CAN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN CHILDREN WITH DOWN SYNDROME FACILITATE LITERACY AND CONTRIBUTE TO THE INCLUSION IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATION?

O desenvolvimento da consciência fonológica em crianças com Síndrome de Down pode facilitar a alfabetização e contribuir para a inclusão no ensino regular?

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ABSTRACT

There are laws that ensure the educational rights for children to basic education since they are six years-old, providing early exposure to teaching strategies aiming literacy. Educational inclusion of children with Down syndrome (DS) occurs in early childhood education and has become increasingly common, providing unique opportunities for cognitive development, including literacy. The diversity of learners with individual educational needs, without proper support from an interdisciplinary team, hinders the acquisition of reading and writing equally. The educators' misunderstanding about minimum prerequisites necessary for literacy also contributes to their failure. One of these prerequisites is phonological awareness, ability that usually is not intentionally developed in early childhood education. Strategies that aim to guide educators in the objective development of phonological awareness in children with Down syndrome may contribute to the educational inclusion. Or would it be possible to educationally include this population without any curricular adaptations or an interdisciplinary effective work?

KEYWORDS: Literacy; Down Syndrome; Child Rearing

Since the 90s, the struggle for greater socialization and respect for people with special educational needs has gained importance in the whole world through the educational policy of inclusion ¹. All are equal before the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 and, based on this equality, inclusive education aims to insert children with special educational needs in mainstream education. The Constitution not only guarantees the right to education, but also the attention to the specificities of students with disabilities, without damage to regular education system². However, as there is a gap between what the law establishes and what happens in practice, it is not uncommon that the child included in this environment remains in the same level for more than two or three years without the expected progress, causing frustration among parents and motivating the child transfer to a special school¹. Considering the clinical situations that characterize a situation of school inclusion we have the case of children with Down syndrome (DS). These children, no doubt, over the past years, are benefiting from this process. However, there are aspects related to the inclusion of children with DS that still deserve to be revised, such as physical adaptation, teacher training, curricular adaptations. The specific policy for

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the full development of this process of school inclusion is not yet consolidated, although it is a practice increasingly common in many countries. In Brazil, there are laws that guarantee the right to education since the first years of life. The 32nd article of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (Law 9.394/96) states: compulsory primary education, lasting for 9 (nine) years, free in public schools, beginning at 6 (six) years of age, will aim at the basic formation of the citizen through:

I – the development of the ability to learn having as basic tools the full mastery of reading, writing and calculation;

II - the understanding of the natural and social environments, of the political system, of technology, of arts, and of the values on which society is founded;

III - the development of learning ability in order to acquire knowledge and skills and to incorporate attitudes and values;

IV - the strengthening of family bonds, of human solidarity links and of reciprocal tolerance, on which social life is constructed.

(Text given by Law No. 11,274, 2006)

If children must be sensitive and responsive to the intentional mediation strategies aiming literacy at six years, it is expected that, to achieve this goal, they are being prepared from early childhood education. Due to specific features of their brain structure, the child with DS shows delay in language acquisition, including aspects of reading and writing, which prolongs the acquisition of these skills. So, what is expected in the typical development of a child does not necessarily apply to this population. In order to guarantee their rights and to be sure they will receive a full education, schools actually need to go through a transformation to accomplishing the inclusion of these students in regular education system. This requires a break with the traditional model of teaching where students are being integrated rather than being included.

How is it possible, through the traditional teaching, a child with DS being literate if adjustments to the curriculum are not made to benefit them? If the development of a child with DS is slower than the others and their difficulties are also greater, how to achieve the goal of having effective results in the literacy process started at six years? Can a classroom be considered educationally inclusive, if in it there are students with the same chronological age but who have different brain structures and therefore different learning times, without any alternative strategies to compensate for these differences? Will special children, under these conditions, be able to follow the class and the subjects?

