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Pedagogical strategies in managing selective mutism in early childhood education: results of a survey with teachers from the municipal school system.

Pedagogical strategies in the management of selective mutism in early childhood Education: results from a study with Municipal teachers

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Summary

Selective mutism is a childhood anxiety disorder characterized by a child's persistent inability to speak in certain social contexts, despite exhibiting adequate verbal communication in other environments. In early childhood education, this condition can create significant barriers to participation, social interaction, and the child's overall development, especially when it is not recognized or understood by school staff. This article aims to analyze the main results of a study that investigated the pedagogical strategies used by early childhood education teachers in managing selective mutism in the municipality of Araquari, Santa Catarina, focusing on the promotion of inclusive practices. This is a non-experimental, descriptive-exploratory study with a qualitative approach supported by simple quantitative indicators. Twenty-five teachers from the municipal school system participated in the research, answering an online questionnaire with open and closed questions. The data analysis revealed, as central results, the identification of recurring signs of selective mutism in the school context and the use of pedagogical strategies aligned with the recommendations in the literature, such as reducing pressure to speak, organizing the environment into small groups, using alternative communication, and emotional validation. Despite the presence of promising pedagogical practices, the results also point to gaps in teacher training, indicating the need for systematic institutional actions that strengthen teachers' performance in addressing selective mutism in early childhood education.

Keywords: selective mutism; early childhood education; pedagogical strategies; inclusive practices; teacher training.

Abstract

Selective mutism is a childhood anxiety disorder characterized by a persistent inability to speak in specific social situations, despite adequate verbal communication in other contexts. In Early Childhood Education, this condition can create significant barriers to participation, social interaction, and children's overall development, particularly when it is not properly recognized by school staff.

This article aims to analyze the main results of a study that investigated pedagogical strategies used by Early Childhood Education teachers to manage selective mutism in the municipality of Araquari, Santa Catarina, Brazil, focusing on the promotion of inclusive practices. This is a non-experimental, descriptive-exploratory study with a qualitative approach supported by simple quantitative indicators.

Twenty-five teachers from the municipal school network participated by answering an online questionnaire containing open- and closed-ended questions. The analysis revealed, as central findings, the identification of recurring signs of selective mutism in the school context and the use of pedagogical strategies aligned with recommendations from the literature, such as reducing pressure to speak, organizing activities in small groups, using alternative communication, and emotional validation. Despite the presence of promising pedagogical practices, the results also highlight gaps in teacher education, indicating the need for systematic institutional actions to support teachers in managing selective mutism in Early Childhood Education.

Keywords: selective mutism; early childhood education; pedagogical strategies; including practices; teacher education.



1. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education constitutes the first stage of Basic Education and plays a key role. central to the integral development of the child, encompassing cognitive, social, and other dimensions. emotional and communicative. At this level of education, the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC) emphasizes the importance of interactions and play as structuring axes of the curriculum. recognizing communication, listening, and orality as fundamental elements for construction of bonds, the expression of feelings and participation in educational experiences (BRAZIL, 2017). Ensuring that all children can actively participate in these experiences is one of the main... Challenges faced by early childhood education institutions.

However, when the child presents persistent difficulties in verbal communication in In certain social contexts, such as school, this right to participation can be compromised. Selective mutism is classified as a childhood anxiety disorder characterized by Persistent inability to speak in specific social situations, despite the child exhibiting Appropriate language in other settings, especially in the family context (AMERICAN (PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2022). This is a phenomenon that does not result from deficits. linguistic, cognitive, or sensory impairments, but high levels of social anxiety that inhibit speech. in certain contexts.

In the school environment, selective mutism can create significant barriers to participation. The child's role in educational activities and interactions with peers and adults. Situations of silence. Persistent behaviors are often interpreted as extreme shyness, disinterest, opposition, or lack of... engagement, which can result in inappropriate pedagogical practices, such as public exposure. from the child, the coercive insistence that they speak or the attribution of negative labels to their behavior (LUCAS; COSTA, 2021). Such practices tend to intensify anxiety and reinforce The pattern of avoiding speech, instead of fostering the creation of a safe and welcoming environment.

From a public policy perspective, inclusive education presupposes the elimination of barriers to participation and learning, recognizing the diversity of modes of communication and Children's expression. The Brazilian Inclusion Law establishes that education systems must... organize to ensure conditions of access, permanence and participation, by offering necessary support and adaptations (BRAZIL, 2015). In this sense, selective mutism can be understood as a communication barrier that requires intentional pedagogical responses, planned and aligned with the principles of inclusive education.

