



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Workshop series to guide families in the socialization of students with autism spectrum disorders

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: inclusive and quality education is fundamental for the well-being of all learners, especially those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who require a multifactorial approach that promotes collaboration between schools and families.

Objective: to propose a system of workshops to support family guidance in the socialization of learners with ASD in the municipality of Pinar del Río.

Methods: an observational, descriptive study was carried out in nine educational institutions belonging to the primary education level in the municipality of Pinar del Río, during the period 2023–2024. Information was collected from the psycho-pedagogical files of learners with ASD, which describe the characterization of the learner and their family, as well as from home visit reports that describe the educational dynamics developed in the family context. Data were processed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The sample consisted of 12 families, representing 100 % of the families of learners with ASD attending primary-level institutions in the municipality of Pinar del Río.

Results: a system of workshops is proposed that seeks to empower families, providing them with tools and strategies to support their children at home and in the community.

Conclusions: the research suggests that family guidance is crucial to improving the socialization and academic performance of learners with ASD. This approach is based on the premise that active family participation can transform the educational experience of learners with ASD, promoting a more inclusive and collaborative environment.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder Social Inclusion; Neurodevelopmental Disorders.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 marked the beginning of the Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Most countries are seeking alternatives and have intensified efforts to transform their educational systems, focusing on SDGs 3 and 4, which refer to ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all, in coherence with developing inclusive, equitable, and quality education.⁽¹⁾

To achieve these objectives, education must have a multifactorial character where the teacher and their necessary interaction with the family as a development agent play a preponderant role. This symbiosis between both spaces is fundamental for the integral development of students, especially those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

The current classification of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), has opted for generic terminology (ASD) based on meeting a certain number of observable behavioral symptoms of social communication, and patterns of interests and behaviors, thus avoiding subcategories existing in previous diagnostic classifications.

ASD is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder with symptomatic heterogeneity, characterized by deficits in social communication, repetitive behavior, and restricted interests;^(2,3) with a presence of interests, behaviors, or stereotyped language and sensory anomalies that begin in early childhood and continue throughout life.^(3,4)

This neurodevelopmental disorder affects approximately 1 in 54 children according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States. More recent data indicate a significant increase showing a prevalence of 1 in 31; in Latin America 1 in 160, in Europe 1 in 111, and globally 1 in 100.⁽⁴⁾ In Cuba, statistics derived from local studies and official declarations from Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) reports suggest that between 1 and 2 per 1,000 children (approximately 0,1 %-0,2 %) have the condition of ASD. The Cuban health system prioritizes early diagnosis. As a result, in 2021 Cuba reported advances in early detection of students with ASD.^(5,6)

These data represent a multidimensional challenge for the educational and health system; their symptomatic heterogeneity requires interdisciplinary approaches.

With these arguments, the role of the school is highlighted as a decisive environment for early detection and socio-cognitive development. In Cuba, the III Improvement of the National Education System (2021-2024) has prioritized educational inclusion, aligning with the SDGs. This process demands greater participation of educational agents, highlighting the role of families as pillars in the formation of students with ASD, emphasizing the main challenges to face persistent gaps in health, linked to social determinants.⁽⁶⁾

In the educational care of these students, historically the family has been relegated to basic care, ignoring their educational potential. Currently, there has been an evolution toward an ecological-systemic model where the family is already recognized as an important and necessary permanent support for the personal development of this student, by favoring learning and socialization opportunities.⁽⁷⁾

The diagnosis of ASD is experienced in families as crisis states, according to the family resources possessed. In this context, a process similar to mourning, with identified phases: shock (emotional blocking), denial (avoidance of the problem), reaction (search for understanding), adaptation (practical focus on needs).⁽⁷⁾

Faced with this reality, family guidance as a progressive process where the teacher from the educational context plays a mediating role will make it possible to strengthen family capacities with an interdisciplinary approach.

Educational care, specifically in regular contexts that include students with ASD, presents significant advances and challenges; differentiated care in regular classrooms is highlighted, with curricular adaptations and with the intervention of Support Teachers. From this perspective, the school is positioned as an articulating axis between educational agencies.