One of the necessary changes would be the offering of a curriculum that would give to children with special educational needs, the same opportunities for the learning of the different skills. Reading and writing skills are examples of such a great help for an efficient communication. They are used by society and have innate neurobiological components less strong than the spoken language. During the development of a child receiving stimulation, speech understanding occurs a few months after birth. Differently, reading and writing are learned, some years later, through a specific methodology and should be taught by the school or by another mediator. Currently, due to the entry of children under six years in basic education, schools have started the teaching of reading and writing at an earlier age, often without worrying about the necessary prerequisites for such learning. Phonological awareness is indicated as one of these prerequisites, still little known and worked at that stage and of pronounced importance in the pedagogical context. However, educators know very little on this subject. If teachers are anticipating strategies for teaching reading and writing, without knowing about phonological awareness and about how children develop it, how can someone expect that children at four to five years-old start to learn how to read and write without any eventual difficulty shown by one or another child? How can parents and teachers, as educators, contribute to mediate intentionally and efficiently the acquisition of skills such as reading and writing?

A major strategy would be to provide knowledge and training of educators on phonological awareness and on its relation to language skills, including speech, reading and writing. It is known that phonological awareness is the awareness of the sounds that constitute part of the words we speak and listen to. It is a metalinguistic skill that enables a child to analyze the sound structure of words. It is extremely important for literacy process and is classified as one of the required skills for phonological processing, along with phonological memory and rapid serial naming or rapid automatized naming. Deficits in the phonological awareness may contribute to communication disorders.

In children with DS, linguistic aspects, especially in the field of phonology and morphosyntax, are more impaired than other aspects of their development. These metalinguistic deficits interfere in the process of literacy. Children with DS have measurable levels of phonological awareness, although they are lower when compared to those of individuals with typical development.
Including children with Down syndrome

Detect sounds, phonemic analysis and synthesis, segmentation of words into syllables⁴. The literature is not extensive regarding the development of phonological awareness in children with DS, but it indicates that when it is worked out previously, it may benefit the literacy process. Few educators know the importance of phonological awareness as a prerequisite for literacy of children with typical development. What then, if we consider how much they know about its relevance for literacy of children with DS?

What have schools done so far? Is it true inclusion or simply the integration of these special children among other students? The law protects learners with special educational needs, but there still lacks a pedagogical practice that actually fosters equal learning opportunities for different individuals. Orientation and training of teachers of early childhood education in the use of strategies for the development of phonological awareness in children with DS, previously to the literacy process, might be an essential part of the movement in mainstream schools to truly encourage the educational inclusion. Children and teachers need support to improve the conditions of teaching and learning. An increasing number of studies suggest that intentional and explicit training of phonological awareness can produce positive effects on phonological awareness itself and also on reading ability in children with and without language difficulties¹¹, including children with DS¹¹. The constant stimulation of these children with special needs should occur through an interdisciplinary team composed of teachers, educational psychologists, speech therapists and occupational therapists. Each professional will intervene with different objectives targeting the same process, literacy.

RESUMO

As leis educacionais asseguram o direito das crianças ao ensino fundamental a partir dos seis anos, propiciando a elas a exposição antecipada a estratégias pedagógicas que visam à alfabetização. A inclusão escolar de crianças com Síndrome de Down (SD) acontece já na educação infantil e se torna cada vez mais frequente, possibilitando oportunidades ímpares para o desenvolvimento cognitivo dessas, o que inclui a alfabetização. A diversidade de aprendizes com necessidades educacionais individuais, sem o devido apoio de uma equipe interdisciplinar, dificulta a aquisição da leitura e escrita de forma igualitária. O desconhecimento, por parte dos educadores, dos pré-requisitos cognitivos mínimos necessários à alfabetização, também contribui para o seu insucesso. Um desses pré-requisitos é a consciência fonológica, pouco trabalhada intencionalmente já na educação infantil. Estratégias que visam orientar educadores no desenvolvimento objetivo da consciência fonológica em crianças com SD podem facilitar a alfabetização e contribuir para a inclusão escolar. Ou será possível incluir pedagogicamente essa população sem que ocorram adaptações curriculares e um trabalho interdisciplinar efetivo?

DESCRITORES: Educação; Síndrome Down; Educação Infantil

REFERENCES


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