

# Autism and Education: Contract of Inclusion<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the inclusion contract of a pupil with Autistic Disorder implicitly established between the parties – the pupil’s family and a preparatory school of the regular education system in Brazil. In the light of qualitative ethnographic research, it analyses the educational process and the interactional relationships between the pupil, his teachers, and his schoolmates. Finally, it reflects upon the inclusion contract and highlights the importance given by the educators to the need of having a ‘gift’ for a successful education of children with special educational needs.

**Keywords:** Autistic Disorder, Educational Inclusion, Ethnographic Research.

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## Introduction

In the light of an ethnographic study, this article discusses the relationship of the social contract established between family and school for the educational inclusion of a boy with Autistic Disorder and his exclusion due to breach of contract. We accompanied the inclusive process of Hélio<sup>3</sup> at a school of the regular education system in Brazil. Data was collected from March to mid June 2002, when Hélio left the school. Research on the theme revealed a number of attempts by schools and by civil society to stimulate the inclusion of people with special educational needs in social spheres. However, it also exposed the failure of such attempts which, contrary to what is provided for by law, promote exclusion. In the particular case presented in this article, Hélio follows the reverse pathway and, after three years at a mainstream school, enters special needs education. The article describes the interaction between Hélio and his schoolmates and finally explains the relationship between the pupil’s permanence at the school and the identification, in the subjects’ reports, of the ‘importance of the gift’ (Bourdieu 1970, 1979, 1997, 2003) for educating people with special needs.

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<sup>3</sup> Hélio, the subject of this research, is a twelve-year-old boy with Autistic Disorder who went through an inclusion process at a regular school. All names have been changed.

## **The Contract**

The contract shall be understood as the agreement settled between school and parents. It is not made explicit, but it is known for the contradictions it nourishes within interactional relationships. Some schools, not exclusively those that accept people with special needs, receive the child and pledge to act in a loving, caring way, and to control behaviours that may indicate a deviation from standards and rules of conduct socially established for all educational institutions.

These rules are manifested in the commitment of both the family and the school to act in accordance with the contract that was tacitly agreed to by the parties. On one side, there is the family, who trust their son to the attention of the school without demanding that the school provide him with any formal learning, i.e., the academic knowledge normally transmitted by educational institutions and expected by society. If this learning takes place, everyone is pleased. Nevertheless, when the educational institution does not achieve academic results, everything runs smoothly, as this was not included in the contract anyway . . .

For Habermas (1983), the contract implies sanctions. Through the observation of an event that took place in the school's playground, we were able to identify the moment in which the contract was broken by the school and, as a result, Hélio's inclusion process was terminated. The event concerns the fall suffered by Hélio from the school swings. The pupil climbed to the highest pole of the swings,<sup>4</sup> lost his balance, and fell. At that moment, as at others, he was not under the supervision of any of the three professionals who shared the responsibility of educating him. The left side of Hélio's back was completely lacerated and he was not taken care of by the teachers. Without due first aid, he went back home with the marks of the fall and of the negligence on his body. This fact meant that the established contract – taking care of Hélio during school hours – had been broken. The school did not succeed in fulfilling its part of the agreement. For this reason, after a series of misunderstandings between the family and the teaching staff, Hélio left the school.

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<sup>4</sup> The swings in question were located on a small lawn on the school's outside playground. They were too small for a twelve-year-old child, being appropriate for children of up to five years of age only. They were short and rusty, and had two parallel rods connected to each other by means of a series of iron sheets. One of the seats was missing. For this reason, they leaned towards one side.

In order to explain the labour-interaction relationship, Habermas (1983) uses the concepts of 'instrumental action', 'purposive-rational action' and 'communicative action'. For the author, instrumental action is governed by technical rules based on empirical knowledge and is defined by strategies dependent upon the validity of empirically true or analytically correct propositions. The rational choice of these rules and techniques is governed by strategies based on analytical knowledge. Such choices imply deductions from preference rules.

