

COOPERATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN WITH AND WITHOUT INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN MAINSTREAM CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Students with intellectual disabilities [ID] have the right to be full members of the ordinary education classrooms. Cooperative teaching strategies and listening to children's voices are tools that serve this purpose. The aim of this research is to understand cooperative learning experiences shared by children with and without ID in the context of mainstream classrooms. In this research with a qualitative approach, 13 students participated, to whom an episodic interview was applied. Subsequently, the students participated in discussion groups to construct a diagram of the experiences. The transcripts were analyzed with grounded theory techniques. The results show 11 elements of the cooperative learning experiences shared by children with and without intellectual disabilities in the context of ordinary classrooms. These experiences occur in group activities, which allow the generation of social relationships and learning through the presence of directions, different roles, artifacts, movement, imagination, and support.

Keywords: *intellectual disability; mainstream classroom; cooperative learning; experience.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rights approach seeks to ensure the development of students with disabilities on equal terms with their peers within participatory learning environments (UNESCO, 2019). This imperative becomes relevant by recognizing that, as Florian (2017) points out, learning takes place in shared activities that involve participation for all students. The goal is for students with disabilities to be members of general education classrooms and to participate alongside their peers (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2011).

According to the inclusive education approach, participation reinforces when everyone is accepted and valued (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). To promote social acceptance for children with disabilities, it is necessary to stimulate positive interpersonal interactions, that is, simple social contacts with their peers is not a guarantee (Pujolàs, 2008). Indeed, Zic and Igrić (2001) detected a low acceptance of children with intellectual disabilities [ID] by the peer group. However, the application of pedagogical strategies linked to cooperative learning increases its acceptance (Jacques, Wilton & Townsend, 1998).

In addition, cooperative strategies positively impact the learning achievement of students with learning disabilities (Sencibaugh & Sencibaugh, 2016). Moreover, the cooperative structuring of learning is generally considered favorable by mainstream education teachers as a tool to include children from special education (Jenkins & O'Connor, 2003). In short, cooperation -understood as working together to achieve shared objectives seeking the benefit of everyone (Johnson & Johnson, 2018)- is a central element of inclusive education (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) and would facilitate the participation of students with disabilities in the regular classroom.

Cooperation is a fundamental process in the educational setting because human cognition is developed through shared activity in culturally developed practices and because, in addition, children with disabilities have had limited access to these contexts (Bøttcher & Dammeyer, 2016). Through shared learning stories that emerge from participation in such social practices (Wenger, 2002), it is possible to analyze the experiences of cooperation between children with and without disabilities. The process of capturing these experiential stories from a shared and group perspective is understood because cognition, in activity settings, is not an individual capacity and is distributed among the participants (Bøttcher & Dammeyer, 2016).

The shared experiences of children with and without disabilities, as an object of study, would be coherent with the principles of inclusion, especially considering that most of the investigations in the area only focus on a segmented group of students (Messiou, 2017). Indeed, inclusive research seeks to give representativeness to people who have unique information, for example, using localized narratives (Parrilla, 2009). In this way, the students' points of view can help us to sensitize ourselves with diversity issues, understand forms of educational organization, develop new possibilities to involve students, among other valuable aspects (Messiou et al., 2016). Therefore, putting together students with disabilities with their peers would have inclusive and cooperative reasoning from the beginning, taking into account that their classmates are their first allies and can contribute more ideas to benefit their partner's participation in common activities (Pujolàs, 2008).

In Chile, the disability with the highest proportion in the school period is the ID (Servicio Nacional de Discapacidad, 2015), a situation that is understood given that, by definition and unlike other disabilities, it arises before the age of 18 (AAIDD, 2011). Based on this research, we seek to approach the experiences associated with cooperative dynamics of children with and without ID to gain insights that allow the identification and discussion of educational implications with a focus on the construction of inclusive classrooms. In sum, the study aims to understand cooperative learning experiences shared by children with and without ID in the context of mainstream classrooms.

2. METHOD

This research base on the qualitative approach because the objects of study are shared subjective constructions. Indeed, this approach emphasizes the perspectives of participants in their social contexts and considers that social reality constructs by its "actors" (Flick, 2007) and is shared intersubjectively (Beltrán, 2015).

2.1 PARTICIPANTS

Five groups of students collaborated in this study, with a total participation of 13 students. The participants studied at the primary level in two mainstream schools located in Chile. Each group included a student with ID, who selected those she/he considered to be "close peers" to set the group studied (each group consisted of 2 to 4 children). Eight women and five men participated in this study, and their ages were within the range of 10-14 years. It should be noted that participation was voluntary and the anonymity of each student in this report was guaranteed.

2.2 INFORMATION PRODUCTION

We use a narrative approach, considering that the experiences (the object of study) can present through narratives (Flick, 2007). In this way, in a group arrangement, we use the technique called "episodic interview", which characterize by requesting narrations of particular situations (Flick, 1997; Flick, 2007). The instruction focused on "experiences or activities carried out in the

classroom where, as a group, they had to work together to learn". With multiple voices regarding experience, a polyphonic approach favored, in which the accounts of personal experiences converge towards common elements (Pujadas, 2002). In this case, these elements were the experiences of cooperation.

