



ASD: an Opportunity for Social Learning?

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Abstract

This communication aims to verify the transformative impact of a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within his/her intervention nucleus, in a bidirectional logic of learning and personal and social development, thinking about education as a multilateral process in a learning community (LC). It aims to understand this nucleus (parents, child, volunteers), as an ecosystem based on the egalitarian dialogue concept, settled in the definition of a common project of intervention, unlocking opportunities and promoting the potential of all intervenients. An interactionist practice is studied, based on the collective belief that a systemic evolution necessarily results from the capacity for individual transformation, in a dynamic of mutual influence, in which each and every one will be subject and object of transformation and learning. The intervention method is described, focusing on the formation of this community, the refinement of their internal process of learning, monitoring and assessment, in a collaborative performance of sharing of knowledge, skills and objectives, capable of promoting effective learning and transforming the course of personal and collective development. Vygotsky and Bruner's social constructivism and Brufenbrenner's ecological vision are adopted, defending knowledge as a social construction. Autism is assumed as a sociorelational dysfunction and the intervention plan was outlined based on The Son-Rise Program (SRP). We used a qualitative methodology and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, minutes and written reports allowed to get the intermediate results that support this paper.

Keywords: *Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Son-Rise Program, Learning Communities, Social Constructivism, Scaffolding, Affective Neuroscience;*

1. Introduction

This communication is the third of a series of reflective reports on a work in progress and intends to describe how a rigorously applied method, which seems to have a very significant impact on the child, promotes a mutually reinforced and reinforcing interaction (volunteers-child) in which the optimization of this LC leverages in the progress of the child, in turn, empowered by the commitment and transformation of all the intervenients, in a logic of evolutionary interdependence.

The child in question will be named G, 4 years old, male and diagnosed with ASD. The family took on the responsibility of defining a home-based intervention program – The SRP.

2. Methodology

This communication integrates a systemic case study with a strong descriptive tendency intended to analyze the intervention nucleus of a child with ASD in its multiple dimensions, beliefs and perceptions. A qualitative methodology was mostly adopted, based on the narrative of the facts. With this methodological option, it was possible to highlight the importance of the individuals involved, as well as their beliefs and perceptions, seeking to understand the transformation/learning opportunities created by and for a child with ASD.

Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, minutes and written reports were defined as instruments of data collection. All were directed to all the individuals involved, except for the child.

3. The Son-Rise Program and the creation of a Learning Community

The SRP understands autism as a difficulty in connection and social interaction, in which the behavioral impairments are perceived as attempts by the child to preserve his sensory, motor and cognitive balance. It is based on the belief of social precedence over the academic, considering, like Vygotsky, learning as a social construct accessible to all, in which motivation and knowledge are cultivated in interaction [1, 2, 3]. It is argued that the human condition is built along a historical-cultural process in which development depends on the learning opportunities and interpersonal relationships established, considering that all the cognitive functions of the individual begin in an interpersonal process that, as a result of a long series of developmental events, will become an intrapersonal

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process [4]. Therefore, learning is assumed as the result of a process of exchange, in which individual and environment mutually influence each other, being in constant movement and transformation. Thus, it is believed that, using appropriate scaffolding techniques, permeated by the quality of mediation and socio-cultural interaction, it will be possible to intervene in the developmental path of a child with ASD, and reciprocally contribute to the integral development of all intervenients.

Thinking about learning as a product of meaningful and motivating interactions promoted in natural contexts conducive to growth, this “social method” instils in parents the urgency to assert themselves as leaders of the home-based program, enabling them with techniques, tools and, above all, fundamental educational and attitudinal principles to select and train a cohesive team to gravitate around the common goal of achieving that child's development potential, within a logic of transient support and progressive autonomy.

The formation of this team went through a very rigorous process, where the parents assumed that the assertiveness in the selection of the volunteers would be predictive of the quality of the exchanges and social experiences promoted and of the proficiency in motivating G to integrate a social and cultural context that promotes significant and internalizable learning [5]. They attempted to select individuals from various social sphere quadrants, with distinct personalities, but that shared a genuine admiration for G's individuality and the unflinching belief in his unlimited potential. Commitment, empathy, sensitivity, critical and reflective spirit were some of the characteristics that parents sought in volunteers. Age, academic qualifications or social and economic statuses were not considered as selection criteria. The diversity of opinions and experiences was valued, believing in the power of egalitarian dialogue and dialogic interactions, highlighting the individual contribution to the development of the team, as well as the role of the collective in the construction of the individuality of each one.

The recruitment and initial training of the volunteers took place in three sessions and the participants immediately identified themselves with the philosophy and guidelines of the SRP. They believe that, more than mediating the development of a child, they would improve their own development, as a consequence of interactive exchanges with all of those involved, and also as a result of the self-reflexive and critical practices imposed both in the personal and social dimensions [6], corroborating Vygotsky, who, introducing the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), allowed a dynamic conception of intelligence.

