



SCHOOL ADAPTATION AND TRANSITION - GOOD PRACTICES OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT WITH EMPHASIS ON SOCIAL SKILLS

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Abstract:

Special Education and Training implements specially designed educational programs, which shall follow the objectives of the Analytical Program and shall aim at the inclusion of pupils. The transition of pupils from level to level of education is a difficult process which brings with it several problems, particularly for children with learning difficulties. In this work we will refer to the concept of transition and its importance for school inclusion. On this basis we will focus on good adaptation and school improvement practices.

Keywords: social skills, transition, school adaptation, school improvement

1. Introduction

Special Education encompasses, on the one hand, specially designed educational programs, on the other, inclusion and acceptance, so that it is functional and provided in a multifaceted, multilevel and interdisciplinary manner. However, the issue of inclusion has many parameters, such as those of teacher's education and training in inclusive education, the design and implementation of individualized curriculums and the insurance of the appropriate logistical structure for their implementation in every general school, as well and shaping the conditions for employment of people with disabilities in their transition into adulthood.

In addition, stereotypes about diversity are an additional dimension of special education and training for people with disabilities or without disabilities. That is why policies for equal opportunities for learning and equal treatment for all people with and without disabilities are being internationally developed, which are broadened and

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enhanced by the policy of inclusive education. Overall, inclusive education is fundamentally relevant to the educational policy of inclusion and focuses on developing actions for the learning and participation of all individuals in the educational process, preventing inequalities and social discrimination. In this context, emphasis is placed on the inclusion of students with and without special educational needs in the learning process and the satisfaction of their needs. Furthermore, this includes the effort for inclusive education programs and the utilization of personalized educational programs at the level of the general schools (Tzempelikou, 2016-2017).

Complicating, therefore, with the philosophy of inclusion, the research interest focuses on educational interventions related not to academic skills and social skills, through which the individual achieves social acceptance and self-fulfillment and, indeed, in transition phases during his or her school career.

2. Transition and adaptation

The sense of change is a common feature of every transition in the human development. Transition is a personal experience for each individual and is associated with changes in roles and environmental conditions (Mogel, 1984). Awareness of change activates the mechanism of adaptation between the self and the environment. Transition is important for school inclusion because it can be linked to both expectations and tensions (Brostrom, 2002), due to the differentiation in cognitive, emotional and social demands.

Therefore, adapting children to the new school situation can have long-term psycho-emotional effects as well as influence on the child's academic development and socialization (Mpagakis et al., 2006).

Collaboration between educators, education executives, the family and the community are an insurance guarantee for a successful transition to school life (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000).

Therefore, the importance of the transition is of the essence for educational systems internationally, as they affect the quality of education and the social adjustment of young persons, in a context of interaction between child developmental characteristics, school practices, family and community support (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

In this paper we will discuss the concept of transition and its importance for school inclusion. On this basis, we will focus on good school adaptation and school improvement practices.

2.1 Transition: Learning difficulties and other difficulties in school life

The concept of transitioning and introducing the child to a different educational setting becomes more complex, requiring careful coordination and planning of actions in cases of special educational needs (Brault, 2005), in which learning and school readiness, relative to practices transition, as well as practicing social skills, become very important for learning and life.

Therefore, given the importance of the child's first school experiences when moving to another school environment. For example, from Kindergarten to Elementary School, the following describes key features of learning and school adjustment difficulties.

The term "Learning Disabilities" or "Learning Difficulties" is perhaps the most widely used verbal formula (verbal code) used to describe the serious or even special difficulties which numerous students are acquiring in basic school knowledge or literacy skills (Stasinou, 2016).

- a) There are usually three groups of children with learning disabilities: The first group includes children with intellectual disabilities (cognitive deficits). In this case, they are generalized learning difficulties because they extend to all school subjects. Therefore, the school failure of these children for a specific reason is general.
- b) In the second group are children with normal or increased cognitive abilities who exhibit specific learning difficulties-dyslexia. In this case, there is a gap or a mismatch between the child's (potentially) normal or higher (mental) learning abilities and his or her low or reduced school performance, as in fact manifested in some of his or her lessons in school (the familiar phenomenon of underachievement).
- c) Children in the third group are children with emotional or behavioral problems, which may interfere with their learning process and may result in reduced school performance or under-performance in school.