Family studies from Cuba and the world have shown that active parental participation significantly improves socialization, academic performance, and emotional well-being of students. For this, it is fundamental to create pedagogical strategies that include the creation of structured domestic environments, the use of assistive technologies, and the fostering of open communication with teaching staff. Active family participation influences the educational success of students with ASD, underlining the need for collaboration between school and family.^(7,8)

In Cuba, collaboration between school and family is a fundamental pillar for the educational inclusion of students with ASD, aligned with the approach of participatory and community education. However, research highlights that, although Cuban families show high commitment to the education of their children, many face barriers such as lack of information about ASD, scarcity of guidance and training spaces, as well as difficulties in accessing support materials.^(7,8)

The community constitutes the natural environment in which the family lives, and the interrelationships established between them are conditioning and enhancing factors of human development; diversity in families constitutes a real fact, which must be deeply known by those dedicated to working with students who present some variability in their development, as is the case of ASD. In the last five years, both in Cuba and internationally, the importance of family guidance from school to improve the educational inclusion of these students has been emphasized.^(8,9)

Globally, models have been implemented such as in the United States the TEACCH Program and interventions like Project ImPACT that reduce parental stress and improve academic outcomes by integrating therapies into the school curriculum. Structured approach for learning, with active family participation. Inclusive schools in Spain: Projects like "TEA Classrooms" integrate families into the educational process.^(9,10)

Experiences in Latin America: Argentina and Chile promote positive parenting workshops.⁽¹¹⁾ In Europe, specialized coordination is used through the "inclusion coordinator" model with personalized family-school plans, and the European Accessibility Law (2025) requires schools to provide resources to families of children with disabilities.⁽²⁾

Cuba has advanced in inclusive educational policies, with programs aimed at Training families and teachers in ASD management. "Learn to Grow" Project (MINED, 2021); the Diagnosis and Orientation Centers (CDO) are preparing to offer multidisciplinary counseling, their specialists together with support teachers from Special Education carry out "Parent Workshops" focused on behavioral modification techniques and alternative communication. Other Cuban studies highlight the need for greater teacher training to attend students with ASD.^(6,12,13)

Family guidance is important in the educational care context of students with ASD since the family is the first educational and socializing agent, so their preparation is fundamental for the development of these students. The role of the school is highlighted, as a training institution, which must provide tools to families to manage the behavioral and communicative challenges of children with ASD, foster collaboration between teachers, specialists, and parents, and promote educational and social inclusion.⁽¹⁴⁾

Studies in Cuban Pediatrics Journals have addressed the topic, but without recent epidemiological data. Psychiatrists, psychologists, neurologists, physiatrists, and other specialists form multidisciplinary groups that, together with teachers, carry out important research that allows providing students with ASD and their families with more optimistic expectations about their development, education, and social integration. In Pinar del Río, this multidisciplinary group was created in the course (2009/2010) which functions until today as a commission with the objective of evaluating, diagnosing, and socially integrating students with autism.

Given the arguments presented, this research has the purpose of proposing a workshop series to promote family guidance in the socialization of students with ASD in the municipality of Pinar del Río.

METHODS

An intervention study was developed in nine institutions of the primary education level where students with autism spectrum disorders attend in the municipality of Pinar del Río. The intervention was carried out in the period 2023-2024.

The universe and sample coincide as the intervention was developed in 12 families of students with autism spectrum disorders, considering 100 % of families of students with ASD attending primary education institutions in the Pinar del Río municipality.

Theoretical methods (analysis-synthesis, inductive-deductive), empirical, and statistical methods were used. The Family Perception Questionnaire on Socialization in ASD with Likert scale was applied, grouped in three dimensions: knowledge about ASD and socialization, social stimulation strategies at home, family participation and self-efficacy.

Observation record of student social behaviors: observation guide in school and family contexts, to evaluate: initiation of interactions, response to greetings, cooperative play, use of social language.

Home achievement record guide: diary kept by each family, where they noted weekly the student's advances in social skills and difficulties.

Focus group at the end of the intervention: with a subsample of 6 families (selected by discourse saturation), to explore perceptions about utility, barriers, and perceived changes.

Participant satisfaction scale applied at the end of each workshop and at closure.

For implementation prior to workshops, the family perception questionnaire on socialization was applied and psycho-pedagogical records were reviewed. An interdisciplinary working group was formed.

During workshop design and validation, considering the diagnosis, the contents of the 10 workshops were redesigned with a duration of one hour each and monthly frequency. Guides for their coordination and visual support materials were prepared.

