

Directed activities in Recess as a method of inclusion of students with special needs

El juego dirigido en los recreos como método de inclusión del alumnado con necesidades especiales

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Abstract

Recess is one of the moments where greater social interaction take places in schools. The free participation of students in activities and games during recess depends –mainly-on the interests and abilities of each student. Because of this, students with greater physical, cognitive sensory and emotional difficulties take risk of exclusion in recess activities. The aim of this didactic experience is to analyse the extent to which recesses with directed activities or games can improve coexistence and inclusion of the students in general and, particularly, in children with special educational needs. The experience took place in a school with 308 students, among them, 39 were children with special educational needs. This experience was carried out for five months, combining directed and free activities, with voluntary participation. For the collection of data, daily record sheets and a preference questionnaire were used. The conclusion was that the directed activities reduced the number of conflicts in the playground and that the participation of children with special educational needs was significantly greater than in the free activities.

Keywords

Directed playground; free playground; school coexistence; behaviors; special needs.

Resumen

El recreo es el momento de mayor interacción social del alumnado dentro del colegio. La participación libre del alumnado en actividades y juegos durante el recreo depende principalmente de los intereses y de las capacidades y habilidades de cada alumno y alumna. Debido a esto, los alumnos con mayores dificultades físicas, cognitivas, sensoriales y emocionales corren el riesgo de exclusión en las actividades de recreo. En esta experiencia didáctica se analiza en qué medida los recreos con actividades y juegos dirigidos mejoran la convivencia y la inclusión del alumnado en general y del alumnado con necesidades educativas especiales, en particular. La experiencia se realiza durante cinco meses en un colegio de 308 alumnos, de los cuales 39 son ACNEE. Se alternan recreos dirigidos y recreos libres, con participación voluntaria. Para la recogida de datos se utilizan hojas de registro diarias y un cuestionario de preferencias. La conclusión es que los recreos dirigidos reducen el número de conflictos en el patio y que la participación de los ACNEEs es significativamente mayor que en el recreo libre.

Palabras clave

Recreo dirigido; recreo libre; convivencia; conductas; necesidades especiales.

Introduction

Recess is one of the most important moments of voluntary socialization for students. During recess, students play freely and mix with each other for personal reasons rather than due to the mandatory reasons characteristic of the classroom. On account of its first-order socializing character, recess involves a relevant moment with regard to two fundamental educational aspects of students: social interaction at school and student inclusion-exclusion.

Pellegrini and Smith (1993) define recess as “a time of rest for children, typically out of the building”. The concept of recess as a resting time for energy replenishment in the interest of the tasks belonging to a classroom has been the most frequent until recent years. Thus, Jarret (2002) points out that “the most evident feature of recess is that it represents a resting period within the daily routine” since this is a period in which children can relax after a long school day during which children become fatigued while their attention decreases. In the same way,

Vallejo (2010) states that recess is a pedagogic resting time and an essential factor of the teaching-learning processes, which allows overcoming mental fatigue and contrasts performance decrease caused by prolonged, uninterrupted work. Dussel & Southwell (2010) stress the same aspect by pointing out that “recess is a part of the pedagogic space and its aim is to provide students with the necessary rest in order for the teaching-learning process to be more productive. That means that during this space of time students relieve the tensions arisen by work at school.” For his part, Álvarez (2013) states that recess is a period in which children have the opportunity to play and rest from the formal class period and have freedom, something they cannot do without getting in trouble while in the classroom.

Even though this conception of recess as a resting period between classroom activities is the most frequent in literature, some authors put emphasis on the importance of this moment as a socializing element for students, which provides teachers with important information about different traits of students themselves. In the same way, Eiviño (2007) states that “recess is usually considered residual time between work periods, nevertheless, it offers a potentially fertile territory to carry out ludic activities and games that drive new learning and values.” For their part, Gras & Paredes (2009) point out that “recess is an important socializing element of the school day since it is a place where children begin to practice their social skills, their affectivity and empathy.” In the same regard, Arias (2013) asseverates that “the space of recess is a propitious moment for the practice of social interaction in order to understand the different emotional responses, as well as individual and collective sentiments; besides becoming a powerful stimulant of virtues and social exchanges among the school community.” Jarret (2002) stresses this aspect by pointing out that “during recess, situations are more open and children are free to organize their own games, invent their own rules and make their own decisions; they may also quit the game whenever they choose to but they can also learn positive or negative behaviors from their peers.” In the same tenor, Zamir & Leguizamón (2015) affirm that “recess also promotes the development of social skills and values that allow for a greater integration into the school environment.”

