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EARLY STIMULATION PROGRAM FOR COGNITIVE, AFFECTIVE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A PROPOSAL

PROGRAMA DE ESTIMULACIÓN TEMPRANA PARA EL DESARROLLO COGNITIVO, AFECTIVO Y SOCIAL EN EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL: UNA PROPUESTA

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Abstract:

The growing enrollment in early schooling during the first cycle of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Spain, along with measures to extend free education to this stage, calls for schools' Guidance Departments to detect and address students' educational support needs early. This paper proposes improving the Diversity Attention Plan at María Auxiliadora Salesian School in Salamanca by developing a program to identify needs and stimulate cognitive, affective, and social development in children aged 0-2. The program focuses on enhancing cognitive and socio-affective skills, guided by principles from cognitive neuroscience and early care. It includes activities to foster student autonomy, with teachers playing a key role in mediating children's developmental processes.

Key words: developmental psychology; cognitive neuroscience; early care; attention to diversity; educational counseling.

Resumen:

La creciente escolarización temprana en el primer ciclo de Educación Infantil (EI) en España, junto con las medidas para extender la gratuidad de la enseñanza a esta etapa, hace necesario que los Departamentos de Orientación de los centros detecten y atiendan precozmente las necesidades de apoyo educativo del alumnado. Este trabajo propone mejorar el Plan de

Atención a la Diversidad del Colegio Salesiano María Auxiliadora de Salamanca mediante el desarrollo de un programa de detección de necesidades y estimulación del desarrollo cognitivo, afectivo y social en menores de 0 a 2 años. El programa se centra en potenciar las habilidades cognitivas y socioafectivas, guiándose por principios de la neurociencia cognitiva y la atención temprana. Incluye actividades para fomentar la autonomía del alumnado, en las que el profesorado desempeña un papel clave como mediador en los procesos de desarrollo del alumnado.

Palabras clave: psicología del desarrollo; neurociencia cognitiva; atención temprana; atención a la diversidad; orientación educativa.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a growing trend in Spain towards schooling at an increasingly younger age. Specifically, between the school years 2011-2012 and 2021-2022, the percentage of students aged 0 to 2 years in school has grown exponentially, with an increase from 9.7% to 13.5% for children under 1 year, from 31.8% to 45.1% for 1-year olds and from 49.8% to 63.6% for 2-year-olds (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2022).

In fact, the public policies implemented by the educational administrations in recent years aim to consolidate this trend, presenting free early education as an opportunity to promote the birth rate. In this sense, Castilla y León region is immersed in the process of extending the free education system in the first cycle of Early Childhood Education (ECE). During the current academic year, this measure has been implemented between 2 and 3 years of age, having already announced its extension between 1 and 2 years for the next school year (Castilla y León regional Government, 2022a). Therefore, in the coming years, the educational system will have to face the challenge of accommodating these students considering their development at neuronal, cognitive, social, emotional and affective levels.

At the neuronal level, the rapid growth of the brain from the third trimester onwards is essential for physical, cognitive and emotional development. Its biological maturation, influenced by environmental factors such as nutrition and trauma, shapes the nervous system (Papalia et al., 2009). Brain plasticity allows new experiences to strengthen neuronal connections, while poorly stimulated neurons degenerate (Maganto & Cruz, n.d.). At the cognitive level, children's perceptual skills are refined as they explore their environment, developing object constancy at 5 months (Anderson et al., 2018). Attention evolves from stimuli capture to a more selective and voluntary approach, influenced by learning (Palacios, 2014; Cáceres-Chávez & de Íscar-Pérez, 2022). The first memory traces appear at 2-3 months and grow in duration and complexity, allowing the development of imitation and spatial memory at 18-20 months (Palacios, 2014; Reynolds & Romano, 2016). However, there are circumstances in which deficits may appear. For example, premature babies show deficits in memory and visuospatial skills, emphasizing the need for early interventions (Fernández-Baizán et al., 2021). At the socio-affective level, babies are attracted to human faces due to the affiliative system, forming attachment bonds with caregivers (López et al., 2001). These links, essential for emotional regulation, influence social competence and interpersonal relationships (Cáceres-Chávez & de Íscar-Pérez, 2022).

