundant literature on the subject, a socio-political-sanitary crisis, which suspended the exercise of social mobility and deeply interfered in the fabric of social and historical processes, which produced disastrous effects on the psychic health of the survivors, as Birman (2022) wrote.

With children it wasn't any different. The closure of schools in Brazil, which was very necessary for health reasons, had a profound impact not only on student learning, but on their development in general and on their psychological development, having been particularly harmful for children with ASD, or with EE<sup>1</sup>, which is the term that will be used in this article. By living restricted to family life, all the children lost, for two years, the opportunity to enjoy the formative dimension of the school, and particularly its subjective dimension.

Thus, there were several losses. Some two-year-old children, surprised by the pandemic and forced to stay at home, went to school for the first time when they had already turned four, having then postponed the passage from the familiar environment to the social environment provided by the school and having been deprived of the necessary alternation between the public and the private fields of life.

Children in inclusive education, especially EE, were the first to drop out of school at the beginning of the pandemic, and the last to return.

The time spent at home because of the pandemic wasn't so harmful to EE children: comfortable with screens, they found a stability they didn't have at school. For this very reason, the post-pandemic return was even more difficult for them. Thus, contrary to what many researchers assumed, who feared the emergence of major disturbances for children with autism during the pandemic, this did not happen. But the post-pandemic effects, those are worthy of note.

In addition, when starting the study, the researchers came across the high absenteeism of children, either because they had a cold and it was feared that they had covid, or because they were subjected to frequency rotations, imposed by the school, in order not to have too many children in one classroom.

Because of all of these difficulties, the intervention had special relevance: it enhanced the way the subjectivity of the children was perceived and helped the schools in their support during the post-pandemic times. Meeting other children was therapeutic, especially for children in inclusive systems.

## **3. The function of the siblings**

It is known that relationships between peers are important because affective relationships are produced there and are, therefore, a source of reassurance for children. But thanks to the psychoanalytic theory, it is possible to understand that in these relationships much more important and structural processes operate: the siblings are a source of identification and participate in the psychic constitution of the subjects involved there. Therefore, peer relationships gain even greater importance for children with EE, for whom the psychic constitution is not assured and the identification processes are not in progress.

Identifications are understood here as psychic processes that produce an I/Other differentiation, insofar as they allow the child to perceive the slightest difference between him and the other when he incorporates the trait of the other "that I don't have". For children with EE, this differentiation has not yet been conquered, but it may occur with the help of the similar, a kind of mirror, another very close and very similar to oneself (Lacan, 1938/2001), a mirror from which the difference is noticeable. In these children, often only imitation movements are observed that are not incorporated as their own traits and do not contribute to the formation of self-knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> The denomination "child with structural obstacles in the psychic constitution" (EECP in Portuguese, or SOPC in English) is being proposed here in substitution to the denomination ASD, and it designates the children in risk of evolution towards the serious psychopathologies of the childhood, such as the infantile psychoses and the autism.

Bernardino (2020) takes up the issue of identification present in the relationship between peers in Lacan's work, experienced with colleagues in schools, to point out the importance of the other in the constitution of the self. If there is an identification with the other, often experienced as the self, in a specular way, there is also, on the other hand, a desire to destroy the other in order to preserve the self. In the game between resembling and differentiating oneself, between wanting to be like the other and also willing to destroy him, the subject situates himself in the world little by little. The similar, therefore, helps to define one's own image: "I am what the other is not".

The function of the siblings operates for children in general, and had already been pointed out by Freud (1916-1917/1976), who noted the importance of the entry of siblings into the life of the child subject, when there is an expansion of his Oedipus complex into a family complex, an expansion that is experienced, initially, as a loss of his place towards his parents. Feelings of hatred and rejection may be awakened initially, and later, they should be replaced by compassion and fraternal feelings.

#### 4. The therapeutic education

The researchers were guided, at the schools, from beginning to end, by the principles of therapeutic education, systematized by Kupfer (2000) to face the need for psychoanalytical operators who would especially guide work in schools.

