CURRENT TRENDS ON STRATEGIES FOR THE EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

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Abastract. The main objective of this work is to identify studies related to the educational inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Childhood and Primary Education, paying special attention to the publications generated in the last decade (2010 - 2020). To do this, a systematic review was carried out in the Web Of Science (WoS) database, with the following descriptors: "autism, inclusion and education". A total of 309 references were obtained, of which only 24 fit the selection criteria. The results obtained are structured around the following five categories: Analysis of interventions with students with ASD; Good practices aimed at teachers with students with ASD; Curricular adaptation processes of students with ASD; Analysis of the training needs of professorship; Generic processes of educational inclusion. Most of the investigations conclude that it is important to work based on the interests of the students and verify the lack of teacher training in terms of inclusive practices and knowledge about ASD.

Keywords: early childhood education, Primary Education, educational inclusion, ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, systematic review.

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TENDENCIAS ACTUALES SOBRE ESTRATEGIAS PARA LA INCLUSIÓN EDUCATIVA DE ALUMNADO CON TRASTORNO DEL ESPECTRO AUTISTA (TEA)

Resumen. El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo principal, identificar los estudios relacionados con la inclusión educativa del alumnado con Trastorno del Espectro del Autismo (TEA) en Educación Infantil y Primaria, prestando especial atención a las publicaciones generadas en la década 2010 - 2020. Para ello, se realizó una revisión sistemática en la base de datos Web Of Science (WoS), con los siguientes descriptores: "autismo, inclusión y educación". Se obtuvieron un total de 309 referencias, de las cuales solamente 24 se adaptan a los criterios de selección. Los resultados obtenidos se estructuran en torno a las siguientes cinco categorías: Análisis de intervenciones con alumnado con TEA; Buenas prácticas dirigidas a docentes con alumnado con TEA; Procesos de adaptación curricular del alumnado con TEA; Análisis de las necesidades formativas del profesorado; Procesos genéricos de inclusión educativa. La mayor parte de las investigaciones concluyen que es importante trabajar a partir de los intereses del alumnado y constatan la falta de formación docente en cuanto a prácticas inclusivas y conocimiento sobre el TEA.

Palabras clave: educación Infantil, Educación Primaria, inclusión educativa, TEA, Trastorno del Espectro del Autismo, revisión sistemática.

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is one of the most challenging categories, both for diagnosis and intervention, within the so-called "Neurodevelopmental Disorders" (APA, 2013). ASD is included in this category, according to the DSM-5, along with intellectual development disorders, learning disorders, motor disorders, communication disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Specifically, the current criteria defining ASD are:

- Persistent deficits in communication and social interaction manifested by difficulties in social-emotional reciprocity; deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used in social interaction; and difficulties in developing, maintaining and understanding social relationships.
- Repetitive and restricted patterns of behavior, activities and interests, manifested by at least two of the following symptoms: stereotyped or repetitive movements, use of objects and speech; excessive adherence to routines, ritualized verbal and nonverbal behavior patterns or excessive resistance to change; highly restricted and fixed interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus of interest; or hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory stimuli or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment.
- Symptoms must be present in early childhood, limit and disrupt daily functioning and are not best explained by intellectual disability or global developmental delay.

As stated by Villalba (2015), the prevalence of ASD is around 15-20 cases per 10,000 inhabitants, which means that of the 4,675,716 students expected to be enrolled in the 2019-2020 school year in Early Childhood and Primary Education (Ministry of Education and

Vocational Training, 2019), more than 9,000 had ASD. In addition, these percentages have increased significantly in recent years; therefore, it is essential to provide these students with quality inclusive educational attention that enables their presence, participation and learning in regular classrooms and that, in addition, values their differences as a source of enrichment.

At a conceptual level, educational inclusion, according to Echeita (2013), should be considered as the balance between learning and quality performance that adjusts to the capacities and abilities of the student body and ensures meaningful learning for all. In contrast to integration, it is a model that modifies the educational system so that it adapts to the needs of the students, and it is not the students who must change to fit into it. As Blanco (2006) summarizes; "teaching adapts to the students and not the students to the teaching" (p. 6), which will contribute to the development of fairer, more democratic and supportive societies (Echeita, 2008), but will require ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality education with equal opportunities. To achieve this, it is first necessary to reduce or eliminate all barriers of different kinds that limit or prevent access, presence and participation in learning for all, paying special attention to the most vulnerable students (Sandoval, Simón and Márquez, 2019).

