

## Unveiling challenges: Inclusive literacy of children with intellectual disabilities in the Brazilian school context

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### ABSTRACT

The literacy of children with intellectual disabilities in mainstream education faces numerous challenges, requiring specific strategies on the part of teachers to overcome such obstacles. The main objective of this study is to analyze and understand these challenges, highlighting the disparity between inclusive guidelines and educational practice. It is intended to identify and discuss the conceptions of teachers, their adequate training and the stigmas that directly impact the learning of these children. Based on the Historical-Cultural approach, this work used the methodology of bibliographic research, with searches in Google Scholar and Scielo, using keywords "pedagogical practices", "intellectual disability", "literacy" and "school inclusion". A total of 311 articles were selected, considering inclusion criteria that encompass pedagogical practices in regular education and Historical-Cultural theory. The exclusion criteria applied were articles that did not deal with ID, did not address the Historical-Cultural theory and did not deal with pedagogical strategies in regular education. The results indicate that the challenges faced by these children range from stigmatization to cognitive and neuropsychomotor barriers. Although inclusive legislation exists, the practice often reveals a pseudo-inclusion, highlighting the need for educational planning that considers the pedagogical diagnosis and the particularities of each student. The Collaborative Teaching strategy, which promotes the partnership between Special Education and common classroom teachers, proves to be effective in overcoming these barriers. Inclusive pedagogical practices should involve the use of varied resources, playful activities and concrete materials, such as literacy games, as well as the incorporation of educational technologies and the exploration of contexts outside the classroom. Pedagogical mediation and the use of Digital Information and Communication Technologies are essential, as well as daily literate practices, including reading books, newspapers and magazines. Planning that respects students' rhythms and incorporates challenging processes is crucial for a truly inclusive education.

**Keywords:** Pedagogical practices, Intellectual disability, Literacy, School inclusion.

### INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a complex process that goes beyond the mere acquisition of rote reading and writing skills. In the light of the historical-cultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (2011), Soares (1985) understands literacy as a social and cultural practice that develops over time, incorporating language and interaction as essential elements.

This article focuses on a crucial section within this broad context: the challenges faced by children with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) in the literacy process. Despite the inclusive guidelines in Brazilian legislation, reality reveals significant obstacles, often resulting in masked exclusion in the school

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environment, as pointed out by Dantas (2019).

The literacy process for students with ID presents a number of challenges that impact both teachers and students themselves. The consolidation of social inclusion from the perspective of inclusive education requires the development of more adapted and effective pedagogical practices. The complexity of the individual needs of these students requires a personalized approach and, for this, adequate resources, continuous training of teachers, are fundamental in the process of teaching and learning reading and writing for children with ID.

In view of these challenges, it is necessary to highlight the importance of pedagogical mediation as a fundamental strategy to support the development of these students' reading and writing skills. Pedagogical mediation involves adjusting knowledge according to the individual needs and learning pace of each child with ID (Pereira, 2023). In addition, promoting social interactions based on dialogue and ensuring the proximity of the teacher during reading and writing monitoring are essential aspects to stimulate the engagement and active participation of students with ID in the literacy process (Papim; Oliveira, 2023).

This article aims to expand the literature on the topic of children with ID and literacy and also to contribute to the broader discussion on the urgent need for inclusive pedagogical practices. By highlighting the importance of teacher training and the revision of limiting concepts, this article aims to promote critical reflection and the possibility of implementing effective strategies to ensure a literacy process for all children.

## **OBJECTIVE**

The main objective of this study is to analyze and understand the challenges faced by children with ID in the literacy process, highlighting the disparity between inclusive guidelines and educational practice. We seek to identify and discuss the teachers' conceptions, the appropriate training and the possible stigmas that surround these children, directly impacting their learning.

