Research paper

The role of the Support and Attention to Diversity Teacher (SADT) from a community-based perspective: Promoting educational success and educational inclusion for all

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We have investigated the role of the Support and Attention to Diversity Teacher (SADT) in inclusive educational contexts.
- The role of the teacher include to mobilize teachers, specialists and agents in the community to join the work of support.
- The role of SADT improve the learning of children inside the classroom and optimize the collaboration with all community.

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the transformation of the role of the Support and Attention to Diversity Teacher (SADT), traditionally called special education faculty. The results are from a qualitative study in three inclusive preschool and elementary schools in Catalonia, Spain. The results demonstrate a transformation in the role of the SADT that mobilizes teachers, specialists and diverse agents in the community to join the work of educational support. The transformation of the SADT role fosters an improvement in the attention and learning of children in the classroom, and existing resources are optimized in collaboration with the entire educative community.

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1. Introduction

The impetus shown by inclusive schools represents an investment in improving the efficiency of educational institutions and assuring the participation and the success of all students, particularly student groups at risk of exclusion and academic failure (Echeita & Ainscow, 2011). These types of schools demonstrate the importance of collaboration amongst the various educational agents to generate more inclusive structures that eliminate barriers to learning and encourage the participation of all students (Ainscow, 2001; Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Currently, scientific evidence demonstrates the value of serving all students in the classroom to ensure academic success (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007) and reduce social inequalities (Hargreaves, 1979; Lucas, 2001; Rosenbaum, 1976). In an increasingly complex society, addressing diversity in mainstream schools has become a major issue not only because diversity concerns learning but also to build healthier societies (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2010). In this context, it is absolutely essential to rethink the role of the traditional special education teacher, in this article designated the Support and Attention to Diversity Teacher (SADT, or Support Teacher, to simplify) because

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the research and our experience demonstrate that this title better represents the functions that the Support Teacher performs.

1.1. Educational support in inclusive contexts

Traditionally, the concept of support has been associated with the idea of help, predominantly individually based, provided to students who, for various reasons, experience difficulties in following an educational process parallel to the process of their peers. It was assumed that these difficulties were primarily intrinsic to the student and required special education. The medical-clinical framework that extends from diagnosis to treatment permeated this model, and we mostly continue to pay for the results of this framework (Alborno & Gaad, 2014; Bines & Lei, 2011; Griffin, Kilgore, & Winn, 2008).

Although we have not left this model entirely and do not have the means to understand and address learning difficulties, beginning with the inclusive school movement of the 1990s, the theory and practice of understanding the support provided and the role of the special education teacher was called into question (Ainscow, 2001). In an inclusive context, support cannot be viewed as an entity that is disconnected from the dynamics and purpose of the centre itself (Porter & Smith, 2008). Therefore, in this study, we understand educational support as a set of practices that act in two manners. On the one hand, there is the goal of eliminating the barriers to learning and participation that limit the progress of students (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), particularly students belonging to the most vulnerable groups. Conversely, there is the goal of accelerating the learning of disadvantaged students (Levin, 1998; Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2011) and prioritizing the most relevant content for students who cannot manage the mandatory curriculum in its entirety, as may occur with students with intellectual disabilities.

The role of the SADT becomes more complex because of sociocultural and interactive learning perspectives and their resultant difficulties, understanding that learning occurs by interaction and dialogue (Edwards & Mercer, 1988; Mercer, 1997; Wells, 2001) situated in a particular social and cultural context (Bruner, 1996; Cazden, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1993; Vygotski, 1988). Based on this premise, we understand that the role of the faculty is closely linked to the dynamics of the school and its environment. This understanding precludes considering this teacher to be an added element or a specialist foreign to the reality of the centre and the community in which the school is located, as indicated by recent research (Alborno & Gaad, 2014; Bleach, 2013).

Scientific research recognizes that developing inclusive educational practices requires a "network of standardized support" (Muntaner, Alzina, & Radó, 2006; Stainback & Stainback, 2004). In an inclusive school, assuming that educational processes are driven by interactions, we can no longer consider the SADT to be the only figure who provides support. Moreover, an increasing number of findings indicate that the coordinated action of all agents who interact with the child is the best guarantee of providing effective support (Ault, Collins, & Carter, 2013; Russell, 2008; Ryder, Rostas, & Taba, 2014). Overcoming the barriers that limit such collaboration (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008) should be one of the first objectives of this type of support, including in the field of research (O'Brien, McConkey, & Garcia-Iriarte, 2014). The network composed of these agents must comprehensively address the entire educational system, and their actions must not be focused exclusively on students with special educational needs but should seek to facilitate the participation and learning of all students.

1.2. The support teacher in inclusive schools

Various studies suggest that the roles of the SADT include teaching, advising, and management (Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry, & McGinley, 2010; Takala, Pirttimaa, & Törmänen, 2009; Vlachou, 2006). Thus, the relevant question is what type of context and from what perspective of attention to diversity are these functions developed.

Traditionally, the function of teaching was the only function considered for the special education teacher, with a focus on small groups of students, all with educational difficulties, outside the regular classroom and within school hours (Markussen, 2004; Takala et al., 2009). This practice, which separated students by levels of learning and other forms of segregation, similar to the premature selection based on tracks, negatively affects the most vulnerable students because this practice increases and accentuates existing educational inequalities (Braddock & Slavin, 1992; Oakes, 1985; OECD, 2012; Petreñas, Puigdellívol, & Campdepadrós, 2013).

Thus, the function of the SADT may include more inclusive formats, developing itself principally within the mainstream classroom and directed at all students (Giné, Duran, Font, & Miquel, 2009), working collaboratively with the tutor in a co-teaching modality. Various studies address the effect of co-teaching (two teachers in the classroom), which, among other benefits, renders it possible to support students who have more difficulty in the mainstream classroom, advise the general teacher on how to improve his/her praxis, and monitor the progress of students with learning difficulties or some type of disability in a mainstream context, thus achieving greater educational efficiency (Austin, 2001; Gurgur & Uzuner, 2011; Huguet, 2006; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015). That said, shared teaching presents new challenges for teachers. According to Strogilos and Tragoulia (2013), shared planning, specific training to prepare teachers for collaboration, and a good understanding and willingness to collaborate with other teachers are necessary.

Eisenman et al. (2010) observed that advising suggests accompanying the general teacher in the improvement of learning, teaching, and assessment strategies by mutual learning and negotiating that indirectly effects the improvement of the learning processes of students.

The management function includes participation in coordinating meetings among teachers, student assessments, the design of materials, the monitoring of students with more difficulties, and coordination with other stakeholders in the educational community (Takala et al., 2009). To that end, according to the reviewed literature (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Knackendoffel, 2005; Wallace, Anderson, & Bartholomay, 2002; Eisenman et al., 2010), the creation of formal structures that promote collaborative spaces between teachers are important, given that the good administration of these spaces affects student performance (Eisenman et al., 2010).

1.3. Contextualization of the catalan educational system

The Catalan Educational System is regulated by the Education Law of Catalonia (2009), which promotes the right to a quality education and endorses attention to diversity to achieve equal opportunities. Different modalities of schooling are provided to students with special educational needs: mainstream school, shared schooling (when the student attends a mainstream school for a period of time and a special school for another period of time), or special education schools.

Regular schools are staffed with one or more special education teachers (SADT) whose mission is to attend to students' learning