Overall, the transition of children from one school environment to another, e.g. from Kindergarten to Elementary School, *"is considered one of the most critical periods of childhood and is a dynamic and evolving process that lays the groundwork for later schooling. However, the smooth transition is not only aimed at the academic success of children / pupils, but mainly in their socio-emotional development, which is part of the complex learning process and contributes decisively to the educational and personal development process"* (Sakellariou, 2009).

Certainly, in the transition phase, there are active processes of general and inclusive education focusing on co-teaching, co-education as well as co-existence within the classroom, as well as the role of teachers in the learning process and experience.

Here, it is important to note that when preschool and school teachers' prioritize the development of social behavior and communication skills, place children's general attitudes and perceptions on primary school, while simultaneously as a third important benchmark they evaluate the acquisition of academic knowledge by children. In other words, they focus on the acquisition of social skills, which are necessary for their whole lives (Sakellariou, 2014), but also on the knowledge of their adaptation in response to changes in life (Perry et al., 2000).

3. Social skills

Teaching social skills is an important pillar of the Curriculum especially for students with behavioral and communication problems, many of whom have difficulties in conducting group discussions and activities, emotional expressions and managing intense, aggressive and generally challenging events between peers within the educational community. As characteristically formulated by contemporary literature (Heward, 2009):

- Learning these social skills in mainstream school is about social skills such as anger control between both peers and adults, adherence to guidelines and rules, following instructions given by teachers, and adapting to classroom activities.
- In addition, social skills training programs focus on and promote discussion, communication and emotion management, personal expression, peer-to-peer collaboration, problem solving, and more.
- Positive behavioral support systems at the school level use team-based approaches to teach appropriate behaviors to all school students. Indicatively:
 - Behavioral expectations are stated (clearly defined eg. respect), recognized at the level of positive behavior (eg. remuneration) and taught (rule outlined, analyzed and examples given).
 - Behavioral errors are actively corrected (correction is made through understanding the error).
 - Evaluations and adaptations of positive behavioral support programs in schools (continuous success assessment and decision making that allow for adaptation to behavioral challenges).

In conclusion, educators and classroom teachers have to face several challenges in teaching children with communication, learning and adaptation problems. Specialized practical and intensive educational interventions can bring about drastic changes in pedagogical approach and school inclusion of students with special needs.

4. Teaching skills with emphasis on students' social competence

Social adequacy is particularly important for students diagnosed with disabilities, such as special learning difficulties, emotional and behavioral disorders, autism spectrum disorders, and more. Among the most popular educational approaches for these students is social skills training. It is noteworthy that many bibliographic analyzes focus on the advantages of this educational intervention model, but also point to further elaboration (Gresham et al., 2001).

Furthermore, research findings also indicate that the three areas of social interaction, social behavior and socio-cognitive skills adequately represent the construction of social skills. Training social skills in children is an effective intervention strategy in a wide range of behavioral problems, such as aggression behaviors and unacceptable behaviors (Gresham et al., 2004).

On this basis, the search for a child's positive behaviors, focusing on abilities rather than deficits, are dynamic in developing new skills that can reduce inappropriate social and communication behaviors. This positive perspective enhances children's integration into mainstream education and parenting with formal developmental children and additionally results in equal treatment and coexistence. Therefore, inappropriate behaviors are limited through teaching and reinforcing social skills, which - social skills - fall into the following categories (Caldarella & Merrel, 1997):

- relationships with peers eg. interpersonal relationships, social participation, sociality, social interaction, marriage, etc.
- self-regulation eg. self-regulation and self-control on social issues such as social responsibility, social independence, etc.
- academic success, such as orientation in academic work, compliance with the rules of the classroom and the educational community, etc.
- compliance, such as social cooperation and compliance etc.
- claiming, such as socially active participation and pursuing goals.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that modern educational practices and policies show the tendency to implement educational interventions within the classroom and in the mainstream school environment, promoting social skills such as cooperation, communication, self-control, empathy, assertion, responsibility, tolerance etc. (Matson, 2017).