Despite the importance that many authors attribute to recess as a promoting element of interpersonal relationships and socialization of students, nowadays in the related literature there are no significant studies about the improvement of such socialization. This dearth is even

greater when it comes to students with special educational needs, except for students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), for which diverse experiences with guided recess exist. From the cases observed in his study about guided recess for the integration of students with ASD, García Junco (2017) affirms that the employment of these programs was giving good results with regard to the interaction of this kind of students with the rest of their schoolmates and that “positive interaction periods of children with ASD increased.” There also exists contrasted scientific evidence that shows how interventions directed at preparing an ASD student’s equals and school environment (schoolmates and teachers), have a greater impact regarding the development of social skills of this type of students than individualized interventions of the student with a specialized professional (Kasari and cols. 2012). Nonetheless, there is neither evidence nor gathered experiences with respect to a different kind of students with special needs, whether motor, cognitive, sensorial or emotional.

Taking into account that recess is a complex moment when conflict and exclusion situations arise, this didactic experience aims to determine to what extent the organization of guided games on the playground improves the interaction of students at school and promote inclusion, particularly that of boys and girls with special educational needs in different areas (cognitive, motor, sensorial and emotional), in comparison to free recess.

Study of relational situations during recess

On account of the socializing character of recess, during which students interact with each other in different settings and situations in a free manner, learning to socialize in different ways -not always positive ones-, during this period three main relational problems may arise:

- Harassment and violence: as Castells (2013) points out, harassment and violence cases among students usually occur during recess and not in classrooms, especially in Elementary Education.
- Sexual segregation: such as Abraldes and Argudo (2008) indicate, during the first part of Elementary Education, division of students by sex is less noticeable, while during the second part division of students by sex is stronger primarily on account of the type of games. Thus, during the last two years of elementary school, students show preference for the performance of sports activities, in which soccer becomes

the king of recess for male students. On the other hand, the participation of girls in this type of sports activities is not frequent, since from an early age the traditionally feminine roles in games are strayed from motor activity (García and Navarro, 2009), favoring chasing games and those not needing large spaces.

- Segregation for capacity reasons: during recess, students usually mix with other students from their class, and among these, with those having bigger similarities of abilities and interests.

This aspect of segregation for capacity reasons, especially when it comes to students with the most serious motor, cognitive, sensorial and emotional difficulties is the one that mainly concerns us in this didactic experience. A piece of example is the fact that students in the last two years of Elementary School have an almost exclusive bent towards highly competitive sports activities (Abralde and Argudo, 2008), which causes the least skillful students at motor activities -whether due to motor, sensorial or even cognitive difficulties- to be excluded during recess.

The study project

The Inclusion Project at the Playground during Recess [Proyecto de Inclusión en el Área de Recreo (PIAR)] is an activity promoted by the Foundation RafaPuede, which has the primary objective to promote healthy social skills and collaboration among peers during recess in schools. The PIAR project started as a pilot project in 2016, in Joaquín Carrión Valverde Public School, in San Javier, Murcia, where it is currently unfolding. Physical Education teachers as well as the Principal are responsible for the appropriate performance of the project.

A great part of the activities that boys and girls spontaneously perform during recess have a marked competitive or sporting purpose, which makes it hard for students with motor, cognitive, sensorial or social difficulties to participate under equal conditions in this type of activities, giving way, in some cases, to social exclusion. Because of that, the goal of this Inclusion Project at the Playground during Recess (PIAR) is to facilitate the inclusion of students showing motor, cognitive, sensorial and social difficulties during ludic activities, so as to develop social relationships by participating in games with their peers.

Development of the project

Upon assessment of the features typical of students with special needs in this center, Physical Education teachers choose a series of games and cooperative activities that allow the participation of all students under equal conditions. This set of games and activities may be chosen by teachers from their own proposals or from those available in articles and books like “Proposal for Psychomotor Activities Adapted to Children with Special Educational Needs Inside the Physical Education Classroom” (“Propuesta de actividades psicomotrices adaptadas a niños con necesidades educativas especiales dentro del aula de Educación Física”) from Víctor Arufe-Giráldez (2011) or similar ones.

