



Modern Psycho-Pedagogical Approaches in Working with Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract: Inclusive education has come a long way in recent decades, and psychopedagogical approaches for students with intellectual disabilities have diversified and refined considerably. This article explores the main modern strategies used in working with this category of students, emphasizing the personalization of learning, the use of assistive technologies, and the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration. Starting from the premise that each child has a unique development potential, regardless of the cognitive limitations they face, methods that have demonstrated efficiency in contemporary educational practice are analyzed. It discusses how formative assessment, curricular adaptations, and positive behavioral support strategies contribute to increasing the autonomy and social integration of these students. The article emphasizes the need for a paradigm shift from the deficit model to that of resources and capabilities, arguing that educational success depends largely on the system's ability to respond to individual needs. By presenting practical examples and recent research results, the material offers a comprehensive perspective on the challenges and opportunities in this field, being useful for both teachers and psychopedagogical specialists.

Keywords: inclusive education; assistive technologies; curricular personalization; psychopedagogical intervention

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1. Introduction

When we discuss the education of students with intellectual disabilities, we are faced with one of the most complex and, at the same time, most rewarding dimensions of the educational act. In recent years, we have witnessed a profound transformation in the way society and the educational system perceive and approach this category of students. If in the past a segregationist vision prevailed, in which they were educated separately, today we are increasingly talking about real inclusion and active participation in school and social life (Villa & Thousand, 2016).

Intellectual disability, defined by the American Psychiatric Association as being characterized by significant deficits in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, manifested during the developmental period (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), affects approximately 1-3% of the general population. However, beyond these statistical figures, we are talking about children and youth with unique stories, with different aspirations, fears, and potentials. Over two decades of experience in the field of special education have taught me that diagnostic labels, although administratively necessary, can sometimes become obstacles to an authentic understanding of the child.

Modern psychopedagogical approaches start from a fundamental premise: educability is a universal right, and every child, regardless of the severity of the disability they face, has the capacity to learn and progress. This change in perspective is not just a matter of pedagogical optimism, but the result of numerous scientific studies that have demonstrated the plasticity of the brain and its ability to develop alternative ways of processing information when given the appropriate stimuli and support (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Schalock, Luckasson and Tassé (2021) emphasize the importance of reconceptualizing intellectual disability through a multidimensional model that goes beyond the simple measurement of IQ and integrates adaptive functioning in real-life contexts.

The current context, marked by rapid technological progress and an increasingly deep understanding of cognitive neuroscience, offers unprecedented opportunities for personalizing the educational process. Assistive technologies, adaptive educational applications, and differentiated teaching methods today allow for a flexibility that previous generations of educators could not even imagine (Browder & Spooner, 2020). At the same time, however, these tools can only become effective to the extent that they are integrated into a child-centered educational philosophy supported by scientific evidence-based practices.

The challenges teachers face when working with students with intellectual disabilities are numerous and complex, ranging from adapting curriculum content to meet students' cognitive abilities to managing challenging behaviors and ensuring an inclusive classroom climate. These challenges become even more acute in the context of the integrated classroom, where the teacher must balance the needs of students with disabilities with those of the entire group. However, experience shows that inclusion, when done correctly, benefits the whole system: students with disabilities develop more harmoniously socially and emotionally, while their peers learn essential values such as empathy, respect for differences, and cooperation (Turnbull et al., 2020).

2. Curriculum Personalization and Adaptation Strategies in the Education of Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Personalizing learning for students with intellectual disabilities does not mean, as is sometimes mistakenly believed, a simple reduction of requirements or the elimination of some content. On the contrary, we are talking about a reconceptualization of the entire educational process, starting from the unique cognitive profile of each student, from their learning style, and from their personal interests. The Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) becomes in this context more than a bureaucratic document – it represents a personalized map of the child's educational path (Zirkel, 2018).

Developing an effective IEP requires a comprehensive assessment that goes beyond standardized IQ testing and includes a wide range of aspects: adaptive skills, social and emotional competencies, preferential learning styles, personal interests, and family resources. Thompson et al. (2009) argue that assessing support needs must be a dynamic process that takes into account the interaction between the individual characteristics of the person and the contexts in which he or she functions. We have observed over time that students with intellectual disabilities respond very differently to various teaching strategies. Some learn better by manipulating concrete objects, others through images and visual representations, and still others through repetition and structured routine. Identifying these preferences is not a pedagogical luxury but a necessity for making the learning process more efficient.

One strategy that has proven particularly effective is teaching through situated and contextualized learning. Rather than learning abstract concepts in isolation from context, students with intellectual disabilities benefit enormously when learning

takes place in authentic situations that are relevant to their daily lives (Westling & Fox, 2019). For example, teaching mathematics can be done through hands-on simulated shopping activities, where students learn to count money, calculate change, and make purchasing decisions. This approach not only facilitates understanding of concepts but also contributes to the development of personal autonomy, a fundamental goal in the education of these students.