In addition, the article aims to highlight the importance of the Historical-Cultural approach, which highlights the interdependence between the development of the subject and its cultural, social and historical context. Pedagogical mediation, aligned with this perspective, is explored as a crucial tool to overcome challenges, providing adequate stimulation and promoting significant cognitive changes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To achieve the proposed objective, the methodology used was bibliographic research. The search for articles and journals was carried out in Google Scholar and Scielo, using the keywords "pedagogical practices", "intellectual disability", "literacy" and "school inclusion", combined with the Boolean operator



and a total of 311 articles were found. The inclusion criteria were: research articles that deal with pedagogical practices for the literacy of students with ID in the context of regular education, articles that are based on the Historical-Cultural approach, fundamental for the analysis of the role of pedagogical mediation in the educational context of children with ID. Other factors for the selection of articles: publications in Portuguese; relevance of the title and abstract in relation to the research objectives; Full availability of the text to allow the reading and in-depth analysis of the selected articles. The exclusion criteria were articles that did not deal with ID, did not address the Historical-Cultural theory and did not deal with pedagogical strategies in regular education.

The titles and abstracts of the articles were initially read to verify their relevance to the research theme. Only those works that had a clear connection with Historical-Cultural theory and that contributed significantly to the understanding of the challenges in literacy of children with ID were chosen. Data analysis was performed based on the critical and interpretative reading of the selected articles through reading sheets. The focus was to identify and discuss teachers' conceptions, adequate training and possible stigmas surrounding children with ID, directly impacting their learning. In addition, the importance of the Historical-Cultural approach was highlighted, exploring the interdependence between the development of the subject and its cultural, social and historical context.

Bibliographic research is the ideal methodology for this study, due to the multiplicity of authors who approach the theme in line with the proposed objective. According to Gil (2002), articles published in journals and periodicals are characterized by their depth and methodological rigor, configuring themselves as sources of research of extreme relevance today. Through this methodology, it was possible to carry out an in-depth theoretical study of the challenges experienced by children with ID in the literacy process, in addition to identifying effective pedagogical strategies and practices for the promotion of quality inclusive education. By highlighting the importance of pedagogical mediation and the Historical-Cultural approach, the study contributes to a critical reflection on teacher training and the implementation of inclusive educational policies, with emphasis on the literacy of children with ID.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

The understanding of literacy, encompassing the acquisition of the written language code and reading and writing skills, has evolved over time (Soares, 2012). As highlighted by Vygotsky (2011), literacy transcends mere mechanical acquisition, emphasizing the relevance of language and interaction in the development of reading and writing comprehension. Vygotsky emphasizes language and interaction as central axes in the process of developing reading and writing comprehension. Soares' perspective (1985; 2020) conceives literacy as social and cultural practices in constant evolution, emphasizing the importance of understanding the context in which the reading and writing processes occur. Defined as the



appropriation of writing technology, literacy involves cognitive and linguistic techniques, procedures, and skills (Soares, 2020). This broader understanding highlights the complexity of the process, considering its intrinsically social and cultural nature.

In this context, literacy is a crucial element, especially for children with ID, due to the relevance it assumes in the development process. Soares (1998) defines literacy as the process of mastering the written language, emphasizing the construction of written expression based on orality. From this perspective, the educator and the student assume active roles in a dialectical process, where the contents are internalized and transform the psychic development, enabling the appropriation of new knowledge (Firbida et al., 2021).

Inclusive education, which seeks to ensure access and full development for all children, including those with disabilities, recognizes literacy as a fundamental tool. Silva (2020) highlights its importance as a means to promote social inclusion and ensure the full participation of these children in different contexts. Matos and Mendes (2013) collaborate with the idea that inclusive education is an integral and essential part of an inclusive society and becomes fundamental for the consolidation and development of the democratic state.

Children with ID, who are often exposed to stigmatization and marginalization (Antunes, 2012), find in literacy a way to face such challenges, acquiring essential skills for communication and interaction. Literacy is perceived as an instrument of empowerment for these children, demanding inclusive and adaptive pedagogical practices that value their individual capacities. This study seeks to contribute to an effective understanding of the literacy process of children with ID, emphasizing its importance in educational and social development.