Therapeutic education is a set of interdisciplinary treatment practices based on psychoanalysis, articulated with educational practices. It relies on the partnership with schools and seeks to find the conditions for the possibility of an education that targets the subjectivity of the child.

For Lerner *et al.* (2016), Therapeutic Education considers education in its function of subjectivation and not only in that of teaching, as it considers the subject of the unconscious and the operations that constitute it. Based on this concept of work, "educating and treating are in a relationship of continuity, insofar as we make an offer of a bond, we sustain the encounter of the child with their peers within a symbolic field and we aim at changes in the subjective position of the children." (p. 261)

For the research, some guidelines directed the researchers' interventions. Among them, the following stand out: Guiding the games so that there is shared play, without actively and excessively interfering; Following and recognition of the identifications, of the connections of the EE child with the other children; Naming and recognition of desire; Offering occasions or activities that allow the presentation, by the children in the group, of ways that constitute childhood, for children with EE (such as, for example, the presentation of the use of fantasy for a child with EE that usually does not use fantasy in its life).

#### 5. The APEGI instrument

The APEGI (Psychoanalytic Monitoring of Children in Schools, Groups and Institutions) is a guide that helps researchers read 5 theoretical axes considered central to follow the subjectivation of children from 2 to 6 years old. This instrument includes the follow-up of the "function of the siblings" and pays special attention to its establishment in the classroom group.

IN APEGI, the 5 axes intersect and mutually determine each other in their function of producing the constitution of the subject. They are: presence and recognition of the subject; playing and fantasy; the paternal role; body image and the function of the siblings.

The APEGI is already validated and has been used with relative extent, but it does not have, on the other hand, been used especially for monitoring the intervention for children in inclusive education. So, this research was a good opportunity to verify how the APEGI can go beyond the reading of subjectivation and also guide possible interventions in the direction of promoting the inclusion of children with EE.

At the end of APEGI, there are monitoring indicators for each of the 5 axes. If some of these indicators are marked as absent, they are signaling problems or arrests in psychic development. If, on the other hand, the indicators become present after a period of intervention – if they are made present – they will be signaling that the march of the constitution of the subject is being resumed.

Some indicators are considered to be more accurate in pointing structural obstacles in the constitution of the subject, and they are called IEE (SOI). If they are absent, the child will be quoted as a child with EE. When the indicators become present, when there is a "presentification" of them, after some time in which the child is followed, we can assume that the subjective constitution is relaunched.

## 6. Results

The percentage analysis of the “presentification” movements of the follow-up indicators showed that 25.8% of the previously absent indicators of the “Similar Function” axis became present. In the other 4 axes, the share of indicators that were present was: 18.8% in “Paternal Role”; 17.9% in “Presence of a Subject”; 16.4% in “Body and its Image” and 10.4% in “Play and Fantasy”.

The analysis of the axes reveals that the Function of Siblings was the one that had the most positive impacts. In fact, the emphasis of the research is really on this axis, and these numbers show that the intervention showed its effects, especially if we compare the results with the changes found in the other axes, in which the movement was smaller, but which occurred, in all way, since the axes are intersected and determine each other. In general, after the interventions, improvements were observed in the children's condition; for the most part, there were gains.

Quantitative results would be enough to confirm the hypothesis that the APEGI can be a good tool for monitoring interventions aimed at subjective change in children in inclusive education, considering the group of children in the research. But after the intervention, would these children have found more inclusion in their schools? Would the post-pandemic effects have found a decrease after the intervention in schools? To reflect about this, the qualitative results are more expressive. Going through the reports written by each researcher about the child they accompanied followed, we can extract, among many others, some aspects that can help answer these questions.

George, a child with EE, loves to play tag. The researcher proposes the game, and Samuel, a member of the group of children, introduces a symbolic game into it: he shouts “police”. The researcher captures this word, unfolds it by introducing its complement: “thief”. Now George calls his friends to play tag by shouting “police!”. His friends answer him and the game is relaunched. The body ceases to be just movement. Samuel was there to introduce the game, and the researcher was there to “fish” it and give value to the work of the peer. This fragment of report shows that the coordinator of Georges’s group, in this post-pandemic context, has done more than to be a symbolic reference, as all coordinators do. It can be said that the children were waiting for their fellow, “en souffrance”, as Lacan recalls, regarding a letter that remains at the post office waiting to be delivered. So, the researcher “delivered this letter”, by mediating the relationship between peers, by addressing to the children the lines that would otherwise have been lost, without a receiver to receive them.