Despite the relevance of the topic, Brazilian scientific production on selective mutism still... It is incipient when it comes to the educational perspective. Theoretical review studies predominate and Clinical reports are scarce, with empirical research investigating the phenomenon in the context of... school institutions, especially in early childhood education, that focus on pedagogical practices.



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developed by teachers (ELIAS, 2020). This gap contributes to teacher insecurity and

for the adoption of strategies based on common sense, to the detriment of practices grounded in evidence.

Given this scenario, it becomes necessary to understand how teachers in Education Children identify selective mutism in their daily school life; what pedagogical strategies have been used? used in their management and to what extent do these practices contribute to the promotion of healthy environments? inclusive. Considering that the teacher occupies a central position in the organization of experiences In educational contexts, analyzing their perceptions and practices allows us to identify both potential and... Limitations of the pedagogical responses offered to children with selective mutism.

Thus, this article aims to analyze the main results of a survey. conducted with teachers from the municipal early childhood education network of the municipality of Araquari, Santa Catarina. Catarina, focusing on the pedagogical strategies used in managing selective mutism and its... implications for promoting inclusive practices. By presenting and discussing these results, it seeks to- if it contributes to strengthening teaching practice, to improving teacher training teachers and to broaden the academic debate on selective mutism in the context of Early Childhood Education.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Selective Mutism: Characterization and Implications in the School Context

Selective mutism is classified as a childhood anxiety disorder. characterized by a persistent inability to speak in specific social situations, despite the The child demonstrates adequate linguistic competence in other contexts, such as the family environment. (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2022). This condition is not associated with deficits. cognitive, neurological, or language impairments, but also the presence of intense anxiety in the face of certain communicative situations, especially those involving social evaluation.

Studies indicate that selective mutism manifests itself situationally, being common that the child speaks fluently at home and remains silent at school, in front of teachers and colleagues (MURIS; OLLENDICK, 2021). In the school context, this manifestation can compromise the child's participation in educational activities, social interactions, and processes of evaluation, in addition to affecting their self-esteem and emotional well-being.

In Early Childhood Education, where oral communication occupies a central place in the organization of In educational experiences, persistent silence tends to be interpreted as a problem. It is often considered a behavioral trait or a personality trait, which makes mutism difficult to recognize. selective as a specific clinical and educational condition (LUCAS; COSTA, 2021). This reading A misguided approach can lead to the adoption of pedagogical practices that intensify the child's anxiety.



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such as publicly displaying speech or repeatedly demanding verbal communication.

Understanding selective mutism as an anxiety disorder is fundamental to shift the focus from individualistic or moralizing explanations to pedagogical approaches based on reducing anxiety and gradually expanding the communicative possibilities of child. In this sense, the role of the school is not to force speech, but to create safe conditions for the communication can emerge in a progressive and respectful way.

2.2 Early Childhood Education and Inclusive Practices: Legal and Pedagogical Frameworks

Inclusive education presupposes the recognition of diversity as a principle structuring educational systems, which implies the elimination of barriers that limit access, The retention, participation, and learning of students. In the Brazilian context, the Law Brazilian Inclusion Law establishes that education systems must organize themselves to meet the needs of children and adolescents. specific needs of students, ensuring the necessary support for development. full (BRAZIL, 2015).

In Early Childhood Education, the National Common Curriculum Base reaffirms children's right to... participation, expression, and listening, recognizing multiple forms of communication beyond the strict orality (BRAZIL, 2017). This perspective broadens the understanding of inclusion by considering that children can express themselves through gestures, facial expressions, drawings, play and other symbolic resources, especially in situations where speech is temporarily inhibited.

In the case of selective mutism, inclusion requires that the school recognize silence as a A form of communication permeated by anxiety, and not an absence of communicative intent. Inclusive pedagogical practices, in this context, involve adapting teaching strategies to... Flexibility in forms of participation and the creation of emotionally safe environments (ELIAS, 2020).

The literature suggests that adopting inclusive practices in early childhood education requires... Intentional planning, collaborative work, and ongoing teacher training. When these If the conditions are not present, there is a tendency to reproduce standardized practices that disregard the specific needs of children with selective mutism, reinforcing exclusion processes. symbolic in everyday school life.

2.3 Pedagogical strategies in the management of selective mutism

Scientific evidence regarding school interventions in cases of selective mutism indicates which strategies are based on reducing anxiety and gradually exposing individuals to communicative situations They present better results than approaches focused on directly demanding speech (COHAN; (CHAVIRA; STEIN, 2008). In the school context, these strategies need to be integrated into the routine. pedagogical, respecting the child's pace and the playful nature of Early Childhood Education.