Adapting teaching materials is another essential dimension of personalization. Tomlinson (2014) provides a comprehensive framework for differentiating instruction, emphasizing the need to adapt the content, process, product, and learning environment to the individual needs of students. Texts can be simplified by reducing syntactic complexity, using accessible vocabulary, and structuring information into shorter sequences. Visual aids – images, diagrams, and graphic schemes – can replace or complement written text, facilitating understanding and memorization. Digital technology offers extraordinary possibilities here: applications that transform text into speech, programs that allow adjusting the speed of information presentation, or adaptive educational games that automatically adjust to the level of the student.

One aspect that I think is worth emphasizing is the importance of learning through repetition and reinforcement. Students with intellectual disabilities often need many more exposures to information for it to be internalized and generalized in various contexts. However, repetition does not have to be mechanical or boring. Varying the ways of practice – through games, practical activities, exercises with technological support – maintains the student's interest and facilitates the transfer of learning.

Structuring time and activities is another critical component. Many students with intellectual disabilities function better in a predictable environment, where they know what is coming next. Visual routines, where each activity of the day is represented by a picture or symbol, provide security and reduce anxiety. At the same time, however, there must be a balance – too rigid a structure can inhibit the development of cognitive flexibility and the ability to adapt to new situations.

Family collaboration is essential in the process of curriculum personalization. Parents and caregivers know their child best – what motivates them, what frustrates them, what strategies work at home. Their active involvement in the development and implementation of the IEP not only improves outcomes but also ensures continuity of learning between the school and family environments (Turnbull et al., 2020). We have had numerous situations where the information provided by parents

was decisive in identifying effective strategies or in understanding behaviors that seemed inexplicable in the school context.

Progress assessment needs to be formative and ongoing, not just summative. Instead of focusing exclusively on standardized test scores, which often do not reflect the true potential of students with intellectual disabilities, we need to observe and document progress in authentic contexts. Portfolios of work, systematic observations, video recordings, and regular feedback provide a much more complete picture of a child's development. Furthermore, this approach allows for prompt adjustments to strategies when something is not working, rather than waiting until the end of the semester to find that the student has not progressed.

3. Assistive Technologies and Behavioral Interventions in Supporting Global Development

Assistive technologies have literally revolutionized the learning and participation possibilities of students with intellectual disabilities. We are no longer just talking about specialized, expensive, and hard-to-access devices, but about smartphone apps, educational tablets, and software that can transform any computer into a powerful support tool. This democratization of technology has made interventions that were once only available in specialized centers now accessible in regular classrooms and even in families' own homes.

Communication is one of the areas where assistive technology has made the most dramatic advances. For students with severe intellectual disabilities who have significant difficulties in developing speech, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems provide a voice (Browder & Spooner, 2020). From simple picture boards to sophisticated speech synthesis applications, these tools allow the expression of needs, desires, and thoughts. I have witnessed countless times the transformation that the ability to communicate brings – a child who previously displayed frustration through problematic behaviors becomes calm and cooperative when he finds a way to make himself understood.

Tablets and adaptive educational apps are other examples of technologies that are having a major impact. Unlike traditional static teaching materials, digital apps can automatically adjust the level of difficulty based on student responses, provide immediate feedback, and transform learning into an interactive and engaging experience. For students with intellectual disabilities, who may have short attention spans and need sensory stimulation, these features are extremely valuable.

Educational games that combine academic learning with playful elements succeed in maintaining motivation where traditional methods have failed.

Technology can also support the development of personal autonomy. Reminder apps help students follow daily routines, voice prompts guide them through the steps of a complex activity, and GPS and navigation apps can increase independence while traveling. In an increasingly digitalized society, these skills are not just conveniences but are essential for full social participation. The World Health Organization (2011) emphasizes in its World Report on Disability that environmental barriers, including technological ones, can exacerbate or diminish a person's degree of disability.

However, technology alone is not enough. It must be integrated into a comprehensive approach that also includes effective behavioral strategies. Many of the challenging behaviors exhibited by students with intellectual disabilities – tantrums, aggression, stereotyped behaviors – are not whims, but ways of communicating an unmet need or sensory overload. Positive Behavior Support (PBS) has radically changed the way we understand and address these manifestations (Sailor et al., 2021).

PBS starts from the functional analysis of behavior – we try to understand why a certain behavior occurs, what need the child is trying to satisfy through it. It is a common mistake to treat only the symptom, the visible behavior, without asking ourselves what triggers it. A child who becomes aggressive during a math lesson may actually be communicating that the task is too difficult, that he is tired, or that he needs a sensory break. Identifying these triggers allows the design of preventive interventions, much more effective than punitive reactions after the behavior has occurred.