The challenges faced by children with ID in the literacy process are multifaceted and can exert significant influences at this crucial stage of educational development. According to Scheffel and Moura (2023), these challenges imply stigma and social exclusion, as ID comes up against the idealization of a perfect human being, resulting in suffering and social exclusion due to non-compliance with expectations regarding neuropsychomotor development.

In addition to the historical stigmas associated with old terms, which fail to recognize the importance of the person with ID as an individual with developmental potential. Other challenges are related to the cognitive and neuropsychomotor aspects that characterize ID, with lower cognitive development, often expressed as an intelligence quotient (IQ) below that expected for chronological age (DSM-5, 2013).

Human diversity, evidenced in school interactions, requires educational practices that are simultaneously pluralized and individualized, recognizing the uniqueness of each student. Dantas (2019) highlights that children with ID face significant challenges in the literacy process, revealing a discrepancy



between Brazilian legislation, which advocates the inclusion of all students in the same classroom, and the observed reality, which often reflects a masked exclusion or pseudo-inclusion. This disharmony in the inclusion process can create substantial barriers to the full development of reading and writing skills.

In the context of Inclusive Education, particularly in the challenge faced by education professionals in the literacy process, the complexity associated with children with ID is highlighted. The main purpose is to expand the access of these children to the elaborated culture, using pedagogical resources and didactic strategies. Papim and Oliveira (2023) emphasize the relevance of pedagogical mediation in the context of oral and written language teaching, aiming to instigate meaning, need, and motivation during the process of learning to read and write in children with ID.

In this context, the theoretical approach adopted is based on the Historical-Cultural theory, indicating that learning and human development derive from social and cultural interactions. The duality of these interactions is highlighted, originating both from everyday experiences based on common sense and from knowledge acquired through scientific methods in the school environment. Learning at school is conceived as a more intricate construction, aiming not only at the child's immediate performance, but also at his ability to think and act through the complex culture of language (Papim; Oliveira, 2023).

The difficulty in literacy of students with ID is closely linked to teachers' negative conceptions of their learning possibilities. The lack of training and knowledge of educators about the process of acquiring reading and writing emerges as an additional obstacle (Dantas, 2019). Countering these difficulties, Vygotsky's epistemological perspective highlights the importance of considering the subject in its totality, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between organic factors and cultural influences.

By integrating the Historical-Cultural theory to the challenge of teaching literacy to students with ID, a significant relevance is perceived, emphasizing that the genesis of the constitution is historical-cultural, highlighting the integral role of culture in the formation of the human being, culture is understood as historically produced knowledge, shaped by social relations, human activities and by the tools and artifacts that each society develops over time. Vygotsky opposes reductive approaches that attempt to explain development only through biological or cultural factors in isolation. This approach suggests that learning is strongly influenced by the social and cultural environment, transcending biological determinations (Vygotsky, 2019).

Teachers' negative conceptions about the learning possibilities of students with ID, mentioned by Dantas (2019), are in disagreement with the Historical-Cultural approach. Vygotsky does not reduce the human being to social determinations, but highlights the dynamic interaction between organic factors and cultural influences. Therefore, the difficulty in the literacy of these students can be interpreted as a gap in the understanding of the crucial role of the educational environment in the formation of the subject.



The articulation between the Historical-Cultural theory and the difficulties in literacy of students with ID highlights the importance of an educational approach that recognizes the interdependence between the development of the subject and his cultural, social and historical context. This association highlights the need for teacher training that integrates principles capable of promoting a more inclusive education and that addresses differences.

The guiding principles of inclusive education represent a key milestone in developing more equitable and learner-centred approaches. The principle of inclusion highlights the importance of including all students, regardless of their differences, in mainstream educational settings. By acknowledging the diversity of students' abilities, needs, and characteristics, the principle of diversity promotes a more comprehensive and personalized perspective, enriching the educational environment (Brasil, 2008).