In the post-pandemic, schools were still overwhelmed with the challenges that arose with the need to adapt and the staff was less capable to appropriately listen to the subjective reactions from children with EE. The researchers then took it upon themselves to do so. They functioned as a qualified Other, listening to the lines captured there in the small groups, or giving them the necessary holding.

In the first meetings, John hardly explored the toys in the ludic box; he sat with his back to everyone (researcher and children) and preferred to play with plastic letters, turning them between his fingers. At times he would look in the corner at the children who were playing house, creating stories with puppets and drawing. Despite not seeming to be totally oblivious to the environment, he did not interact, he manipulated his penis, made sounds, chatted his teeth, jumped. One day the kids were trying hard to include him in the game by pretending to bite him with a frog puppet. John did not interact with the children, but turned his body sideways towards them. Suddenly, he sought the researcher's lap and sat there for about 10 minutes. So, seated and with his body leaning against hers, he faced the other children who continued to play. He liked being tickled on his back. At the next meeting, John was interested for the first time in looking at what was in the ludic box. Then he showed signs that he wanted to play tickle. He laughed a lot when he was tickled and this scene was repeated several times. Colleagues, seeing the fun game, wanted to participate and also went to tickle John, who soon laughed with them too. This game was followed by other body games with colleagues and the researcher. John jumped around the room, climbed on the chair, on the table, and seemed to seek contact and containment. He ran out of the room and the researcher brought him back. Then he repeated the action more times, slowly, making it easier for his colleagues to catch him, who, when they saw him leave, were ready to go get him and, bringing him back, tickled him more.

The passage through the researcher's body, whose function was to provide a contour and a holding for the child's body in which the mirror stage did not seem to operate, was fundamental. He lended his body to the child, offering him a support anchor and a starting point for the child's opening to his friends, source of identifications. John's APEGI showed a “positivation” of the indicator “the child answers when a child calls him”, an EE indicator.

Mary presented, in the first application of the instrument, 8 missing indicators, one of which was an indicator of a structural obstacle (IEE), and 6 indicators under construction, pointing out that there were structural obstacles in the subjective constitution. She was an impulsive child, without contact with her peers, showing great psychomotor disorganization. After ten months of follow-up, a significant

change was identified, especially with regard to the similar function. She started to be called by other children to play, built friendships and started to include the others in the game. There was a specific game where the children hid the wolf, and it was Mary who warned the others about the approach of danger, making a long howl. In the second application, no more EE indicators appeared.

## 7. Discussion

Some children who were participating in the study began to play with their peers, and here the numbers also come to our aid. By observing the indicators of the function of the similar, it can be noticed that there were more indicators becoming present in the following: the child has friends; the child is called to play. Considering the total number of appointments, these indicators accounted for 13.3% each of all appearances in this axis.

But here, it is interesting to look at the indicators that are expressive of inclusive movements. In this sense, the indicator “the child is called to play” is quite expressive. There is still no dissimulation in children of this age; if they call the EE child, it is because they are considering including her or him. When answering, the child with EE talks about a subjective movement that was absent before and that is being installed, that is, he is also including his fellow.

The inclusion of our group of children with EE started, and showed signs of evolution over time. Thus, it is possible to perceive that a follow-up such as the one proposed by the research could be maintained in the school. If there is room for it, it could perhaps be an instrument capable of reducing the exclusion of children with EE.

From the results of the research, we emphasize that identifying what does not go well in the subjective constitution without the use of diagnostic classifications offered an opportunity for schools to sustain their place as an instrument of inclusion and subjectivity offer. The schools also bet on the children's subjectivation process, reaffirming that the strength of inclusion is in the bond between the children.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank FAPESP and CNPq for their support and research funding, and the group of researchers who carried out the research, who dedicated themselves to going to the schools and collecting these data which turned out to be so significant.

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