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Collaborative Learning in the Context of Inclusive Education²

Extended summary

The paper focuses on the application of collaborative learning in the context of inclusive education. The first part of the paper highlights the theoretical foundations of collaborative learning, a concept that emerged from the constructivist paradigm and interactive teaching. In the framework of this paradigm, learning is viewed as a process of active construction of knowledge that involves individual activity, experience and exchange. Knowledge is viewed as an experiential activity which gives an individual the role of an active and responsible agent in the process of learning who constructs knowledge through research, trial, testing, negotiation, and exchange with others. Interactive teaching, which is based on this concept of the learning process, focuses on interaction, cooperation, and team work. Teachers are expected to create a favourable atmosphere in the classroom that will boost positive interactions, and this expectation represents a challenge in the context of inclusive education. The second part of the paper focuses on the importance of social interactions and cooperation for the children with developmental difficulties and their adequate positioning in the regular teaching. An overview of the theories put forward by Piaget and Vygotsky as well as of their views on the importance of cooperation in the process of learning is also provided in this part of the paper. In the course of collaborative learning, children with develop-

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mental difficulties gradually form a positive image of themselves because teachers focus on their preserved potential that can be identified most effectively and further developed through cooperation and joint activities with their peers and teachers. The roles assigned to these children in collaborative learning, which imply that they are aware of their responsibility in reaching a common goal, can help these children to develop a more positive image of themselves, which in turn contributes to their self-respect, independence, and a sense of being useful and important in their interaction with their peers. The experience of achievement and success contributes to improving these children's self-confidence and independence, the two factors on which emotional stability is based. In the third part of the paper, the authors present the research findings on the effects of collaborative learning in the context of inclusive education. These findings confirm its positive effects on an overall achievement and social development of both children with developmental difficulties and their peers. The application of collaborative learning in inclusive teaching is a great resource for discovering the preserved potentials of children with developmental difficulties and for their overall development. Apart from acquiring academic knowledge and improving the effects of learning, collaborative learning contributes to fostering students' social competencies and impacts the quality of social interactions in the classroom. In collaborative learning situations, students support one another more than in other situations, students with developmental difficulties are better adapted to the group, they have a more positive opinion about themselves and their self-evaluation is better, while they also build more positive relationships with their teachers and peers. However, positive effects of this learning approach are diminished in situations when a child with developmental difficulties does not take enough responsibility for his/her own learning, i.e., when other students offer too much help and finish the task instead of the child. The effects of the application of this learning approach have been explored from the perspective of teachers and their role in fostering cooperation among students. The problems that teachers face while implementing collaborative learning in inclusive education are discussed as well. These problems relate to the need for a continued commitment of teachers to adequately plan, monitor and evaluate the effects of applying this approach on students and their relationships. The challenges that teachers are faced with in collaborative learning are much greater if they have not been trained in implementing it in the course of their initial education and during their professional development. The difficulties in implementing this approach are the consequence of teachers' insufficiently developed teaching strategy and a generally inadequate implementation of inclusive education, rather than of the developmental specificities of the children with developmental difficulties. The key pedagogical implications for the implementation of collaborative learning are presented in relation to teachers' work, school organization and the education system as a whole.

The paper points out the significance of the reflective approach in teachers' work and the importance of teachers' further professional development in the area of inclusive education and collaborative learning. The changes in teachers' personal and professional lives should be adequately supported by the school and the entire education system. The latter must undergo changes and must be improved in order to be in line with a modern education paradigm that underlies inclusive education.

Keywords: collaborative learning, inclusive education, children with developmental difficulties, teachers, interactive teaching.

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