By basing pedagogical actions on the assumptions of the Historical-Cultural theory, special education can only be understood from an inclusive point of view. In this context, practices aimed at students with ID should consider the potential capacity of students, offering quality mediations, actions, strategies, and interactions that stimulate mental processes, conceptual formation, and abstract thinking, with an emphasis on the development of higher psychological functions and not only elementary ones (Noronha et al., 2023). The authors affirm that the experience of appropriating the knowledge accumulated throughout social history, of the objects and phenomena created from language and social interaction, allows the development of higher mental functions.

It is through social interactions that the child can advance through the compensation process. The quality of these interactions, the situations created, and the difficulties imposed by the environment influence the different directions of compensation. The Historical-Cultural theory advocates the attendance of children with disabilities in regular school, where they will be able to interact socially with diversity and develop ways to compensate for the disability (Noronha et al., 2023).

School inclusion promotes a more egalitarian and comprehensive view of knowledge, which recognizes diversity and the importance of welcoming all differences in the school environment. The idea of inclusion is to eliminate discrimination by working with all students together. The ethics of inclusion must be embodied in attitudes that support the affirmation of the identity of individuals, without hiding their competences. The objective is to achieve the fulfillment and development of all people, according to their particularities, limitations and potentialities, escaping from the conceptions advocated by the current social and economic order, which add value to people according to their potential for productivity and efficiency (Matos; Mendes, 2013).

These reflections highlight the importance of ensuring that all students have access to quality education, regardless of their abilities, stay motivated, and stay in school. The pursuit of full participation



aims to ensure that each student participates fully in the educational opportunities available, respecting and valuing their individual characteristics. Mendes (2017) points out that inclusive education means thinking about a school where access and permanence for all students are possible, arguing that the mechanisms of selection and discrimination, used until then, can be replaced by procedures for identifying and removing barriers to learning. Qualify all children and young people with regard to content, concepts, values and experiences in the school teaching-learning process, based on the assumption of recognizing and valuing individual differences.

In addition, the principle of equal opportunities reinforces the commitment to ensure that all pupils enjoy equitable access to quality education without any form of discrimination (Jomtien Conference, 1990). To fulfill this commitment, it is essential to build a fair educational system, where each student, regardless of their characteristics or abilities, has the same chances to learn and develop.

Teachers often express feelings of unpreparedness in the face of diversity in the classroom, which may be related to the persistence of an idealized model of student. This anxiety, combined with unmet expectations, can generate dilemmas in teaching practice. The initial problem in the literacy of students with special educational needs (SEN) is often associated with teachers' limiting conceptions of ID, often based on the belief in the student's lack of cognitive capacity. This deficient view, often fueled by the absence of adequate training, ignores the need to revise traditional pedagogical approaches (Dantas, 2019).

In this context, pedagogical mediation emerges as a crucial tool for the literacy of students with ID. The implementation of appropriate interventions, considering the individual characteristics of each student, can trigger significant cognitive changes and overcome obstacles in the construction of knowledge (Glat, 2021). Studies show that, with proper support, students with ID have great potential to progress in learning to read and write.

Difficulty in literacy, associated with teachers' negative conceptions of the learning possibilities of students with ID, can result in reduced expectations and stigmatization. The lack of knowledge and lack of training of educators about the process of acquiring reading and writing represent additional obstacles, because, as Vygotsky (2019) points out, the educational context is fundamental for the construction of knowledge. The absence of inclusive pedagogical approaches, which consider the diverse abilities and potentials of students with ID, can significantly limit the effectiveness of educational practices.

Teachers' limiting conceptions of ID, often based on deficient views of students' potential, reinforce the urgency of revising pedagogical approaches. This review is crucial to create an educational environment that promotes the cognitive development of all students, considering the heterogeneity of abilities and potentials present in the classroom.