According to Gallego (2012), the current measures proposed by the Spanish educational system to attend to students with ASD according to their level of impairment include, from the lowest to the highest level of inclusion, the following schooling modalities:

- Specific center for autism: In which students with ASD only are included. Specific for people who need extremely individualized learning conditions.
- Specific center: In this center, students can interact with other students who do not only have ASD, increasing their relationship possibilities.
- Special education classrooms located in regular centers: These classrooms enable students with ASD to be close to the inclusive environment and, therefore, the advantage of benefiting from social interactions with neurotypical children, while still receiving an adapted and individualized intervention.
- Combined schooling: Students who receive this type of attention attend simultaneously the regular and the specific center (or specific classroom), and in both the curriculum is developed jointly. This requires the coordination of all professionals involved.
- Regular center: This is the most inclusive option since students with ASD are included in a regular classroom with the necessary adaptations and specific support to optimize their educational response.

Among all these options, ordinary measures tend to prevail, and the adaptations that are developed must take as a reference the general evaluation criteria established in the didactic programs. When these are not sufficient, after a psycho-pedagogical evaluation, other specific measures of Significant Individualized Curricular Adaptation (abbreviated to ACIS in Spanish) will be implemented, which will affect the mandatory elements of the curriculum: objectives, content and evaluation criteria (Moreno et al., 2005).

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However, currently, the educational inclusion of students with ASD is limited, in most cases, to their attendance in a regular center equipped, to a greater or lesser extent, with a series of human or material resources. In this variation of the model, closer to integration than to inclusion, the student feels obliged to survive in an environment in which hostility oscillates according to the child's abilities to adapt to the context which, taking into account the limitations in terms of social and communication skills, are usually limited. For this reason "given the confusion and uncertainty present, progress towards the implementation of inclusive education is far from easy" (Ainscow, 2012, p. 40).

Given this situation, we propose the present research, with the intention of contributing to some extent to the imminent need to find organizational and pedagogical resources that allow teachers to reach informed agreements on what strategies to use, what didactic, material and personal resources are more relevant or what content is a priority in the teaching and learning process of people with ASD. Therefore, the main objective will be to analyze the state of the art of the organizational and didactic strategies used in the national and international educational context to face the educational challenges involved in the inclusion of students with ASD in kindergarten and primary school.

Method

A systematic review of the literature was carried out in December 2020, using articles indexed in the Web Of Science (WoS) databases, with the main objective of identifying research on educational inclusion of students with ASD. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol for systematic reviews was also taken into account.

In this bibliographic search, there was no language restriction, and the following descriptors were used: "autism", "inclusion" and "education". The search was adapted to the Boolean operator of WoS and Abstract was used as the field label. A total of 356 references were obtained. However, publications not included between 2010 and 2020 were discarded, leaving a total of 309 records.