Despite the fact that thanks to the enormous brain plasticity (Rosselli et al., 2010) it is possible to alleviate more easily the possible deficits that children may present and the existence of a

plan that regulates the inter-administrative coordination of Early Care in Castilla y León, the interventions offered to the age group corresponding to the first cycle of Early Childhood Education are usually provided by health or social services (Castilla y León regional Government, 2015). This is in conflict with several essential aspects of our educational system. Firstly, with the need for a design that considers the individual differences of the student as set out in article 4 of the current educational law and in the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Pastor, 2018). On the other hand, with the functions of the educational counsellor, who is in charge of identifying the needs and responding to them (Cobos-Cedillo, 2022); that is, of addressing attention to diversity (Martín & Onrubia, 2011). Furthermore, it must be taken into account that with regard to Early Care, the current regulations must be complied with, as set out in the Instruction of September 2022, which places emphasis on coordination between education, health and social services professionals; the Resolution of 2015 and DECREE 53/2010, which establish inter-administrative coordination protocols in Early Care; DECREE 37/2022, which organizes the Early Childhood Education curriculum in accordance with state legislation; and Resolution of June 28, 2023, of the Secretary of State for Social Rights, which publishes the Agreement of the Territorial Council of Social Services and the System for Autonomy and Care for Dependency, which establishes the roadmap for the improvement of early care in Spain on a common framework of universality, public responsibility, equity, free of charge and quality. In addition, the professional guidelines for Educational Guidance must follow DECREE 5/2018 and ORDER EDU/1054/2012, which define the model and operation of guidance departments in Castilla y León. Therefore, it seems necessary to delve deeper into the attention given to these students from the educational field, where there are hardly any plans adapted to this new need that is imposed with their incorporation into the educational system.

2. Current study

The Guidance Department of a private subsidized educational center has among its functions the early identification and evaluation of all the students of the center, including the two cycles of ECE (Federación Estatal de Asociaciones de Asociaciones de Profesionales de Atención Temprana - GAT, 2011). However, at the María Auxiliadora Salesian School in Salamanca (Spain) there is no specific regulation of the center for the first cycle of ECE, which means that it is supervised by the Social Services. The present study aims to eliminate this deficiency by elaborating a proposal to improve the process of identification of needs and early intervention on the cognitive, affective and social development that students in the first cycle of ECE may present. The specific objectives of the study were: (1) to design contents and lines of action for the early detection and stimulation of the Special Educational Needs of the first cycle ECE students; (2) to optimize the methodology of attention to diversity currently implemented in the school; and (3) to generate activities that favor the development of greater autonomy in students with regard to their cognitive and socio-affective competences.

3. Method

Initially, based on theoretical perspectives of cognitive and learning psychology, an exhaustive search was carried out for indicators at the cognitive, social and affective level with the aim of obtaining objective criteria for the growth of children from 0 to 2 years old. After obtaining the criteria, the documents of the Salesian School Maria Auxiliadora of Salamanca were analyzed in

depth to verify whether these indicators are suitable for students in the first cycle of Early Childhood Education.

4. Results

4.1 Documents

The theoretical framework that serves as a reference for the design and development of educational guidance activities in María Auxiliadora Salesian School in Salamanca is given by cognitive and learning psychology. However, in the evolutionary period that occupies the present plan, it is necessary to implement two new paradigms: Educational Neuroscience and Early Care.

On the one hand, Educational Neuroscience aims to integrate neuroscientific knowledge about how the brain works and learns in the field of education (Carballo-Márquez & Portero-Tresserra, 2018), that is, it helps to know how neurobiological processes intervene in learning to make it more effective and optimal. Once the relevance of the knowledge of the neurological development of children and the maturation of the nervous system has been revealed, it becomes especially important in the evolutionary period between 0 and 2 years of age, because it is the main way for teachers to understand how their students learn, as well as the existing relationships between their emotions and thoughts, in order to be able to carry out the teaching in the most effective way. If we manage to involve most of the brain in the learning task, including the emotions, the more guarantee there is that it will be learned (Bretel, 2015).

On the other hand, Early Care Intervention (ECI) is defined as "the set of interventions aimed at the child population aged 0-6 years, the family and the environment, whose objective is to respond as soon as possible to the temporary or permanent needs of children with developmental disorders or at risk of suffering them" (GAT, 2011, p. 12). This paradigm considers optimizing the child's developmental resources or the mechanisms of compensation and adaptation to specific needs that may present, considering the student as an active subject of the intervention. This requires early detection, something that does not fit with traditional diagnostic manuals such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in which the criteria are not applicable to children under 3 years of age (GAT, 2011). Therefore, to make diagnoses in the developmental period encompassed by the ECI paradigm, the criteria proposed by the Early Care Diagnostic Organization must be followed.