Teaching alternative communication skills is a central component of PBS. If a child is engaging in problem behaviors to get attention or escape a difficult task, we can teach them more appropriate ways to achieve the same goal. For example, they can learn to ask for a break using a special card or to signal that they need help by raising their hand. This approach not only reduces problem behaviors, but it also provides the child with valuable social tools for life. Structuring the environment and anticipating difficult situations are other effective prevention strategies. A student who becomes anxious about change can benefit from preparation - social stories that describe what will happen, preliminary visits to new places, and the use of images that illustrate transitions. Changes in the physical environment - reducing distracting stimuli, creating retreat spaces where the child can calm down - can prevent emotional escalation.

Positive reinforcement of desirable behaviors is more effective than punishment of undesirable ones. When we observe and reward appropriate behaviors—either through praise or a points system that converts to privileges—we expand a child’s repertoire of positive behaviors. Reinforcement must be immediate, specific, and consistent. A student must understand exactly what behavior is being valued and why.

Collaboration with specialists in psychology and behavioral therapy is essential for complex cases. The school psychologist, behavioral therapist, or neuropsychiatrist can provide complementary perspectives and develop individualized intervention plans. Carter, Cushing and Kennedy (2009) demonstrate the effectiveness of peer support strategies in improving the social life and learning of all students, emphasizing the importance of an ecological approach that involves the entire school community. We have found that multidisciplinary teams, in which each professional contributes their specific expertise, achieve results that are much superior to those of isolated interventions.

Working with the family is particularly important here. Difficult behaviors do not only manifest themselves at school, and consistency of approaches between the school and family environments is crucial for success. Parents need to be supported and trained in applying behavioral strategies at home but also listen carefully – they know the child’s behavioral history and can provide valuable clues about what works and what does not.

Shogren, Wehmeyer and Palmer (2017) propose causal agency theory, which reconceptualizes self-determination as fundamental to optimal human functioning. This perspective emphasizes the importance of developing in students with intellectual disabilities a sense of agency, that their choices matter, and that they have control over the environment in which they live. Positive behavioral strategies, when implemented correctly, not only reduce problem behaviors but also build self-regulation and self-advocacy capacities that will serve the student throughout their lives.

5. Conclusions

The journey through the landscape of modern psychopedagogical approaches in working with students with intellectual disabilities has shown us that we are in a period of profound transformation in this field. The shift from the paradigm of segregation to that of real inclusion, supported by advanced technologies and

strategies based on scientific evidence, offers concrete hopes for a more fulfilled and autonomous life for these students (Villa & Thousand, 2016).

Personalizing learning is no longer an abstract ideal, but a practice achievable through the tools we have at our disposal today. Individualized educational plans, when developed with professionalism and dedication, become authentic roadmaps that respect the uniqueness of each child. We have learned that curricular and methodological rigidity are the enemies of progress – flexibility, creativity, and patience are the essential attributes of the successful educator in this field.

Assistive technologies have opened doors that previous generations did not even know existed. From communication to learning, from personal autonomy to social participation, these tools multiply possibilities and reduce the handicap created by the environment (World Health Organization, 2011). However, technology remains only a tool – its value depends on the wisdom and empathy with which it is used. A tablet full of educational applications will never replace the warm and encouraging relationship between educator and student.

Positive behavioral approaches have taught us to look beyond the surface of challenging behaviors and understand the deeper needs that these behaviors are trying to communicate (Sailor et al., 2021). The transition from punishment to understanding and support marks not just a change in technique, but an ethical evolution in how we perceive disability. Every behavior has a meaning, every problematic manifestation is an attempt to communicate – our job is to become better “translators” of these messages.

Multidisciplinary collaboration and family involvement are not simple recommendations, but sine qua non conditions for the success of interventions. The education of a child with intellectual disability cannot be the isolated mission of a single professional, no matter how dedicated. A coherent team is needed, in which each member – teacher, psychologist, speech therapist, parent – brings their specific contribution, but works towards the same common goals (Turnbull et al., 2020).

Looking ahead, the challenges remain multiple. Education systems need to become more flexible, allocate adequate resources, and invest in the continuous training of teachers. Luckasson et al. (2002) have been emphasizing the need to move from a definition focused exclusively on deficit to one that recognizes the importance of support systems in determining the functioning of the individual. Real inclusion costs – in time, effort, material, and human resources. However, the cost of non-inclusion – both for excluded individuals and for society as a whole – is

incomparably higher. A society that measures progress by how it treats its most vulnerable members will find in inclusive education not only a moral imperative but also a profitable investment in social cohesion and collective progress.

Every child I have met on this professional journey has taught me something about resilience, about the desire to learn and be accepted, about the simple joy of progress, no matter how small. These children do not want pity or sympathy – they want real chances, realistic but not limiting expectations, and above all, to be seen first as people, and only then through the lens of their diagnosis. Modern psychopedagogical approaches, in their diversity and complexity, provide us with the tools to transform these legitimate desires into a tangible reality.

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