For the final selection, through an inter-judge screening, a first reading of their titles and abstracts was made, selecting those considered relevant for full-text review, excluding studies not related to the Early Childhood or Primary Education stages. As can be seen in Figure 1, the selection process, which consisted of three distinct phases, concluded with the selection of a total of 24 papers.
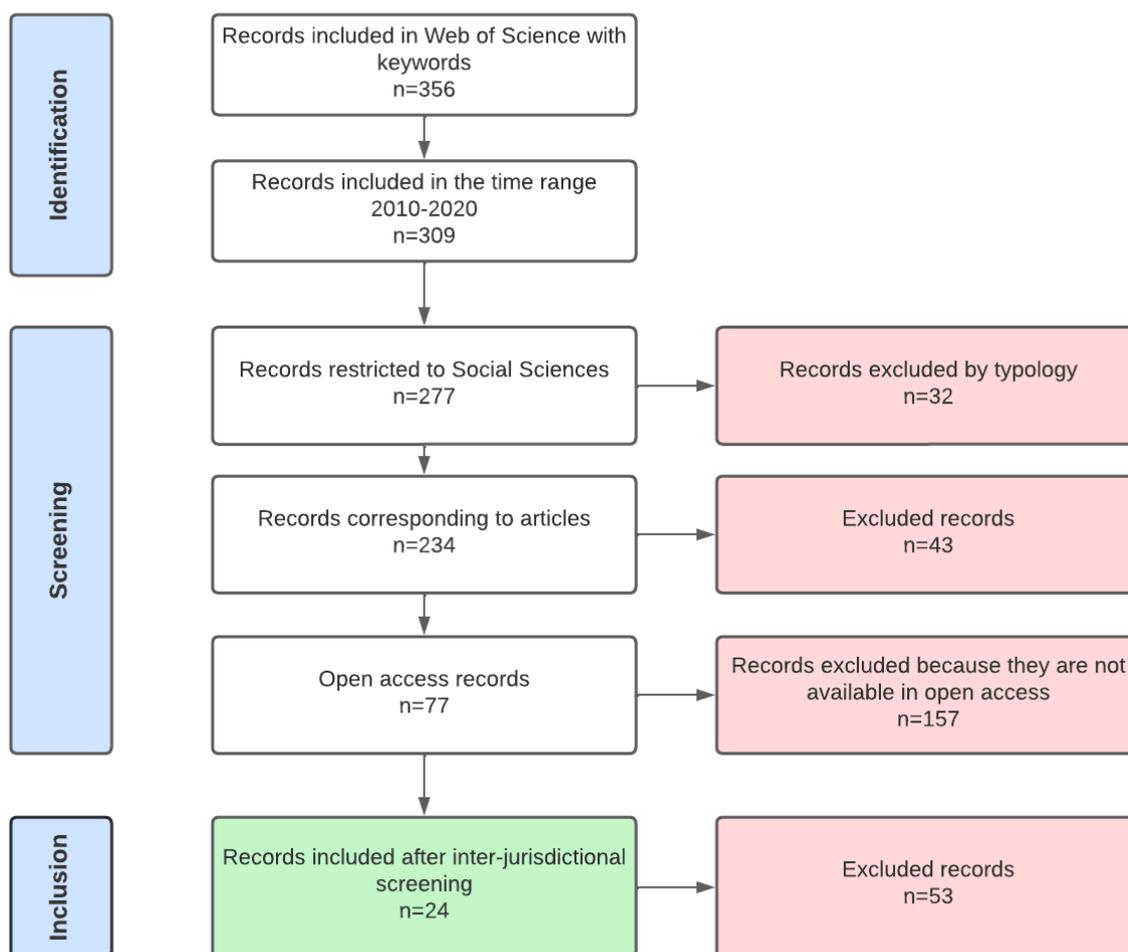
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Figure 1. Flow diagram.

Note: Own elaboration.

For the organization and study of the information contained in each article, an analysis matrix was prepared considering authorship, year, objectives, sample and results.

Results

After analyzing the content of the selected documents, according to the topic that has the greatest weight within each article, a categorical classification was elaborated with the intention of structuring these works related to the educational inclusion of students with ASD. The following five categories were identified:

- Analysis of interventions with students with ASD.
- Good practices aimed at teachers with students with ASD.
- Curricular adaptation processes for students with ASD.
- Analysis of teacher training needs.

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- Generic processes of educational inclusion.

The results found in the different studies are presented below.

Analysis of interventions with students with ASD

This category includes studies that either compare methodological strategies or evaluate the effects of certain interventions.

In the first case, we find the study by Guasch & Sanahuja (2020) carried out in Catalonia, which identifies which methodological strategies are used with students with ASD in the regular classroom, and whether they differ from those used in the SIEI classroom (intensive support service for inclusive schooling,abbreviated to SIEI in Spanish). The results presented show that when there is a SIEI classroom, it is common to place the student with ASD outside the regular classroom, where the support teacher maintains the role of tutor. However, within the regular classroom, the support teacher dedicates his/her time to the student with low-functioning ASD, while the student with high-functioning ASD receives support from the tutor.

ASD receive support from their peers.

In line with peer support systems, Haas et al. (2019) show step-by-step how peer tutoring strategies, namely CWPT (Classwide Peer Tutoring) and PALS (Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies), could be implemented. To exemplify the implementation of both strategies, they use a hypothetical student diagnosed with ASD. However, in the work of Koegel, et al. (2013), also related to interventions with peers, three real children of 9, 10 and 12 years old diagnosed with ASD, with communication difficulties and schooled in regular public elementary schools did participate. In this study, it is tested whether the implementation of an intervention with peers with activities and workshops that include the students' centers of interest improves socialization and interaction, as well as the motivation to remain in the activity. The results show that the development of activities that incorporate the interests of the child with ASD leads to an increase in social engagement.

Improvements were obtained in all three cases in terms of the amount of time engaged and actively participating with peers in activities. In addition, their non-directed verbal initiations improved significantly so much that they often approached those of students without ASD.

