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PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL ADVANCES

School stage and students with Down syndrome

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Abstract

The changes in schooling implemented with the object of improving quality and including all students are benefiting Down syndrome students. Their role is valued and their active and direct participation in the educational process is promoted. However, for these included students to feel they are capable students they must construct their knowledge of themselves and their personal relationship and social skills to face the challenges of the environment in better conditions and in a standard way.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Síndrome de Down;
Escuela ordinaria;
Aprendizaje
cooperativo;
Trabajo
psicoterapéutico

La etapa escolar y el alumno con síndrome de Down

Resumen

Los cambios que se están produciendo en la escuela para mejorar su calidad e incluir a todo el alumnado están beneficiando a los alumnos con síndrome de Down. Se valora su rol y se promueve su papel activo y directo en los procesos educativos. No obstante, para que el alumno en situación de inclusión se sienta un alumno capaz, debe construir el conocimiento de sí mismo y las habilidades personales, relacionales y sociales para afrontar los requisitos del entorno en mejores condiciones y de forma normalizada.

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Education has the aim of promoting an individual's integral formation and helping them achieve their maximum potential for social and personal development.

Mandatory schooling is provided in nursery, primary and secondary schools; and children and teenagers spend most of their time there. As well as absorbing knowledge and developing the skills appropriate to their age, in these centres they grow as individuals, learn to relate and make friends and discover the pleasure of learning.

In the different physical spaces of educational centres (classroom, courtyard, library or canteen), children and teenagers acquire and develop life-long cognitive, emotional and relational skills. Primary and secondary schools will, together with their social and home environment, influence all aspects of their development.

Inclusion of all students in response to the new needs of society

In recent years it has become usual for teachers to speak about student diversity. Apparently everybody accepts an evident reality: students are different, just as adults are different.

Their personal history, life experience, social and family situation, cultural level of their group... All these factors mean that each student is a person different to the rest.

The individual differences related to the student's capacity, interests, motivations and speed of learning are also more generally accepted today than before. But what happens when these differences are marked and go beyond "normal" limits, as is the case when a student has Down syndrome (DS).

Over the last several years nursery, primary and secondary schools have appeared that apply new pedagogical methods with the intention of improving schooling and including all the students' individual characteristics and differences¹.

In general these new proposals have the object of breaking the rigid system of closed subjects and getting boys and girls of the same age to establish contact by means of cooperative work.

The teacher is no longer the adult who possesses information and education and lectures; they are the person who accompanies the student in their individual learning process.

According to P. Pujolàs², cooperative learning, in comparison with competitive and individualistic learning, promotes the following:

- All students learn.
- Acceptance and respect of the differences between students.
- More positive relationships, characterized by mutual friendliness, attention and respect.

And, undoubtedly, the fact that they can conquer a valuable role, since as much is expected of a DS student as of any other student: participating actively and directly in the educational processes.

With the application of these new methods, "the problem" is no longer tackled by looking after some students

individually. In fact, the aim is to help the school itself to receive necessary training to respond to whatever needs the students have, determining priorities when designing curricula, methods used and the organisation so that all the students have access to learning.

Attention is focused on general improvement of schooling and not exclusively and separately on the educational needs of individual students.

However, for a DS student to really have an active role and be the protagonist of their actions, as well as participating in the learning activities of their group, they must feel understood and valued as what they are, a growing child.

Professionals, knowing their characteristics, possibilities, difficulties and limits, adjust their general expectations of schooling results to their real possibilities and provide the necessary support and help for them to progress. Furthermore, students themselves must be able to know and construct their identity and learn to use the necessary tools (listen, stop, think, use words to express themselves, etc.) to be able to grow while being included in a group.

Self-knowledge

Based on the experience we have accumulated over time, as professionals caring for DS children and teenagers we believe that DS students benefit from this change that is taking place in schools and that currently they are better understood as personas in a concrete stage of their lives, although we do understand that it may be difficult for them to act and interact with their environment in a standard way.

We see boys and girls valued for their progress in academic abilities that come to school in the morning and join a group, but do not interact if there is not someone to do it for them. These students are in a waiting situation or are simply "there". How do they see themselves? What image do they obtain from the same situation day after day?