Pedagogical mediation emerges as a crucial tool to face these challenges (Dantas, 2019). Teachers in regular schools can use pedagogical strategies that support students' abilities, promoting development beyond their current abilities. Appropriate interventions, aligned with the Historical-Cultural perspective, can trigger important cognitive changes, overcoming obstacles in the construction of knowledge. Studies indicate that students with ID have the potential to progress conceptually in learning to read and write, as long as appropriate stimulation situations are provided. Therefore, the implementation of reading strategies similar to those applied to students without disabilities can be fundamental for the success of the literacy process (Papim; Oliveira, 2023).

The discussion of how these challenges can influence the literacy process highlights the pressing need for an inclusive educational approach that recognizes and values the diversity of abilities, potentials, and contexts of students with ID. Adequate teacher training, the abandonment of limiting conceptions and the promotion of pedagogical practices aligned with Historical-Cultural theory are essential steps to ensure an effective and inclusive literacy process for all children.

## SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR LITERACY IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The dynamic conception of inclusive education, which recognizes the multiplicity of identities and seeks to overcome challenges related to student diversity, demands specialized pedagogical approaches. By exploring specific strategies or adapted methods used for literacy in the context of student diversity, we focus on the characteristic demands of ID.

The uniqueness of ID requires an approach that transcends mere diversity, incorporating pedagogical strategies adapted to facilitate the learning process. The development of empathetic relationships and affective bonds between teachers and students. The consideration of differences and singularities in pedagogical practice emerges as a vital dimension to promote an inclusive and effective education. Inclusive education, by recognizing the individuality of students, must develop specific methodologies to meet the particular demands of ID, ensuring the full inclusion of each student in the educational environment. It is important to emphasize that learning is a right of all students, and it is up to the State, the school and the teachers to transform their practices to make this right effective.

People with ID face structural and functional conditions that can impact their participation in the school environment and access to scientific knowledge. However, the school should not restrict itself to the diagnosis of the student and his/her deficient characteristics. In this scenario, specialized strategies become essential. It is pertinent that the planning for the student is developed based on the pedagogical diagnosis, identifying the student's possibilities and weaknesses. Despite the limitations, human potentialities can be expanded with external influence, emphasizing the need for specialized action strategies to enhance learning (Scheffel; Moura, 2023).





Collaborative Teaching emerges as a promising strategy for school inclusion. This approach, recently developed in Brazil, aims to create enriching pedagogical practices, overcoming barriers and providing an inclusive educational environment. The Collaborative Teaching strategy, focused on the partnership between Special Education teachers and common classroom teachers, aims to overcome barriers and create inclusive pedagogical practices. Costa (2021) highlights that this approach is fundamental to ensure the teaching-learning process for students with disabilities, pervasive developmental disorders, and high abilities or giftedness.

According to the previously mentioned Historical-Cultural theory, learning and human development originate from social and cultural interactions, resulting from everyday experiences and daily interactions in the classroom, where classmates and teachers play crucial roles in the mediation of knowledge. With regard to knowledge acquired through scientific methods, dialogue, collaboration and social interaction are essential elements that shape learning in regular schools (Papim; Oliveira, 2023). Teachers have the ability to create environments that foster interaction among students, providing opportunities for discussions, group work, and collaborative activities. In this context, collaborative learning or cooperative practice proposed by Scheffel and Moura (2023) stands out as a strategy to encourage meaningful learning. This is collaboration between students, in which a student who is more advanced in the process helps a colleague who is still developing the concept covered in the activity.

Martins (2021) highlights the importance of adopting specific methodological strategies for students with ID, prioritizing autonomy and confidence. The teacher plays a key role in mediating the educational process by creating a dialogic teaching and learning environment that takes advantage of the current abilities of children with ID and directly influencing the development of students' higher psychological functions.

Pedagogical strategies need to be adjusted to accommodate different learning styles, developmental paces, and skill levels. This can include the use of varied resources, playful practices, and concrete materials, such as literacy games, that arouse the student's interest. In addition, the incorporation of educational technology and differentiated approaches, such as the exploration of contexts outside the classroom, as suggested by Domingos and Casagrande (2023), contributes to a more inclusive and stimulating environment.