Purposive-rational action, that is, the way in which instrumental action will be performed – in this case, through affection and control – achieves defined goals under given conditions, while instrumental action organizes means that are appropriate or inappropriate according to an effective control of reality. Instrumental action comprises strategic action. The latter is the way in which affection will be shown and control will be gained, depending only upon a correct evaluation of the possible alternative behaviours. This evaluation, in turn, results exclusively from a deduction made with the assistance of values and maxims that are obvious to all, such as, 'education comes about through the path of love'. Communicative action is a symbolically mediated interaction, that is, it is established on the interaction between school, family and child, governed by rules of compulsory validity created or defined by the school-family relationship itself.

For this relationship to be able to exist, there must be rules. These, which we refer to as 'contract', are defined in the light of expectations of reciprocal behaviour and are strengthened by sanctions. Their sense is objectified in communication, that is, the validity of the contract is based on the intersubjectivity and on the understanding of the interactions, and is guaranteed by universal recognition – all the participants know the rules and, in principle, agree with them.

The violation of the contract implies sanctions as, in the context of inclusion, one assumes that the school's main role is to look after the child while the family's role is not to demand results of a pedagogical nature. The careless way of looking after the child violates confirmed technical rules and is, of itself alone, responsible for the termination of the contract. Hélio's fall from the school's swings violated the contract that had been established. The family considered this phenomenon to be incoherent as they believed taking care of Hélio and physically protecting him was included in the

contract as the school's responsibility. They, therefore, rescinded the contract and transferred Hélio to a new school.

### **The School, the Inclusion and the Experience of Dealing with Hélio**

I believe our work was very good. (Cristiane, in an interview, 17 May 2002)

The school in question was a private institution founded because of its owner's wish to 'take care of children'. According to the owner, Vera, the school was struggling because many pupils had outstanding debts. For this reason, it was impossible to regularize the property in which the school was located – 'this house is not registered with the council' – and of the institution itself. There were approximately fifty pupils between nursery and primary education, and morning and afternoon sessions. In the morning session, two teachers were responsible for both the Year 4 group and a multi-level nursery class, with Vera's constant assistance.

Hélio, twelve years old, had been enrolled as a pupil of the Year 4 of regular education but he actually attended the classes of the multi-level nursery group. The only moment registered by us in which Hélio carried out activities of the Year 4 curriculum was on the first day of data collection. On that day, outside the classroom of his original Year 4 group and accompanied only by the teacher, Hélio did some exercises involving creating words with letter tiles and performing mathematical calculations. After that day, Hélio would go up to the second floor of the building, where the classroom of the Year 4 was located, only once more. Therefore, we will take the nursery group where the pupil remained as a reference.

This group was composed of six children with an average age of five. The tables were arranged in two separate clusters: Hélio sat, most of the time, at one of them while his classmates sat at the other. When Hélio was first enrolled in the school, two years before, there was a third teacher, Elaine, who offered to take him into her classroom with the assistance of Márcia. At the end of Hélio's second year of attendance, Elaine left the school and the group was transferred to Márcia who, based on the experience she had acquired with the former teacher and the pupil, continued the work.

According to Vera, Hélio had been accepted at the school for three reasons: Elaine's previous experience with special education, Vera's wish to help him, and her intention of learning through this experience.

[. . .] seeing Hélio, I felt anxious, I wanted to help him in some way, you know? He is a child, a beautiful boy, and you . . . it gives you a certain . . . it bothers you, it seems like there's something trapped inside, I don't know how to solve it, nowadays . . . it's more of a need to help, to learn, so that in the future we can have other children like that, you know? (Vera, in an interview, 17 May 2002)

In his third year at the school, Hélio read stories from children's books fluently, though he did not interpret them. These skills had been acquired before he entered this institution. He was able to mechanically perform mathematical calculations with numbers of up to three digits and he often wrote or drew his stereotypy motifs – names and logos of TV channels. He also sang songs in a stereotypical way, which proved to be relaxing in moments of anxiety.

Whenever the educational inclusion of children with special educational needs is considered, the question of how the pedagogical process is carried out arises. Seen as a black box, autism is manifested through its most revealing symptoms: the extreme difficulty in establishing affective contact and social ties, stereotypies, the hyperactivity often associated with the condition, and the bursts of aggressiveness that may take place. It became clear that, at this school, the educational process was carried out in an attempt to get round these symptoms in a random trial-and-error approach. They were shots in the dark, tests of the teachers' perseverance and patience.