Although traditionally, convergence is performed exclusively by the researcher in the analysis process, in this study, the students also contributed to its achievement through an analysis process carried out in a discussion group structure. The discussion aimed at collaboratively constructing a simple diagram of the reported activity, including the members, types of relationships, contributions from each member, relationship with the teacher, resulting in learning, artifacts, and other main elements recognized by the students. We chose discussion groups since they show utility to access socially distributed cognition (Pérez & Viquez, 2009) and allow group functioning with relative autonomy (Valles, 1999). Besides, its use with natural groups is recommended to enhance motivation when there are affective ties between the interlocutors (Pérez & Viquez, 2009), as is the case with the groups participating in this research.

2.3 ANALYSIS

Grounded theory analytical tools were applied (Strauss & Corbin, 2002) since these tools are recommended to analyze joint narratives and episodic information (Flick, 2007). The diagrams were taken as a starting point since they have categorical and relational elements built cooperatively by the participating groups. Thus, these elements resulting from the group discussion recognized as analytical categories in their own right. The data of an episodic and narrative nature served to create categories whose function allowed contextualizing the analytical structures derived from the discussions. In this regard, it should be specified that the narratives are constituted as a "dual landscape", allowing information to be obtained from consciousness (feelings, intentions, etc.) and the action (events, setting, etc.) (Bruner, 1990; Bruner, 2004). In short, we applied open, axial, and selective coding -procedures belonging to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2002)- to the material produced, respecting the elaborations resulting from the discussion, while we contextualized with episodic information. The Atlas.ti 9 computer program was used in this research, since it is useful for carrying out analyzes based on the grounded theory model (Valles, 2015).

3. RESULTS

The results derived from this research are synthesized in the diagram incorporated in figure 1. As can be seen, in this image there are 11 elements represented with numbers. These elements consist of categories produced in the analysis, therefore, symbolize certain aspects of the group experiences that students give them relevant meaning. Each experiential aspect is integrated into the diagram, allowing the relationships among them to be identified. Next, we will sequentially explain each of these aspects, which make up the shared experience of children with and without ID. After explaining each aspect, we will show an excerpt from some of the interviews to exemplify. These interview excerpts were translated keeping their original meaning.

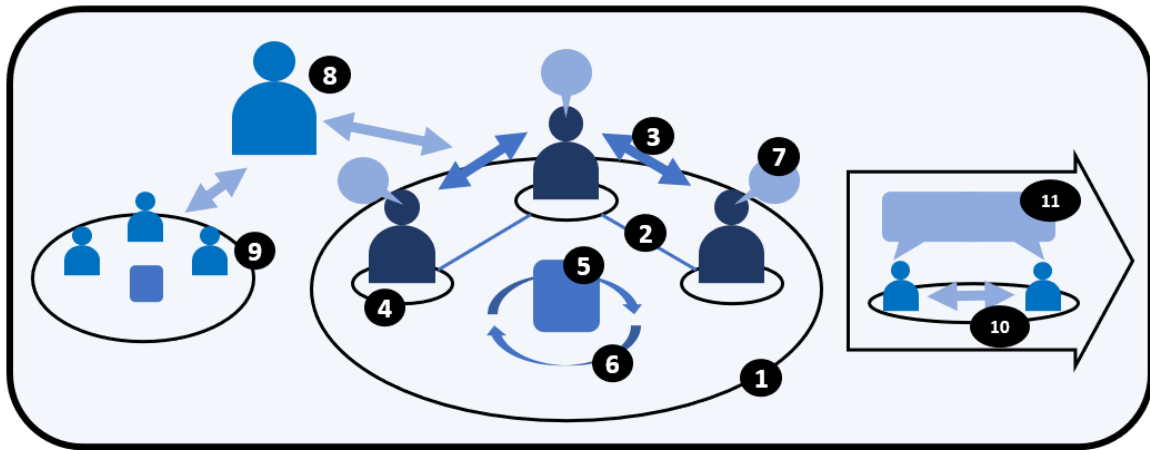


Figure 1. Diagram of cooperative learning experiences shared by children with and without intellectual disabilities in the context of mainstream classrooms.

1) Group organization of the activity: The activities indicated by the participants had in common their group conformation. In general, work teams had a minimum of three members and a maximum of six. Likewise, the groups had a shared goal, which could be a dissertation or dance in front of their peers, a presentation to a teacher, winning a contest or the construction of an artifact.

“We had to organize as a group” (student, girl, 12 years old).

2) Establishment of affective relationships: The group organization of school activities allowed children to establish and reinforce relationships of an affective nature. Indeed, social contacts in workgroups bring children with and without ID closer together to form, for example, friendship relationships.