This team is made up of 14 volunteers (8 females and 6 males) and the nuclear family (parents and child with ASD), with the ages between 4 and 40 years. All volunteers completed the 12th grade, six of them with a complete university degree. Only one has training in the area of autism and special educational needs, and none has worked with this problem before. All the participants have 120-minute sessions, twice a week. These sessions are observed through a mirror glass and recorded, and, at the end, the feedback of the follow-up is presented. Here the techniques used are revised, as well as some suggestions for acting and overcoming, giving value to the qualities, availability and love evidenced and promoting the feeling of acceptance and belonging.

The team meets monthly for monitoring, assessment and training, with the purpose of sharing ideas and experiences, analyzing the objectives set and their level of development and redefining objectives, strategies and activities. It is also the parents' goal with these meetings to inspire the team union by promoting sharing and building bonds among the members of this new family, guiding them in maintaining a powerful focus: the belief in the unlimited potential of their child.

With this method and with this team, the paradigm is changed, believing that learning must take place in a collaborative and instrumental dynamic of sharing knowledge, skills and objectives, in a dialogic and reflective performance in which all the intervenients can be simultaneously learners and multipliers of knowledge, creating a network of sharing in which the whole overlaps the part in the pursuit of a common goal. This team imposed itself as an intellectual, social and cultural environment that facilitates a bidirectional learning, based on a sense of positive interdependence in which everyone, through practice, evaluation and reflection, empowers their capacities and blurs their limitations, giving birth to a new idea of learning community, the Son-Rise Family [7, 8].

4. The Son-Rise Family: Evolution and Overcoming

Analyzing the content of the minutes and written reports produced in the monitoring process, complemented with a set of interviews to all the intervenients, it is concluded that, after 18 months of intervention, this community presents itself as a self-sustaining ecosystem, being its survival and evolution facilitated by the ability of self-reflection, self-criticism, self-assessment and overcoming, as well as by the investment in the learning/training of collaborative work, by the permanent



reinforcement of identity and by the persecution - phased and progressively achieved - of a common and unifying objective.

The rigor in the implementation of the method; the intensive application of the program (56-60h/week); the commitment of the volunteers to operationalize the method with seriousness, rectitude and dedication, and above all, the evident and significant progress that G has demonstrated throughout the whole process are determining factors for the success of the intervention and for the refinement of this community. Feelings of inclusion, acceptance, recognition and parity in the design, monitoring and assessment of a common action strategy are also predictors of efficiency in the joint and assertive evaluation of the program, of the strategies, objectives and interventions, strengthening the community/family spirit and the belief that the transformation of the child will depend on his potential, but also on the ability and availability of each one to allow himself/herself to be transformed.

The evaluation, although collective and shared, has an individualized training aspect, aiming the follow-up of each volunteer after the session, to perceive possible personal constraints that condition their attitude within the playroom. During the empowerment of the parents at the Autism Treatment Center of America, they were taught techniques to enhance the volunteers' ZPD, working their attitude, trying, through assertive feedback and power dialogues, demoted from any judgments, to arouse and guide a reflective introspection that allows them to identify and overcome the causes of some blockages that may represent an obstacle to the profitability of their potential. It is believed that it is this inner gaze that induces transformation in each volunteer, and it is only through transformation that he/she can establish himself/herself as an active and efficient partner in the transformation of the child. There is a great investment of the parents in these techniques of self-knowledge and overcoming of the volunteers, assuming that the evolution in the personal trajectory of each intervenient, simultaneously, is the engine and sustenance for the integral success of this LC and, fundamentally, for the evolution of G.

All team members consider that this follow-up process is essential for pursuing the ultimate goal since it encourages action to the limit of its potential, challenging the individual and collective ZPD in a dynamic to grow, allowing growth [2, 3, 5]. They believe that everyone benefits by integrating this voluntary scheme, recognizing the time spent as an investment in their personal, social and cultural education.

According to reports, everyone felt gratified to be part of a LC that appreciates the inestimable value of the difference and equity, believing in the power of the interaction and cooperation in a project in which the objectives of the participants are closely linked to each other, not being achieved in any other way than the collective way. Feelings like the perception of self-efficacy, pride and overcoming are also shared and promoted by this LC.

More than a method of intervention, this program, along with all the theoretical and practical knowledge acquired during the constant training, starts to bloom a new way of problematizing life, imposing itself a new way of being in society.

5. Conclusion

This family adopted the SRP as their method of intervention, having as a structural pillar the resorting to elements of the community, in a volunteer way, as mediators and promoters of learning and development. They selected, recruited and taught volunteers to give life to a community governed by the common goal of optimizing the child's ZPD. They nurtured the team spirit and used their skills and tools to work the group's cultural, emotional and social intelligence, contributing to the dual purpose of teaching and learning, promoting feelings of shared responsibility, belonging and unity that gave birth to a new idea of LC.

The great achievements of this intervention, in the trajectory of the child and the volunteers, seem to confirm the importance of the quality of social interactions and the collaborative dynamics to strengthen the ZPD, contributing to understand that the individual's learning capacity is determined not only by biological factors, but also, by the ability of the support system to relate itself with the individual's cognitive structures.

To verify the transformative impact of the intervention at the heart of the community is one of the great advances of this home-based program, so ASD could never be just a struggle of the family but an important opportunity for collective growth.



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