With regard to pedagogical activities, what we saw when we first arrived at the school was an assembly of random activities, very little routine, and teachers' attempts to control Hélio's behaviour and impose on him the pedagogical tasks that they proposed. Hélio, in his turn, would perform only the tasks he wanted to, at the time and place convenient to him. His teacher shared the responsibility of looking after him with her two colleagues. Thus, Hélio's main activity seemed to be walking around the school, while his teachers' role was to run after him to try to persuade him to focus on an activity, which, most of the times, was inferior to his intellectual level, such as playing with modelling clay, drawing, and collages (tearing up pieces of paper from magazines and gluing them together on another piece of paper to form geometric

shapes). A passage from an interview with Márcia reveals how working with Hélio was a different learning experience for her:

It was a different experience that I had, and he is like that . . . it was a good contact, you know?, in spite of the barriers we faced in it . . . but it was worth it, because otherwise, I think I would never have contact and when someone said: 'Oh, they need a teacher for the special class', I'd say 'Oh, no, I don't want it', you know, 'I don't know how to deal with it'. But in this case I came in and I had to face it: 'So . . . it's for me, fine then'. (Márcia, in an interview, 17 May 2002)

For teacher Cristiane, who did not have any previous experience in dealing with special children, the work with Hélio was a reflection of the lack of structure at the school:

I undertook an internship when I was a student, I worked with a special class, but there were no autistic children, it was a different kind of special children, children with learning difficulties, ok?, things like that. Now, with real special children I worked for the first time and had my first contact with Hélio, and we started like that, we didn't really know what to do with him because, as you may have already realised, our school is small, has only a small number of pupils, it doesn't have a good structure for us to work with children of Hélio's type. (Cristiane, in an interview, 17 May 2002)

Based on these accounts, we realise that Hélio's entrance to the school took place for three main reasons: (1) economic: the school was 'struggling because of pupils' outstanding debts'; (2) socio-professional: 'a need to help, to learn, so that in the future we can have other children like that'; and (3) contingency: 'it's for me . . . fine then'. By accompanying the evolution of the relationship between the teachers and Hélio, we observed ups and downs in which feelings of satisfaction and achievement were mixed with those of professional failure and incomprehension:

I have often arrived here upset. I know that my personal problems have nothing to do with the problems at the school, so, I said: 'Well, I don't want this for me, I can't deal with this, my God, this is going to drive me mad'. Because I talk to him and it's the same as nothing, so sometimes you even get upset at his mother, because she doesn't understand, and, you know what?, if she doesn't understand me, then I won't understand her either . . . in her own way then, I don't want to know about it any more. I even came here once and said: 'I don't want to stay here any more'. But then Vera came to me and said: 'No, it shouldn't be like this!' I've often thought about quitting everything, 'I don't want this any more. I don't want to be a teacher any more; I've had enough of this. I don't want this any more.' But it's all about nerves at the moment and we say things that have nothing to do with it. Then we stop to think about it and see that it's not like that. (Márcia, in an interview, 17 May 2002)

We accompanied the evolution of the inclusion project, its legislation and, specially, the acknowledgement that we are not the same but rich in our differences. We know that, in order to put into practice the premises of the inclusion project we will first

need to change the way we see ourselves. With the conception of special educational needs formulated in Salamanca (1994) according to which all of us, at some time during our lives, may experience special educational needs, and with the perspective of exclusion by Robert Castel (1991) which states that all of us, at some time during our lives, go through situations of exclusion, we clearly see the pillars of our 'securities' tremble. It is no longer possible to think about exclusion without considering our own. Similarly, the inclusion movement is, above all, a movement towards personal inclusion in a society we can recognize as our own.

By establishing that the provision of special education to individuals with disabilities<sup>5</sup> must preferentially be guaranteed in the regular educational network (Braz. Const. article 208, section III; in conjunction with the Braz. Directives and Bases for Education Act no. 9.394198, article 58), the Constitution established the State's duty with regard to education. The schools respond by opening their doors and fulfilling this duty, which in practice has become their own, the best way they can. The responsibility of educating all children seems to have been transferred to each one of the teachers inside the classroom when at one of the desks there is a special child. The pedagogical action enters the discussion and seems to make all the difference when each child's skill development is what is being assessed. We believe this was not the school's premise for the enrolment of Hélio. However, we can see the essential role of experience in the pedagogical action.