“And when we worked in a group, when we finished and we hugged and became friends” (student, boy, 13 years old).

3) Directions of peer support: Students indicated that they commonly offered help in carrying out tasks. The most typical form of this help was to give directions, instructions, and explanations when faced with the difficulties of a member of the team. All students could offer and receive help, regardless of whether or not they had ID.

“She (a peer) explains to us how to do the job” (student, girl, 14 years old).

4) Differentiation of the roles played: To complete the tasks associated with the group activity, the students developed a specific form of organization, which specified different roles. In this way, the differentiation of roles allowed all the students to become full participants in the activity.

“I delivered the noodles (to my peer), so she could stick them” (student, boy, 13 years old).

5) Use of concrete material: The activities had as a condition the use of concrete material, such as cardboard. In this context, students used this material to build artifacts that allowed them to achieve group goals. The presence of concrete material also facilitated the participation of all members.

“We use paints, a large cardboard and the sheets” (student, girl, 13 years old).

6) Performing actions with body movement: According to the participants, a significant number of actions involved in group activities are body movements. That is, the jobs include not only verbal actions but also bodily actions, such as moving around the classroom or manipulating objects.

“When they said "earthquake", we had to change positions” (student, boy, 13 years old).

7) Use of imagination and creativity: The students state that one of the demands of the activities was to use their imagination and creativity. In other words, the process and the outcome of the activities were not fully established from the beginning.

“We should use the imagination” (student, boy, 14 years old).

8) Support and guidance from the teacher: The teacher gave the instructions for the framing of the activity, and her/his main task was to guide each of the groups of students. Besides, the teacher was available in those moments or situations where students needed or requested support.

“(The teacher) guides us because at first it was difficult for us (student, boy, 12 years old).

9) Competition with other groups: Some groups of students commented that in the activity, they had to compete against other groups with a playful format. However, there was no competition among individuals within the groups.

“The group that made the tallest tower won” (student, girl, 12 years old).

10) Teamwork skills as learning: The main learning reported by the participants in this study was the acquisition or improvement of teamwork skills. The central means for the improvement of these skills was their exercise or use.

“We learned to work in a group” (student, girl, 13 years old).

11) Academic content or skills as learning: Some students expressed that they had learned certain content or academic skills through their participation in the activity. Some participants even knew that the acquisition of content or skill was the objective of the activity.

“It was a review of all the numbers” (student, boy, 12 years old).

These elements configure a type of experience that allows students with and without ID to participate together without discrimination in school activities. This consequence can be explained by several reasons. First, the experiences mentioned are ordinary, since they occurred in the mainstream classroom, were guided by regular education teachers, and included all children. Second, the children never mentioned diagnostic labels during the interviews, such as intellectual disability or learning difficulties. Therefore, the interviewed students did not feel different due to the presence or absence of a diagnosis. Third, the experiences include pedagogical and inclusive dimensions and results, since we identify social support, a feeling of belonging, social participation and significant learning.

4. DISCUSSION

The results presented above allow us to understand the shared experiences of participation that students with and without ID have in cooperation activities, which take place in mainstream classrooms. Essentially, these experiences occur in group activities, which allow the generation of affective relationships between the participants. At a procedural level, students give directions to each other, assume different roles, manipulate or construct artifacts, perform bodily actions, and use their imagination. In this setting, the teacher offers support, sometimes in a context of group competition. Students acknowledge learning in teamwork and academic skills.

We can identify various implications resulting from this research. In particular, the perspectives of children show us that it is necessary to encourage group activities where students with and without ID participate together. The consequences of this implication are mainly two: a) the promotion of friendship and companionship relationships and b) the acquisition of social and

academic skills. In other words, the research findings reveal that it is possible to design teaching activities that allow children with and without ID to reinforce social ties while there is learning. According to the reported results, these valuable consequences for children with and without ID are jointly achieved in ordinary contexts of social cooperation, without the need for interventions in isolated settings.

Additionally, this research offers some guidelines to obtain these desired consequences: a) the teacher should encourage conversation and help among the students, b) the activities should require different roles, c) objects and materials should be available to children, d) the teacher should encourage and allow the body movement of the students, e) the activity should allow creative freedom, f) the teacher should be available to offer help, and g) the competition should not be within the groups. In this sense, students with ID value the activities in which they interact with their classmates and teachers (Soto & López, 2017) and, specifically, this research exposes various characteristics regarding how to configure these activities.

The implications derived from this research offer alternatives to ensure that children with ID can share and cooperate with their peers on equal terms. In such a way, everyday school activities will take a more inclusive form. We still need to go further to make classrooms fully inclusive, and listening to children's voices is a requirement for that goal (Soto, Moreno, Oyarzún & González, 2016). Furthermore, we must avoid compensating the consequences of a segregated school environment with extraordinary measures (Onrubia & Minguela, 2020) and resorting to standardized structures that negatively affect teaching practice (Oyarzún & Soto, 2021), for this, we need to continue advancing with research of an inclusive nature.

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