Furthermore, ways and techniques of treatment are (Kourkoutas, 2007):

- The goals and expectations for the student's success are clearly stated.
- Class management must be effective without authoritarianism, taking into account the evolutionary level of all children, as well as any difficulties of school and social adjustment.
- Positive climate is needed without breaking boundaries and differences.
- Match the skills of the pupils / students with the goals set by the school and teachers.
- Courses should be clearly presented under specific educational procedures.
- Have learning support and a personalized attitude, when deemed necessary by some students, so that they are not directly or indirectly excluded by either the teacher or his / her classmates.
- Provide students with sufficient opportunities to achieve their academic requirements.
- Students' performance should be assessed critically and separated from the rest of the personality.
- To conclude, a more anthropocentric - along with academic achievement - school side, the flexibility of programs beyond technocratic stereotypes, lifelong teacher education and parental involvement are issues that are at stake, in conjunction with the appropriateness of their principles, may prevent inappropriate social behavior.

To conclude, the transition to mainstream schooling requires teaching skills such as (Heward, 2009):

- Systematic teaching and learning of social and academic skills.
- Preventive strategies at school management level to promote positive social behavior and academic success.
- Emphasis on learning self-management and self-regulation / self-control skills that build a sense of responsibility.
- In addition, group approaches through the influence of peer group are intended to help guide desired social choices and attitudes within the community.
- At the same time, teachers need to focus their energy on modifiable variables in a student's environment, as elements that can potentially make a difference in learning and behavior on the part of students with risk in school adjustment.
- At the same time, praise from the teachers' side acts as a means of support and social acceptance.
- It is also legitimate for the teacher's sense of humor to normalize relationships and conflicts.
- The actions of the teacher in general should be consistent with stability and demonstrate maturity.
- Finally, when a student with learning disabilities is placed in a general education classroom, both the student and the teacher must be adequately prepared in advance and then receive support.

5. Other good practices for children at risk

Overall, school difficulties relate to learning, performance, and behavior problems with multifactorial interpretation through cognitive, emotional, medical, and psychosocial dimensions and a two-way relationship of biological and environmental origins. The result of this phenomenon is often the educational and social exclusion of children and adolescents (Tzivinikou, 2015).

In this context, it is important that educational planning takes into account the actions involved, including educational material. Specifically, the learner takes into account his or her learning particularities as well as the psychological structure of his or her relationships with the family and the wider social environment. The teacher is called upon to be a scientist, animator and educator, with initiatives and participation through decision-making in an ever-changing world at the level of social conditions, knowledge and scientific approaches (Scoumbourdi, Kalavasis, 2007).

According to a holistic view of interventions in typical educational frameworks, measures are necessary as (Kourkoutas, 2014):

- Search for the causes through the symptom and attempt to address and modify the behavior.
- Planning psychosocial and academic intervention based on the rationale, needs and capabilities in all areas of the child and the family.

- Intervene through a solid and positive interpersonal relationship.
- Design and provide, if necessary, a personalized academic and psychosocial support program.
- Offer family support through counseling.
- The teacher's acceptance is important as well as his or her attitude, as the attitude and acceptance or not of the teacher influences the feelings and attitudes of other children.
- Appropriate techniques should be used by educators so that to exist a climate of acceptance, communication and proper interaction between all children with learning disabilities or not.
- It is advisable for the child to be approached with subtlety, sensitivity and discretion.
- Particular emphasis should be placed on the role of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in order to make any intervention effective.
- It is necessary to teach effective learning and study strategies through which students with learning disabilities will be substantially supported in order to minimize their weaknesses (Gakis et al., 2016).

6. Conclusion

Finally, it is important to know and discover the student's interests and preferences with learning and communication difficulties. It should be remembered that it is important to use the student's potential in all learning experiences. We build on abilities and enhance student self-esteem and self-confidence with and without disabilities. Exploiting a child's slopes is the most beneficial strategy to develop his or her interest in educational goals in any learning context, promoting communication and social skills as well as academic achievement.

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