The implementation of contextualized pedagogical projects, which involve accessible digital resources, is essential to explore the potential of students. According to Oliveira e Silva (2022), technological resources, when used to mediate the interaction between teacher, student and learning, and carefully incorporated into the teaching-learning process, present positive results. They collaborate with the teacher in developing a dynamic and motivating environment for students. However, we reiterate that technology alone is not capable of promoting learning. It is necessary for the teacher to understand these



tools, analyze their possibilities critically and judiciously, and take into account the context, interests, and factors that influence and are influenced by them.

Martins (2021) highlights the need for teachers to acquire specific skills to implement these methodologies, emphasizing the importance of overcoming technological challenges to adapt to the students' digital context. Regarding the use of technologies, Papim and Oliveira (2023) suggest the development of pedagogical software as a Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICT) tool, combined with pedagogical mediation, which follows a didactic strategy aligned with children's needs.

Other pedagogical practices adopted for the literacy of students with ID, as proposed by Domingos and Casagrande (2023), involve literate literacy practices. These activities are carried out daily in the classroom and include reading books, newspapers, and magazines. The teacher plays a crucial role in organizing the classroom, transforming it into an environment conducive to literacy by making a variety of texts and materials available to students.

In addition, specific adaptations and resources are implemented to ensure that students with ID have access to curricula, methods, techniques, and educational resources appropriate to their needs. The planning includes strategies that adjust to specific requirements, considering the use of different senses, such as hearing, touch and sight.

The development of new forms of mental functioning through pedagogical mediation is crucial (Pletsch, 2014). Dialogues, listening, orientations and collaborative elaborations in daily pedagogical practice are effective ways to promote inclusion (Braun; Marin, 2018). Planning that respects students' rhythms and incorporates challenging processes is fundamental for inclusive education (Oliveira, 2018).

These strategies aim to create an inclusive educational environment, recognizing and meeting the specific needs of students with ID, without segregating or particularizing pedagogical practice. The teacher plays a fundamental role, and it is necessary to have a deep knowledge of the students, their needs and potentialities to implement effective and inclusive pedagogical practices.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Literacy is an essential element for educational and social development, especially for children with ID. Acknowledging the complex nature of the process, the study highlights the importance of social and cultural practices, as defended by Soares (1985, 2020).

The challenges faced by children with ID in literacy are wide-ranging: from stigmatization and marginalization to cognitive and neuropsychomotor barriers. Inclusive legislation often faces the reality of pseudo-inclusion, highlighting the need for educational practices that recognize the uniqueness of each student.



The Historical-Cultural theory underlies the theoretical perspective of the study, highlighting the interdependence between the development of the subject and its cultural, social and historical context. This theory confronts teachers' negative conceptions about the learning possibilities of students with ID, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between organic factors and cultural influences.

Overcoming these challenges requires an inclusive educational approach that values the diversity of abilities, potentials, and contexts of students with ID. The adequate training of teachers, the abandonment of limiting conceptions and the promotion of pedagogical practices aligned with the Historical-Cultural perspective are essential steps to ensure an effective and inclusive literacy process.

In the context of Inclusive Education, Collaborative Teaching presents itself as a promising strategy, highlighting the partnership between Special Education teachers and common classroom teachers. Collaborative learning, grounded in Historical-Cultural theory, is suggested as a way to encourage meaningful learning.

The use of specific methodological strategies, varied resources, playful practices, concrete materials and educational technology makes the educational environment more inclusive and stimulating, considering the individual strengths and weaknesses of students with ID.

Inclusion goes beyond diagnosis, seeking specialized strategies that enhance learning. The central role of the teacher in creating a dialogical, empathetic environment adapted to the specific needs of students with ID is fundamental to the success of the literacy process.

Inclusive education, recognizing the individuality of learners, must continually evolve its practices to ensure that all learners fully exercise their right to learn.

In short, literacy for children with ID requires a commitment to inclusion, valuing diversity, and implementing effective and contextualized pedagogical practices.



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