In Locke, et al. (2019) two implementation strategies for improving the use of a social engagement intervention for children with autism in public schools are compared. And in Brignell, et al. (2018) the effects of two communication interventions on children with ASD are evaluated, specifically: FPI (Focused Playtime Intervention) and PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System). Overall, it is concluded that neither intervention improved oral or nonverbal communication in the majority of children.

Regarding studies that evaluate the effects of certain interventions, there is the work of Reichow, et al. (2018), which systematically reviews the effectiveness of EIBI (Early intensive behavioral intervention) for the improvement of behaviors and functional, intelligence and

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communication skills for young children with ASD, confirming its effectiveness. In Santarosa & Conforto (2015) the relationship between students with ASD and mobile devices is studied, confirming to be favorable since the socialization of the analyzed students increased, favoring cognition, motor skills, communication, among other skills.

Positive results were also obtained in Barba & Minatel (2013), with an inclusive intervention through occupational therapy involving two children diagnosed with ASD aged 3 and 5 years, their mothers and the teaching team of the two centers. This study shows that myths stigmatize the attitude of people in the environment and represent a barrier to inclusion, so it is proposed to work on concepts such as respect for difference, tolerance and cooperation. As for these children, it is indicated that, thanks to this intervention, they were initiated in oral communication, expanded their circle of relationships, and experienced collective and group situations that facilitated their socialization.

Best practices for teachers of students with ASD

This group of publications offers advice for the care of students with ASD. Some of these studies provide practices to effectively carry out some method, as in the case of Ozel Erenand Nik Asilah Nik Ali (2017) with the EBP (evidence-based practice) method, and Togashi & Walter (2016) to introduce the use of the Adapted-PECS system. Other publications focus on specific subjects, such as the proposal by Aguiar et al. (2018) on the textual comprehension of students with ASD within the subject of Spanish Language.

In Corona et al. (2019), generic suggestions are offered, such as those summarized below:

- The teaching and learning process for students with ASD should be developed in natural contexts of intervention.
- The pace of performance of students with ASD should be respected, maintaining a patient and reassuring, but also directive and respectful attitude.
- The space in which the teaching and learning process takes place should have a fixed and predictable structure, avoiding chaos or lack of definition. The space should have natural light, with little visual stimulation, ventilated and clean. Ideally, noisy environments should be avoided.
- It is recommended to place students with ASD in the group, close to peers with whom they have empathy or support. They should also be close to the teacher and the blackboard, in order to favor their attention. It is better not to place it next to a corridor, window or in places with potential distractions.
- If an unexpected situation arises in the classroom, such as an unforeseen behavior of the child with ASD, the moment should be used to explain to the rest of the group what is going on with his or her classmate.
- As for the material, it is suggested to use videos, illustrations, drawings, finished models, etc. It is important to provide them with resources that allow them to understand the temporal nature of events, in which emotions are identified, that help them to

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organize actions following logical sequences or that graphically describe certain activities in a sequential manner.

- Better to plan the teaching and learning process based on the knowledge possessed by students with ASD. Special importance should be given to the achievement of skills related to communication, social interaction and behavior.

Likewise, it is worth highlighting the work of Hersh & Elley (2019) in which evidence-based recommendations are offered, in this case the good practices provided arise after conducting a survey carried out to 120 teachers, as well as other professionals working with children and young people with autism in Poland. Some of the practical recommendations are:

- It is necessary for each student with ASD to have an individual teaching assistant or support teacher, but without limiting access to the teacher or other students.
- Small group teaching and individual planning, including individual motivation systems and transition support.
- Positive but realistic attitude toward each student's academic and social potential.
- Minimize sensory disturbance and overstimulation in activities.
- Inclusive climate where all students with ASD feel safe and respected by all.
- Contact or visits to adult ASD schools that act as role models.
- Adequately funded schools with high quality resources to fully support quality instruction for students with ASD and/or disabilities.
- Measures to promote inclusion: active participation of students without disabilities, inclusive social events, opportunities for students with ASD to take on roles and responsibilities.
- Training and information for professionals on ASD.

Curricular adaptation processes for students with ASD

Processes carried out with specific cases are presented. For instance, in Aporta & Lacerda (2018), the activities carried out with a Brazilian student with ASD are presented, the materials used and the impressions of the teacher in charge are analyzed, who at the beginning of teaching indicates suffering anxiety and insecurity for having a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder. In the conclusions, it is emphasized that the work of this teacher evidences the importance of the teacher's performance with these cases, and made it possible to identify the teacher's fragility in the face of unknown demands. The need for further studies to expand knowledge about ASD and to obtain successful practices is emphasized.