4.2 Proposal for improvement

The improvement proposal presented here aims to articulate a link between neurological development potential and the development of cognitive competencies, according to the definition proposed by Cáceres-Chávez and de Íscar-Pérez (2022):

A specific intervention within early childhood intervention (ECI) aimed at the population from 0 to 2 years of age, when a change or delay in the developmental process is detected, or a risk of its occurrence. Operationally, it is a set of strategies and techniques for preventive purposes, habilitation (implementation) and functional rehabilitation (modification, improvement, repair, compensation) applied through systematized and sequential programs, where the objectives are specific to the process by which cognitive skills are formed, although the intervention takes

into account other areas that encompass a harmonious development (social, communicative, psychomotor and affective) (p.19).

Since the intervention must be idiographic based on the child, we must carry out a previous assessment both at a quantitative and qualitative level. Qualitative developmental assessments are evaluations of the developmental process of a skill from its inception to its full acquisition, according to each child's own pace of development. An example of an assessment program used as a thermometer of development from 0 to 2 years of age is the Carolina Curriculum (Lutkins, & de la Cruz, 1994). Quantitative assessments are designed to measure the level of development of a behavior or skill in relation to the average age of the reference group for that child, thus yielding developmental quotients. The most used in the developmental period from 0 to 2 years are: the Brunet Lézine revised: early childhood psychomotor development scale (Brunet & Lézine, 1997), the Battelle Development Inventory (De la Cruz & González, 2011), the Bayley-III, Bayley Scales of Child Development-III (Bayley, 2015) or the Denver Developmental Assessment Test II (Frankenburg et al., 1992). Both types of evaluation should be accompanied by an assessment of possible warning signs that indicate various changes in the child's developmental process. This will allow us to assess the existence of any delay in the expected acquisitions for a given age, stagnation or regression in acquired skills, persistence of reflexes or behaviors from previous stages, abnormal physical signs, inadequate quality of the responses emitted or atypical forms of child development. For this purpose, the Haizea-Llevant developmental grid, which is derived from the Denver Test and shows the cognitive, social and motor development of children aged 0 to 5 years in an organized list of items representative of the most important evolutionary milestones in the child's development, is usually used as a reference (Alcantud et al., 2015). This developmental chart, which can be of great use at the educational level corresponding to the first cycle of ECE.

After the individualized evaluation, strategies will be applied to maximize the child's full development with the available resources. Therefore, it is important to have a direct interaction between the child and the educator, since this adult is responsible for observing and understanding the child's habitual functioning. The proposed methodological strategies are based on cognitive stimulation, as defined below:

Cognitive stimulation, in practice, is a set of systematic programs organized in strategies, techniques and activities aimed at maintaining and optimizing the cognitive processes that generate knowledge: perceptual processes, logical organization, representation, reasoning, memory, executive control and the formation of symbolic thought (Cáceres-Chávez & de Íscar-Pérez, 2022).

These strategies and techniques are grouped in an individualized intervention program whose objective is to compensate for deviations in normative cognitive development and to minimize the risks of their possible occurrence. This program is based on a functional diagnosis of the case, according to the developmental course and the competencies and capacities perceived in the child, in order to try to improve them. For the elaboration of this Orientation and Attention to Diversity Plan for first cycle ECE students, the following lines of action will be defined: (a) identification of needs, assessment and evaluation of cognitive and socio-affective competencies; (b) perceptual knowledge of the object; (c) representation of objects; (d) logical organization of actions; (e) object permanence; and (f) stimulation of symbolic play.

The activities proposed within the framework of this early stimulation program are not intended to be a set of exercises to be repeated, but rather working models that take into account the student's progress in order to promote increasing autonomy in terms of cognitive and socio-affective competencies. Therefore, the activities must be adaptable to the context to organize the means and tools available to achieve the proposed objectives.

Table 1 shows the cognitive stimulation guide designed, which distinguishes the learning processes or basic skills to be developed, the expected acquisitions in certain competencies and the strategies or procedures to be followed to achieve the objectives proposed in this study:

Table 1 Cognitive stimulation guide

Learning processes	Acquisitions/competencies	Strategies/procedures
Perceptual Sustained and selective attention. Spatial perception. Short-term memory. Action schemes.	Spatial organization. Knowledge of the object. Object permanence. Basic concepts. Representation.	Memory tasks. Identification, discrimination and grouping of objects by attributes. Tasks with pictures.
Reactive Habituation. Sensitization.	Adaptation to contexts. Behavioral habits. Self-control.	Control of basic habits: hygiene, feeding. Gestural and vocal imitation. Spatial organization. Temporal organization.
Modeling Sustained attention. Perception. Memory.	Knowledge generation. Logical organization of actions. Self-awareness. Interaction. Deferred imitation. Socialization processes.	Facilitate the organization of actions. Gestural and vocal imitation. Action formats and joint attention. Functional and representative play. The adult mediator.
Significant Combination of action schemes.	Knowledge generation. Communicative gestures. Deferred imitation. Mental schemes. Oral language.	Motivation techniques. Communication. Representative and functional game. The adult knowledge generator.
Symbolic Attention control. Working memory.	Communication skills. Knowledge generation. Representation.	Use of pictures and symbols. Development of play in interaction with the adult. Use of conventional gestures. Symbolic play. The adult skill builder.

This guide to cognitive stimulation is intended to enable the educator to carry out the necessary procedures to mediate the child's cognitive developmental processes

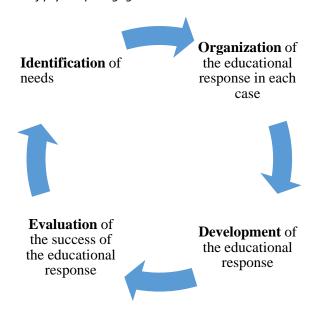
5. Discussion

The scientific literature is unanimous in pointing out the attention to diversity as one of the main functions to be performed by the educational counselor (Martín & Onrubia, 2011). However, this function requires a comprehensive approach in its application, covering all stages and all students in the school, considering diversity as a principle and not as a mere measure that corresponds exclusively to students who show some difficulties. Attention to diversity must be based on an attitude of recognition, appreciation and respect on the part of the educational community, aware that diversity is inherent in human beings and that each individual contributes to the enrichment of the group.

Educational guidance is responsible for identifying needs, however small they may be, in order to provide a specialized response to them, based on the planning and organization of contexts and the management and optimization of existing human and material resources (Cobos-Cedillo, 2022). In fact, attention to diversity begins with the assessment of educational needs, goes deeper into them through psycho-pedagogical evaluation, proposes and adopts measures to adapt the educational response, and ends with the monitoring and evaluation of the measures adopted, according to the scheme presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Process of psycho-pedagogical intervention in Attention to Diversity



At this time, it is necessary to base the development of this plan for the early identification and stimulation of Special Educational Needs on the current legislation, both at national and regional levels, in terms of attention to diversity and curricular issues for the ECE stage.

Currently, the general reference framework for the design of educational policies in Spain is governed by Organic Law 3/2020, of December 29, which modifies Organic Law 2/2006, of May

3, on Education (LOMLOE), whose implementation was taking place as of the school year 2022–2023 and is expected to be completed in the next school year 2023-2024.

This new educational law, in its article 4, emphasizes in a special way the attention to the individual differences of the students, the improvement of the educational inclusion, the personalized attention and the prevention of learning difficulties, adopting the corresponding organizational and curricular measures in accordance with the principles of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Pastor, 2018). More precisely, UDL is an approach to design for all that prioritizes the flexibilization of the curriculum to make it open and flexible from the beginning: a curriculum in which the barriers to learning that exist in educational contexts are reduced as much as possible.

The LOMLOE introduces changes in the classification of SEN, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2
Types of specific educational support needs in the LOMLOE

Disappear	The following are maintained	New products emerge
Learning difficulties	Special Educational Needs (SEN)	Maturational delay
ADHD	High intellectual ability	Developmental language and communication disorder
	Late incorporation	Attention or learning disorder
	Personal or educational history	Serious lack of knowledge of the learning language
		Situation of educational vulnerability

Thus, according to the provisions of article 71 of the LOMLOE, students with specific educational support needs are those who require educational attention different from the ordinary for presenting: Special Educational Needs (i.e., physical, mental or sensory disability or severe behavioral disorder); maturation delay; language and communication disorder; attention or learning disorder; severe lack of knowledge of the language of learning; socio-educational vulnerability; high intellectual abilities; or late incorporation into the educational system, personal conditions or school history.

At a regional level, the treatment of data related to students with specific educational support needs is carried out according to similar categories, as established in the Instruction of the General Directorate of Educational Innovation and Equity of August 24, 2017, which amends the Instruction of the General Directorate of Educational Innovation and Teacher Training of July 9, 2015, which establishes the procedure for the collection and treatment of data related to students with specific educational support needs who are schooled in educational centers in Castilla y León (Castilla y León regional Government, 2017). At a regional level, it also aims to ensure that the educational response to students with specific educational support needs reaches the highest possible degree of normalization, inclusion, integration, compensation,

quality and equity in the educational process, guaranteeing equal opportunities in access, permanence and promotion in the educational system.