In intervention implementation, workshops were developed in the primary education schools themselves, in the afternoon schedule, with a total duration of 10 months (October 2023 to July 2024). Each workshop followed the structure: welcome and activation (10 min), dialogued exposition and small group work (25 min), active participation (15 min), exposition and debate (10 min). Participation of extended family (grandparents, uncles) was encouraged. Support materials were delivered after each session.

Post-intervention evaluation was developed at the end of the 10 workshops; initial instruments were reapplied. The focus group was conducted and satisfaction criteria were collected.

Analysis of evaluation results was processed with descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, absolute and relative frequencies) to characterize the sample and results by dimensions. Qualitative data (achievement records, focus group) were analyzed through thematic content analysis. Method triangulation (quantitative-qualitative) allowed greater internal validity.

Ethical considerations

The research was conducted following ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy. Each family was explained in writing and verbally the objectives, procedures, risks (associated with possible emotional discomfort) and benefits, as well as the characteristics, meaning of results, and their scientific purposes with respect to their identities. All participants signed an informed consent for their agreement to participate in the research. At the end of the study, results were returned to families and schools through a feedback session.

RESULTS

The proposed workshop series was based on the postulates of the Cultural-Historical theory with emphasis on social mediation, recognizing that, through family guidance workshops, parents' learning should be provoked through the performance of a concrete activity. The teacher orients, guides, helps to learn, and the parent learns by doing, happening, on many occasions, that their responses and reflections are more valuable for learning than those given by the guide.

In the field of pedagogy and didactics, the workshop is conceived as a method, procedure, technique, and/or form of organization of the teaching-learning process. In this sense, the workshop constituted a quick, effective, and dynamic way to achieve the process of guidance to families of students with ASD, which allowed optimizing time to prepare them in topics as necessary as these.

The general objective of the workshops consisted of promoting family guidance in the socialization of students with ASD; and as specific objectives: To know the perception that the family has about the socialization of the child with ASD and their preparation to stimulate that process; To stimulate the preparation and participation of the extended family (grandparents, uncles) in the stimulation and treatment of the student with ASD and their family; and to provide parents with information, training, and support to enhance the socialization of their children with ASD.

This proposal is made up of 10 workshops which, due to their experiential character and the link between theory and practice they possess, guaranteed a process of awareness about the importance of the topic. Each workshop has a duration of one hour; they were developed in family education schools on a monthly basis.

The 10 workshops were planned and organized based on the determination of needs that demanded their elaboration, taking into account the results obtained in the application of theoretical, empirical, and statistical methods in order to transmit knowledge, inform, and guide families of students with ASD; The workshops are conducted by the coordinator through group-centered dynamic techniques, which are currently included in so-called participatory techniques. Their merit lies in that it is the group itself, which is coalescing around the proposed tasks, who carries out an experience of true collective learning. The problems that arise, the interrelationships that are created, the concepts that are reached, are eminently a group creation of the parents. A favorable environment will be promoted where it is necessary to accept the use of popular language when commenting on the various aspects of coexistence.

Its structure was conceived taking into account: Title, objective, introduction, development, and evaluation.

During its implementation, four main moments were traversed from individual and group reflection, small group work, and plenary. Sensitization, awareness, and socialization of the addressed topic were achieved with a theoretical-practical, experiential, participatory, intersectoral, and interdisciplinary approach.

The relationship between individual experience, collective reflection, and knowledge production was also taken into account as a guiding principle; as well as reflection, review, and critical projection of contents related to educational inclusion.

It was also attended as main elements that; topics should not be developed with the traditional teacher-student scheme. Precisely the rupture of these schemes is what is most novel about this form of learning, allowing its collective construction, without losing, for that reason, the scientific and experiential. Participation of couple members, uncles, siblings, grandparents, among others, interested in the activity was insisted upon. All those who influence children's education must be prepared with the objective of positively influencing the development of their socialization. The creation of a climate of trust, of security, that allowed sharing opinions, experiences, knowledge, and unknowns was sought. An optimistic approach was promoted that transfers forces and realistic hopes to parents, to teachers, and to society, helps them to face, think, do, and be.

The main topics were related to:

Workshop 1: Let's get to know each other.

Workshop 2: Working with visual aids. A valuable resource.