## **The Schoolmates**

In contrast with the relationship established between the teachers and Hélio, the contact with his schoolmates – and, in this case, not only classmates – took place naturally. We witnessed Hélio being invited for games and group activities as well as being offered assistance by the other pupils:

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<sup>5</sup> Article 3: For purposes of this decree, we shall consider: I – disability – complete loss or abnormality of a psychological, physiological or anatomic structure that creates inability to perform an activity up to the standards considered normal for human beings; II – permanent disability – that which took place or was stabilized during a period of time that is sufficient to impede recovery or have the possibility of being altered notwithstanding new treatments; and III – impairment – an effective and sharp reduction of social integration ability which requires equipment, adaptation, means or special resources in order for the person with impairment to receive or transmit the information needed for his/her personal well-being and for the realization of a specific function or activity (Decree No. 3,298, of 20 December 1999; Regulating Act No. 7,853 of 24 October 1989).

It's true. There's a dispute at break time here to see who will get Hélio's snack, you know? 'No, teacher, it must be me today!' And I say: 'No, calm down! Each one has their own day to get Hélio's snack'. Otherwise it's great confusion, chaos. (Márcia, in an interview, 17 May 2002)

Hélio, in turn, would not always agree to the requests, but he allowed the other pupils to establish contact. This fact shows that, with regard to interaction with his peers, the process of inclusion was successful.

### **The Condition of Having the 'Gift'**

She [Márcia] says: 'I don't have this gift'. (Vera, in an interview, 17 May 2002)

Among the conditions for the realization of pedagogical activities with a child with special educational needs, it becomes clear from the subjects' statements that 'having the gift' was essential. Characterized as 'something unexplainable . . . it's personal . . . it's affection, it's enjoying, taking pleasure in dealing with *this type of child*', the gift seems to replace experience, creating an innate condition for success. According to Vera, Elaine had this gift; she was 'pure love'. This characteristic was seen as an attribute that allowed her to know how to educate him.

Cristiane explained that, in order to work with special children:

You need to like what you're doing, you know? Because you need a lot of patience, a lot, and we learned this with Hélio. Because we realised we need a lot of patience. Sometimes you're about to lose . . . you're hanging by a thread, but then you remember: 'No, he is a special child, I can't. He must be treated normally, as a child at school, but at the same time he has a side to him that must be respected because he is special', you know? (Cristiane, in an interview, 17 May 2002)

According to Bourdieu (1997), the gift arises as something essentially free, gratuitous. Thus, those who possess it do so spontaneously. Following the same line of thought, the one who does not possess it will undoubtedly experience the anguish of the possibility of failure. On the path of education through experience, those who do not naturally possess the gift will have to learn. But in order for that to happen, they must be willing to learn.

Here, the difference between maternal love and the love of a teacher is also highlighted. In the former, there seems to exist a right over the child's body. The teacher says: 'I give him a piece of myself', but also: 'a few slaps, if it was my child, I'd feel

like giving'. In the latter, the statement differs with regard to these rights: 'The child is a human being and we have to consider their rights, they have duties but they also have rights' (Cristiane, in an interview, 17 May 2002).

We have seen that, in the interaction with Hélio, the pedagogical approach fluctuated between these two types of love, or practice.

### **School, Family and Pedagogical Process**

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be – and of a less desirable kind [. . .]. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma [. . .]. It constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity. (Goffman 1990: 12)

What follows is a simple commonplace example that took place so many times that it became relevant to be studied. These are situations that go unnoticed in everyday life but when inserted in a school environment may modify relationships of mutual trust and subvert the educational dynamics.

0:23:20 – Teacher offers modelling clay to Hélio.

0:24:30 – Teacher instructs Hélio to sit on the bench, not on the table. Teacher sits on the table.

0:25:54 – Hélio sits on the bench and awaits the modelling clay.

0:27:56 – Teacher offers felt-tip pens to Hélio.

(Event collected on 1 March 2002)

This event reveals the prevalence of the stigma of a 'special child', in which the logic and coherence necessary for the concretization of the educational process give place to several forms of body control – physical control through which the teacher keeps him sitting and the relational control in which infantilizing activities suppose a prolongation of childhood.