Since this plan has a specific impact on first cycle ECE students, the specifications contained in the Instruction of September 2022 of the General Directorate of Planning, Management and Educational Equity of the Ministry of Education on the organization and implementation of various measures related to educational equity and guidance for the academic year 2022-2023 (Castilla y León regional Government, 2022b), which specifies the need for close coordination between professionals in the fields of education, health and social services, must be followed. These joint actions must be in accordance with what is established in the Resolution of February 26, 2015, of the Commission of General Secretaries, which approves the Protocol of Interadministrative Coordination in Early Intervention in Castilla y León (Castilla y León regional Government, 2015) and in the DECREE 53/2010, of December 2, on Inter-administrative Coordination in Early Intervention in Castilla y León.

The curricular aspects outlined in DECREE 37/2022, issued on September 29, must be considered, as it establishes the organization and curriculum of Early Childhood Education in the Castilla y León region. This decree addresses the need to align content and minimum teaching standards with the new national legislation. Furthermore, the Resolution of June 28, 2023, from the Secretary of State for Social Rights, publishes the Agreement of the Territorial Council of Social Services and the System for Autonomy and Care for Dependency, which provides a roadmap for enhancing early care across Spain. This roadmap is built on a common framework emphasizing universality, public responsibility, equity, accessibility, and quality. Additionally, the professional regulation of the Educational Guidance specialty requires adherence to the competency guidelines set forth in DECREE 5/2018, of March 8, which establishes the Model of Educational, Vocational, and Professional Guidance in Castilla y León, and ORDER EDU/1054/2012, of December 5, which regulates the organization and functioning of the Guidance Departments within educational centers in the region.

All these regulations are reflected in the Diversity Attention Plan, a document that contains all the educational proposals articulated in a school center for attention to diversity: in it are collected all the measures to respond to the educational needs of students in a planned manner, specifying the objectives, planned actions, ordinary and extraordinary measures to be adopted, criteria and procedures for the detection of needs, etc. (Tortosa-Ybañez et al., 2010).

The Diversity Attention Plan of María Auxiliadora Salesian School highlights that, as a regular school, it serves not only a considerable number of students who can be included in the categories described in the LOMLOE. The Diversity Attention Plan of the María Auxiliadora Salesian School emphasizes that, as a regular school, it serves not only a large number of students who can be included in the categories described in the LOMLOE, but also a large number of students for whom it is necessary to make the teaching activity as flexible as possible in order to adapt the educational activity to the particular way of learning shown by each student, assuming the principles of the UDL to try to eliminate any obstacle or barrier that prevents learning and to optimize the strengths shown by each student in particular (María Auxiliadora Salesian School, 2022).

5. Conclusion

This work presents a proposal for improvement that aims to remedy the limitation manifested in the Diversity Attention Plan of the María Auxiliadora Salesian School in Salamanca regarding the identification of needs and early intervention in the first cycle ECE students.

To this end, a program of early stimulation of the cognitive, affective and social development of children from 0 to 2 years of age has been developed, trying to prevent the appearance of possible later learning difficulties and to give early attention to them if they already exist. Thus, some lines of action have been designed, focusing on the detection of possible difficulties in the acquisition and development of socio-affective competences and on the early stimulation of contents typical of this developmental period, such as perceptual knowledge and the representation of objects, the logical organization of actions, object permanence or the stimulation of symbolic play.

Likewise, a change in the methodology of attention to diversity, currently implemented in the school center, has been proposed, from the classical postulates of cognitive psychology and learning, prevailing in the majority of Guidance Departments, to the methodological principles of educational neuroscience and Early Care. The goal of these approaches is to optimize the child's cognitive development to the maximum, to make a functional diagnosis of the pattern of difficulties he/she may present, and to propose an individualized intervention program based on his/her perceived competencies and capacities in order to try to improve them. This process is carried out through the production of activities aimed at promoting the autonomy of the first cycle ECE students, always with the mediating action of the teachers in the child's developmental processes.

Although this program was developed within the framework of a proposal to improve the Diversity Attention Plan of a specific educational center, the exponential growth of schooling in this educational stage makes it possible to extrapolate it to other schools with first cycle ECE students, despite the adaptations that may be necessary as a result of the contextualization or specific characteristics of these centers.

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