Workshop 3: Daily Routine. Making their life predictable.

Workshop 4: Teaching the use of visual agendas. And the location of spaces for socialization.

Workshop 5: Social training at home.

Workshop 6: Teaching to manage behaviors in public places

Workshop 7: Relating with family members and close people.

Workshop 8: I greet and I say goodbye

Workshop 9: Interacting with peers "not with people with autism"

Workshop 10: To learn to cope in a social situation. Use of stories

The evaluation model was carried out from the process of change and transformation in the modes of action of families, without ceasing to verify the changes in the evolution of indicators that evaluate the socialization of schoolchildren. In addition, satisfaction is evaluated at the conclusion of each of the topics, for which their opinions are recorded and attendance and participatory action of parents is taken into account, in addition to the affective emotional environment, stimulation of development, and socialization that the family guarantees.

In all workshops, parents were encouraged that once the work session with their children at home was concluded, they should record the child's achievements in each session; this would allow them to determine exactly when they should withdraw a task and place new activities of greater complexity level. This action should be performed, whenever possible, at the end of working with their child. The final evaluation is carried out from the analysis of the record that each parent established about their child's achievements where they exposed their experiences and arrived at conclusions about the level of socialization achieved by their children.

DISCUSSION

The research conducted on family guidance in the care of students with ASD has revealed significant findings that provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics between school and families. One of the most highlighted aspects is the recognition of the active role that families can play in the social and educational development of their children with ASD. Through the proposed workshops, it is observed that parent training and empowerment not only favor the socialization of students but also contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and understanding environment. The proposed family guidance workshop series contributed to the demands required by the Third Improvement of the National Education System from the coherent implementation of its new forms of work, in close relation with the opportunities offered by its components and structure with possibilities of multiplication to the levels that are subordinate to it and with the necessary link with families.

The family develops through practical guidance and educational support, which coincides with previous studies that have highlighted the importance of continuous training and access to adequate resources for families of students with ASD.^(2,12,13,14)

The intervention shows the importance of an interdisciplinary approach that involves professionals from diverse areas, including education, psychology, and health. Collaboration between these actors is essential to address the complexities of ASD and to provide integral support to families, which enriches educational and therapeutic practice.

The workshops made possible the relationship between the socio-psychological environment of the home and the socialization of students with ASD. A positive family environment, characterized by understanding and empathy, is associated with better socialization outcomes. The intention was to address overprotection and family tensions as obstacles that hinder the development of social skills. Interventions focused not only on the student but also on the family dynamics as a whole.

It is crucial to point out that the success of educational inclusion of students with ASD largely depends on the capacity of schools to involve families in the educational process. The conclusions derived from this study underline the importance of establishing effective communication channels between teachers and parents, as well as the need to create a space where families feel supported and empowered to participate actively.

It is important to recognize the limitations of this study. The relatively small sample and the focus on a specific context may limit the generalization of findings. Therefore, it is recommended to carry out additional studies in different contexts and with larger samples to validate and expand these conclusions.

It is suggested that future research consider the relationship between the use of supports and improvement in the socialization of students with ASD. The incorporation of technological tools could offer new opportunities to facilitate communication and social interaction.

The research highlights the importance of family guidance and collaboration between school and families in the education of students with ASD. The findings suggest that, through a participatory and supportive approach, it is possible to improve the socialization and well-being of these students, thus contributing to their integral development and their inclusion in society.

What is important is to recognize the school as a scenario of learning, willing to overcome barriers, recognize life and development opportunities, transit from a space of reproduction to a space of creation; from a context of regulations to a context of participation; from a terrain of competition to a terrain of cooperation, and from a site centered on the teacher to a site centered on relationships with families and among all actors that intervene in the learning process.^(13,14,15)

Coordinated and sustained efforts are required, recognizing that there are probabilities of improving the outcomes of students with ASD, which depends on the changes that occur in attitudes, beliefs, myths, and behaviors of adults. This requires long-term sensitization work by the main actors of society, including parents, teachers, and community agents and agencies.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Authorship Contribution

YAG and OGR: were in charge of conceptualization, investigation, project administration, supervision, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

YDS and ACR: were in charge of conceptualization, investigation, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

GCP: participated in conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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Declaration of Artificial Intelligence Use

The authors declare that artificial intelligence was not used in the development of the present manuscript.

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