In the same line, the study by Fiorini & Manzini (2016) identifies situations of difficulty and success of two Physical Education teachers during classes with students with disabilities and autism. It is highlighted that both teachers found it difficult to include these students in their classes, due to teaching strategies, pedagogical resources, content selection or the presence of the classroom teacher. Among the results of this study, three aspects that supported the development of the classes also stand out: the profile and previous experiences of each teacher,

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the type of disability or disorder and knowledge about them, and teacher empathy. It was positive that the teacher's gaze focused on the students' possibilities and abilities, instead of focusing on their limitations.

Roberts, et al. (2017) documents the trajectories of Australian students with autism during their education and examines the personal (e.g., student abilities) and environmental (e.g., school environment) factors associated with different trajectories and outcomes. While this paper explains the research process, the final conclusions are not recounted, although it initially concludes with negative outcomes for adults with autism in domains such as employment and independent living.

Analysis of teacher training needs

These works are mainly focused on studying teacher competencies and training in the face of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Razali, et al. (2013) investigated the perceptions of teachers on the inclusion of children with autism at the preschool stage in Malaysia. The results show that the three teachers interviewed were not prepared to teach children with autism in their classes because they lacked knowledge of the characteristics of this student body. They did not understand why inclusive education is important.

The need for the educational administration to have a clear understanding of the true concept of inclusive education is emphasized. In addition, it is emphasized that the parents of all students should be informed of the presence of students with autism so that they can cooperate. But, above all, this study highlights the importance of teachers receiving orientation through workshops or continuing education courses so that they can better understand autism. The research shows that most government schools do not offer inclusive programs, and those that do are implemented by people who lack experience in early childhood education or early childhood special education.

In the research by Caicedo & Amén (2016), contextualized in Ecuador and reaffirming theater as a method of inclusion for infants with autism, it was found that 67% of the 15 teachers interviewed were unaware of inclusion methods for children with autism and that 60% did not receive specific training to be able to work with these students.

The lack of teacher training in terms of inclusive practices and knowledge about ASD is also found in the study by Marques & Giroto (2016), which analyzes the teaching performance of a kindergarten teacher when faced with the school inclusion of children with ASD. Similarly, in Lourenço & Leite (2015), training needs are detected both related to the understanding of the problems of children with autism spectrum disorders, as well as classroom planning and curriculum management.

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Generic process of educational inclusion

These are international studies that analyze how to process of educational inclusion of students with ASD is or could be carried out in their respective countries, such as the work of Majoko (2017) in Zimbabwe; Vieira-Rodrigues & Sanches-Ferreira (2017) in Portugal; Lima & Laplane (2016) in Brazil; and León (2018) focused on Ecuador.

In Majoko (2017), 18 teachers were interviewed. Documentary analysis and non-participant observations were conducted to explore supportive practices for including students with autism in regular Early Childhood Development classes. It is explained that teachers need to look beyond the label of ASD, to overcome stereotypes and maintain expectations about the abilities of students with autism. Focus on potentialities rather than limitations. It is considered that adaptations should not be made only with students with ASD, but concern the whole educational community.

Vieira-Rodrigues & Sanches-Ferreira (2017) describe the opinion of teachers on the inclusion of students with special needs, exploring the factors that justify their opinion after six years of the implementation of the Portuguese Decree that aimed to promote equal opportunities, value education and promote improvement in the quality of teaching. The results emphasize that educational inclusion is beneficial for students with needs, but also for the socio-moral development of typically developing students. Another important fact is that more than half of the 244 teachers who participated in the study considered that they did not have sufficient training to deal with certain students with special educational needs.

In Lima & Laplane (2016) it is concluded that the schooling process of students with autism is not completed, since few reach secondary school, not guaranteeing educational inclusion.

Finally, León (2018) summarizes a series of conditioning factors to facilitate the educational inclusion of students with ASD in the Ecuadorian context, including the following:

- Early initiation of children with ASD in the educational process. For their development, the same educational objectives that are taken into account for the rest of the students should be considered.
- To carry out the necessary adaptations in the objectives, contents, methodology, didactic materials and evaluation, in order to provide the fulfillment of the planned goals in line with what is considered for the students in general.
- Work in a structured way with specific objectives and by specific areas.
- If necessary, initiate students in the use of alternative systems, as well as in the use of different communicative functions.
- Provide interdisciplinary and specialized care: professionals in psychology, medicine, rehabilitation, nutrition, speech and occupational therapists, etc.
- Work with the family, the community and other educational agents from the very beginning. Also from the beginning of educational care, it is considered necessary to develop the socialization processes of these students.