As previously mentioned, school is a privileged space in the process of socialisation and personal development, but there are moments during which the conduct of the DS student leads one to think that they are confused and need to understand their situation.

Sometimes it is believed that they do not realise their difficulties, but it is probable that once they are 5 or 6 they perceive that there is something different about them, since they find it hard to make themselves understood or draw.

As B. Garvía³ says, that is the moment to explain to them that they have DS and that some things will be more difficult for them, while there will be others that they will be able to do just as well as others. The most important thing is to not to allow them to identify completely with disability and feel totally incapable. When someone explains to them why they find it more difficult to carry out certain activities; they become less worried.

Kate Sefton⁴ also thinks that it is surprising to see that boys and girls with DS who know what DS is and say they have it, do not do badly or feel sad. Speaking about DS clarifies what is undoubtedly a confusion and cause of

concern that may lead to depression. Those that can say they have a disability know it is not their fault and they are more willing to work with challenging subjects because they know that the problem does not arise from not working hard enough.

It reassures them to know that, although they have to work harder than others, their DS will not disappear if they work harder or speak clearer. In this way they can enjoy their progress, learning, games and friendships, and can even make mistakes without worrying about having to put right their parents' sadness or stress.

The fact that a person is retarded mentally, retarded in learning and has poor motor control does not mean that they cannot understand or collect information. For example, their parents' concern when they speak to others about the day to day, or when they see smaller children doing and saying things that they would like to be able to do and say.

Development of personal, relational and social skills

The School Stage Follow-up Service, created to support 5 to 16 year old DS children and teenagers, offers group therapy to promote personal development and social inclusion. We offer therapy to provide a framework for constructing one's own identity and all aspects related to the maturation process.

Frequently, when they attend for the first time, they identify themselves as the youngest in their class, although they are usually a year older, or as the "clown" or mischievous one. They attend with an idea of themselves that does not correspond to reality, and with a style of relating to their environment that does not promote growth and maturation.

We know that self-knowledge and recognition of disability are the basic aspects necessary to grow and mature. Furthermore, discovering one's own identity (who I am and how I am) makes it possible to construct the necessary relational competences to access society and to develop satisfactorily as a person.

How many times, when speaking of a certain student in a certain school, the starting point is a cliché? I remember the case of a school in which, when classes were almost ending and it was time for assessing the students, a teacher said: "Have you seen how the look in her eyes has changed?". The beginning of the school year had not been easy either for the girl or the teacher and expectations were very low, however, at the time of assessing the progress made during the year, it was possible to perceive her as a student.

We must remember that for a boy or girl who is in an ordinary school, meeting others with whom they may share experiences related to disability (having little skill, feeling rejected or confused, finding it hard to communicate, realising that everything is harder for them) makes it easier to speak about and recognise these personal characteristics.

According to R. Borbonés^{5,6}, during the different activities carried out in the sessions, boys, girls and teenagers with

DS discover, with the help of therapy, that they are not the only DS people. They realise that what they think, experience and feel about their disabilities can also be experienced or felt by other boys, girls or teenagers. They speak about the fact that the other child does not know how to speak, draw, control themselves or stop. They see in others what they experience in the first person in school and other environments; this makes it easier for them to speak of their feelings.

Moreover, psychotherapeutic group-work is useful to make them see the differences between themselves, the DS group. They see that each individual has a different way of going about things, different likings and preferences, skills and difficulties. Some like sports, others dancing music, building games or reading and drawing. Some are chatty and others not.

Torres de Beà⁷ states that during this new relational experience it is especially important that members of the group share experiences and feelings with mates of the same age and moment in life: "Learning to interact, to communicate verbally, to observe and listen helps them to control their anxiety and changes their interpersonal relations in and outside the group".

Children and teenagers, knowing and recognising themselves as students with their singularities, can face the challenges of their environment better, becoming the protagonists of their actions, and feeling totally accepted and recognised. It is true that they have different needs, but they also have a range of capabilities and possibilities and have future prospects that can be achieved as they grow and become more mature.

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