There is a clear incoherence in the educational process. In an attempt to gain control over Hélio and make him stop wandering around outside the school building, teacher Cristiane suggests an activity – playing with modelling clay. But in order to be able to play with it, Hélio needs to sit at the table and wait for the clay to be brought to him by another teacher. Cristiane remained beside him so that he would not get up and start walking around the school again. The teacher then instructs him to sit on the bench

and not on the table. However, she sits on the table herself. The gap between what is said and what is done widens as the minutes pass by. Finally, contrary to her initial promise, the teacher hands felt-tip pens to Hélio. One may suppose this is the education of incoherence or even think that dealing with someone with such a stigma does not require logic.

In the next example, we may notice, once again, the realization of an infantilizing activity, a permissive attitude towards an inadequate behaviour, and the discrepancy between what is said and what is done.

0:27:56 – The teacher offers felt-tip pens to Hélio.

0:28:25 – Hélio draws on the paper and on the table.

0:28:47 – The teacher reprehends Hélio for drawing on the table.

0:29:12 – Hélio draws on the table.

0:29:30 – The teacher reprehends him again.

0:32:27 – Hélio draws on the table.

0:32:53 – The teacher reprehends Hélio and threatens him: ‘Not on the table! I don’t find this funny! I’ll put the paper away!’

0:33:30 – The teacher complains with Hélio: ‘I don’t find this funny! I’ll put the paper away!’

0:34:13 – Hélio draws on the table and smiles. The teacher says: ‘I don’t find this funny!’

0:34:47 – Hélio draws on the table and smiles. The teacher says: ‘I don’t find this funny!’

0:35:07 – Hélio draws on the table and smiles. The teacher says: ‘I don’t find this funny!’

0:35:22 – The teacher says: ‘Hélio is smiling. I don’t find this funny!’

0:37:55 – The teacher takes the felt-tip pens rather than the paper away from Hélio as he continued to draw on the table.

0:38:05 – The teacher gives a felt-tip pen back and threatens: ‘Draw on the paper or I’ll take it away!’

(Event collected on 1 March 2002)

The subsequent course of affairs suggests the persistence of incoherent actions and the use of menaces, which, like the promise, are also unfulfilled. In this situation, the teacher instructs Hélio not to draw on the table but on the paper before him. Hélio draws on the paper, but also on the table, which drives the teacher into an authoritarian discourse with the menace of taking the paper he is drawing on away from him.

We may think that, if while Hélio has a sheet of paper before him he draws both on the sheet and on the table, the moment this sheet is taken away from him he will

most probably devote his attention to drawing on the table since he had already been doing so. If we agree that the teacher has also followed this train of thought, though she did not clearly state it but used an authoritarian tone and showed how Hélio's smiles and disobedience bothered her, she took the felt-tip pens away from him. However, this was not what she was threatening to do. Another incoherence. According to her own determination, she should have taken the paper, not the felt-tip pens, away from him. Nevertheless, the lack of logic prevails. And to conclude, ten seconds later – a very short period of time for Hélio to miss them – a felt-tip pen is returned to him.

Hélio, in turn, demonstrates his understanding of these situations by presenting his own set of rules – he frequently goes in and out of the classroom, uses the tables as seats, remains for long periods of time in the playground or walking by himself around the school. According to Goffman, 'routinely available information about him [the stigmatized] is the base from which he must begin when deciding what tack to take in regard to whatever stigma he possesses' (1990: 65).

## **Conclusion**

The depiction that has just been presented reiterates the establishment and maintenance of the contract between school and family and its consequences concerning the education of a child with special needs. It exposes the belief in the strict relationship between professional experience and 'gift' to achieve success in the educational process, considering the latter as the utmost value that will make a successful special education possible. In addition, the combination of contract, acquired experience, and the absence of gift results in a formula that prolongs the pupil's childhood. It also acknowledges that the stigma of a 'special' child makes the use of logic unnecessary in the educational process. We thus conclude that the compliance with the contract on the part of the other pupils – Hélio's schoolmates – may be considered the point of inclusion that maintained the pupil at the school.

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