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- Structuring the educational intervention based on the achievements attained.

Regarding the years of publication, most of these papers have been published between 2016 and 2019 (75% of the total), in addition, three publications from 2013, two from 2015 and one from 2020 have been selected.

Discussion and conclusions

This systematic review has allowed us to learn more about the process of educational inclusion of students with ASD and to evaluate the situation of these students within the educational system. It should be noted that the research analyzed is quite recent, since although the search covered the years 2010 to 2020, the first experiences collected belong to 2013. Likewise, most of the productions are international studies and come from countries such as Ecuador, Portugal and Brazil.

Regarding the methodological strategies carried out in infant and primary classrooms, most of the researches highlight the importance of working on the basis of the students' interests. This improves their motivation and involvement in the activity, and encourages socialization and interaction among peers. This is confirmed by the results of the research by Da Silva, Oliveira, Campos and Oliveira (2019), which conducted a review of studies that used play mechanics for the inclusion of students with educational needs, and in which they concluded that working from the interests of students increases their commitment and involvement in the task, while promoting adequate cognitive, social and human development.

Another aspect to reflect on the results obtained is that most of the studies were aimed at working on some of the most affected areas of students with ASD: communication, social interaction or behavioral inflexibility. These deficits cause them serious difficulties in understanding the society in which they live, which has led to a recent increase in interventions that focus on the development of these skills in students with ASD (March-Miguez et al., 2018).

To achieve this purpose, most of the experiences proposed the use of cooperative and inclusive strategies and discarded interventions of a more individual nature. Of all of them, the positive results obtained from the use of the peer tutoring strategy are cited, such as with: CWPT (Classwide Peer Tutoring) and PALS (Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies). And it is that in the research conducted by Liesa, Latorre and Vázquez (2016) peer work stands out for increasing the maintenance of communicative and social interactions in inclusive school environments. Offering empirical evidence that validates the effectiveness of this type of support systems for students in kindergarten and primary education, in diverse school contexts ranging from classrooms to the playground.

On the other hand, there was also a consensus among the different investigations that interventions should be based on classroom learning principles and had to be delivered in a spatially and temporally structured way. This is also pointed out in their work Arróniz-Pérez and Bencomo-Pérez (2018), in which they emphasize that the intervention should be characterized by an early start, intensive character, high structuring and, finally, by a specific

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action on language. From that point on, the choice of one or another resource, space or content will depend on the idiosyncrasies of the student in question, since much emphasis is placed on the individuality of each case.

It is worth highlighting the role played by ICT in some of the educational experiences analyzed. All of them had favorable findings, as they managed to improve, among other aspects, student socialization, motor skills or communication. In line with these results, the intervention program mediated by ICT and implemented by Suárez, Mata and Peralbo (2015), which increased student motivation and reinforced each of the activities, is mentioned.

Concerning the teachers, a large number of those who had to carry out the inclusion of students with ASD said that they were not prepared for this task, as they felt insecure due to their lack of knowledge about ASD, educational inclusion and classroom curriculum management. In some cases, they did not even understand the need to include these students. For all these reasons, and according to Patiño's research (2018), the need for training of all teachers in strategies that allow them to solve the problems that may arise from these inclusive educational situations arises, as well as maintaining continuous communication and coordination with other teachers, specialists and families.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight families as essential agents in the educational intervention of their sons and daughters (Arróniz-Pérez & Bencomo-Pérez, 2018). As Lozano-Segura, Manzano-León, Casiano & Aguilera-Ruíz (2018) state, a child with ASD who perceives from home a positive environment favorable to inclusion, will generalize his or her learning and will develop it correctly in the relationships he or she establishes at school. However, in a large number of the studies analyzed, the involvement of families is not as good as teachers would like for multiple reasons. This aspect is also picked up by García-Cuevas and Hernández (2016), since in their study the collaboration of families and external professionals was very limited, negatively influencing the effectiveness of the inclusive activities carried out in the center.

We conclude this section by pointing out that, although the different methodological and organizational strategies used in the different documents lead to varied conclusions, it is still a reality that the inclusion of students with ASD is complicated due to various aspects such as: teaching strategies, pedagogical resources, content selection or the presence of the classroom teacher. This causes that the trajectory of students with these characteristics is not as satisfactory as expected and that, sometimes, they do not finish the mandatory education. For this reason, research and experiences should continue to be carried out to systematize good practices that ensure inclusive and quality education for all students with ASD.

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