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Among the most recurring strategies in the literature, the reduction of pressure stands out. speaking, the use of alternative communication, the organization of activities in small groups and the Emotional validation of the child's experiences (MURIS; OLLENDICK, 2021). Communication Alternatively, for example, it allows the child to participate in activities without the immediate requirement of... speak, using gestures, images, cards or visual aids.

Organizing the environment into small groups or pairs tends to reduce anxiety. social, encouraging interaction and gradual participation. Playful, sensory, musical and other activities. Dramatization is also cited as a powerful strategy, as it shifts the focus from speech to the audience. shared experience, creating less threatening communicative contexts (LUCAS; COSTA, 2021).

Furthermore, emotional validation, understood as the recognition of the feelings of A child without judgment is a central element in managing selective mutism. Recognizing this... While acknowledging that anxiety is legitimate, the teacher contributes to building bonds of trust, a condition... indispensable for advancing communication processes.

2.4 Teacher training and challenges for managing selective mutism

Initial and ongoing teacher training plays a central role in the implementation of Inclusive practices aimed at children with selective mutism. Studies indicate that many teachers They report feeling insecure when dealing with situations of persistent silence, associating this difficulty with... absence of specific content on the topic in their educational trajectory (ELIAS, 2020).

A lack of training tends to result in pedagogical responses based on common sense. common, which are not always aligned with scientific evidence. On the other hand, when the Teachers gain access to qualified information about selective mutism, becoming more capable. to plan coherent pedagogical strategies, to engage with families, and to seek support. intersectoral collaboration with health services (COHAN; CHAVIRA; STEIN, 2008).

In this sense, teacher training needs to be understood as a continuous process. Aligned with the concrete demands of school practice. Investing in training on selective mutism. This means strengthening inclusive education in early childhood education and expanding the possibilities for... participation and development of children experiencing this condition.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was designed as a non-experimental, cross-sectional study, with descriptive-exploratory in nature, adopting a qualitative approach supported by indicators. Simple quantitative methods. This methodological approach allowed for an understanding of perceptions and practices. teachers' approaches related to the management of selective mutism, considering the specific context of Early Childhood Education.



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Twenty-five teachers from the municipal early childhood education network participated in the research. Araquari/SC, including classroom teachers and assistants. Data collection was carried out by through an online questionnaire, composed of closed and open-ended questions, organized into blocks. which addressed the characterization of the participants, the identification of signs of selective mutism, the The pedagogical strategies used and the perceived training needs.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, while The quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics, allowing for the identification of Trends and recurring patterns in responses.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data obtained from teachers in the municipal early childhood education network of Araquari/SC allowed the identification of recurring patterns related to manifestations of mutism. selective learning in the school context, as well as the pedagogical strategies used to manage it. The Results are presented and discussed based on two central axes: (i) the identification of signals selective mutism in the school routine and (ii) the pedagogical strategies adopted by teachers and its implications for inclusive education.

4.1 Manifestations of selective mutism in the context of Early Childhood Education

Teachers reported that selective mutism manifests itself at school through a set of bodily, emotional, and behavioral signs. Among the most frequently observed aspects Among the characteristics mentioned are rigid body posture, unresponsive facial expression, and avoidance. lack of eye contact, the predominant use of gestures and nonverbal expressions, and the persistent refusal to... To respond verbally to direct requests from the teacher.

Another recurring element in the responses was the perception of discrepancy between the The child's communicative behavior in the family and school environment. Teachers They reported that, according to information provided by families, many children with selective mutism They speak fluently at home, but remain silent at school. This characteristic is widely observed. described in the literature as one of the central criteria for identifying selective mutism, reinforcing its situational nature and its relation to social anxiety (AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, 2022; MURIS; OLLENDICK, 2021).

These findings show that teachers are able to recognize signs consistent with the selective mutism, although they don't always use that specific term. In many accounts, the The child's silence was initially associated with extreme shyness or difficulty adapting, which This corroborates studies that point to a tendency towards simplistic interpretations in the school context. (LUCAS; COSTA, 2021). This reading may delay the recognition of the condition and the adoption of more appropriate teaching strategies.



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Identifying these signs in daily school life is a relevant step towards building Inclusive practices, as it allows shifting the focus from blaming the child to analyzing the... pedagogical and relational conditions offered by the school. However, the results indicate that This recognition still occurs in a fragmented way, often disconnected from guidelines. institutional or specific training on selective mutism.

4.2 Pedagogical strategies used in the management of selective mutism

Regarding teaching strategies, teachers reported adopting practices that, To a large extent, they are aligned with recommendations found in the specialized literature. Among the The most frequently cited strategies include reducing the pressure for the child to speak and respecting their pace. of response, the promotion of alternative forms of communication and the organization of activities in small groups or in pairs.

Reducing the pressure to speak was identified as a central strategy in managing... selective mutism. Teachers reported avoiding direct demands, public calls, or Insisting that the child respond verbally helps to reduce anxiety and promote... Participation in group activities. This result aligns with studies that indicate that... Excessive pressure tends to intensify speech blockage, reinforcing the anxiety cycle. characteristic of selective mutism (COHAN; CHAVIRA; STEIN, 2008).

The use of alternative communication was also mentioned as an important resource. especially in pedagogical activities that require some type of response or expression of child. Gestures, pointing, visual cards, drawings, and facial expressions were reported as There are ways to ensure the child's participation without immediately demanding speech. This practice fosters dialogue. in accordance with the principles of inclusive education and the guidelines of the BNCC (National Common Core Curriculum), by recognizing multiple Forms of expression and communication in Early Childhood Education (BRAZIL, 2017).

Another aspect highlighted by the teachers was the organization of the environment into small groups. Considered an effective strategy for reducing social anxiety. Activities performed in pairs. Groups of three, as well as playful and sensory activities, were identified as more favorable contexts. to interaction and communication. The literature suggests that less exposed and more predictable environments They tend to encourage the participation of children with selective mutism by reducing their fear of evaluation. social (MURIS; OLLENDICK, 2021).

Furthermore, the teachers emphasized the importance of emotional validation, acknowledging This approach contributes to understanding the child's feelings and avoiding moralizing interpretations of silence. for building trust, a fundamental condition for the development of practices inclusive pedagogical approaches and for the gradual advancement of oral communication (ELIAS, 2020).



4.3 Limits of practices and implications for teacher training

Despite the presence of pedagogical strategies aligned with scientific evidence, the results indicate significant limitations related to teacher training and institutional support. Many teachers reported that the practices adopted were built intuitively, based on... from everyday experience, without systematic support from initial or continuing training on mutism. selective.

This lack of specific training creates insecurity and hinders the systematization of... pedagogical strategies, which may result in specific practices, dependent on sensitivity. Individual teacher behavior. Studies indicate that a lack of training tends to reinforce responses based on individual needs. common sense prevails, to the detriment of planned interventions coordinated with other professionals. such as psychologists and speech therapists (LUCAS; COSTA, 2021).

The results also highlight the need for greater collaboration between school and family. and health services. The teachers highlighted that dialogue with families is fundamental for to understand the child's behavior in different contexts, but reported difficulties in building institutional referral and follow-up flows. This weakness Institutional policies limit the potential of inclusive practices and reinforce the perception of isolation. A teacher facing the challenge of selective mutism.

Thus, the findings reinforce the importance of continuing education policies that They approach selective mutism in an interdisciplinary way, articulating knowledge from psychology and... Pedagogy and inclusive education. Investing in teacher training means expanding possibilities. of pedagogical intervention and ensure that the strategies used are consistent, intentional and Sustainable practices in the daily life of Early Childhood Education.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article aimed to analyze the main results of a survey that investigated the pedagogical strategies used by early childhood education teachers in managing... selective mutism, with a focus on promoting inclusive practices. The data analysis showed that Teachers are able to identify signs consistent with selective mutism in the daily school routine. even though they may not always have the theoretical or educational frameworks to support this. systematic recognition.

The results indicate that the pedagogical strategies adopted by the teachers present convergence with recommendations from specialized literature, especially regarding reduction From pressure to speak, to the appreciation of alternative forms of communication, to the organization of Activities in small groups and emotional validation for the child. Such practices contribute to the to reduce anxiety and to expand the child's opportunities for participation in the context.

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of Early Childhood Education, configuring themselves as relevant elements for the construction of environments more inclusive education.

However, the research also highlighted important limitations related to training. initial and ongoing teacher training and the absence of systematic institutional guidelines on the Managing selective mutism. The reliance on individual initiatives and solutions constructed from... An intuitive approach tends to weaken the consolidation of consistent pedagogical practices and... overburdening the teacher, especially in contexts that require interaction with families and with health services.

Given this scenario, the findings reinforce the need for investments in policies of continuing education programs that address selective mutism within the context of inclusive education, articulating theoretical and practical knowledge and promoting interdisciplinary work. The construction of pedagogical protocols, the expansion of dialogue between school, family and health services and the Strengthening institutional support for teachers is a relevant path towards... Improving inclusive practices in early childhood education.

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