After selecting the games and activities, a schedule is set, with the possibility to repeat the most motivating or best-accepted games by students throughout the course. The PIAR project takes place two days a week; Tuesdays and Thursdays, from February to June, and benefits from the collaboration of voluntary teachers.

Student participation is also a voluntary. This aspect is important since it can be further assessed to what extent the offer of the project is voluntarily accepted by the students in comparison with free play. In order to encourage student participation, a number of promotional actions are carried out with the intention that students, boys and girls, get to know and participate in the activities of the project. The first promotional activity corresponds to a talk Physical Education teachers give in their classrooms to all students of the school, in which they inform about the project and they put emphasis on the ludic aspect of the latter. The second promotional act is the motivational offer of participation to final-grade students as collaborators in the organization of such games.

Objectives

The objectives of the PIAR project are the following:

- Promoting the practice of physical activity during recess through games with high motor engagement.
- Promoting student inclusion through guided play during recess.
- Boosting positive social skills among students, improving student interaction.

- Training and involving students, boys and girls, in the final years of Elementary Education in the management of games for the youngest students.
- Integrating the teachers from the center, the families and other agents within the close environment into the project, thus opening new participation paths for the whole school community.
- Analyzing the effectiveness of the project and performing a transfer of results with the collaboration of researchers from the San Javier College of Sport Sciences (UM).

Materials

As regards materials for the development of the experience, it is responsibility of the Physical Education area. According to the activity to be carried out, the following materials will be needed: rings, ropes, pikes, cones, mats, balls, etc.

For study follow-up and data collection: observation sheets, record forms and surveys.

Target Audience

All students in Elementary Education, with special attention to boys and girls with special educational needs. The data of Elementary Education students is the following:

- 308 students: 159 boys and 149 girls
- 12 different nationalities: 5 from within the EU and 7 from outside the EU.
- Out of 308 students, 157 are foreigners, which accounts for 50.97%.
- Among foreign students, Moroccan students are the most numerous, with 127 students, which accounts for 41.23% of the total.
- Students with Special Educational Needs (SWSEN), 39, of which:
 - ASD: 5
 - Mental disability: 30
 - Motor disability: 4
- Students with social relationship difficulties: 14

Methodology

This didactic experience may be classified as mixed-type since it is based on quantitative and qualitative methods. With respect to the quantitative approach, the data collected is reported through numbers, and from them it is intended to generalize the results found in a population sample to other contexts (Fernández and Batista, 2010); using the conclusions for the improvement of research and knowledge (Hernández et al., 2010). At the same time, this experience uses the qualitative approach since information is collected based on the observation of natural behaviors.

a) Procedure

The playground is divided into four monitoring areas, one of them being assigned to the activities of the PIAR project.

The PIAR project takes place from February to June, on Tuesdays and Thursdays every week.

The teachers responsible for monitoring the playground collect every day the information in the record forms prepared for this purpose.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays information is gathered corresponding to the days on which the PIAR project takes place, while the rest, information is gathered corresponding to the days on which no PIAR takes place.

On days the PIAR project takes place, teachers monitoring the area in which the PIAR project activities unfold, collect the information in two record sheets. In the first record sheet (Sheet 1), the number of arguments is written down (insults, threats and aggressions), and the reason (soccer, discrepancies in other games, participation denegation; personal, cultural racial, sexual or other reasons). In the second record sheet (Sheet 2), the total participation of students, the participation of students by grade, the participation of students by sex and the participation of Students with Special Educational Needs (SWSEN) are written down. Teachers monitoring the rest of the playground collect the information belonging only to Sheet 2.

On non-PIAR days, teachers collect the information corresponding to Sheet 1 (number of arguments and reasons) and a third record sheet (Sheet 3) in which the participation of Students with Special Educational Needs (SWSEN) in group activities is written down (observation).

Once the PIAR program finishes, two surveys are conducted: one addressed to students, boys and girls, who have participated in the PIAR program, and another one addressed to the rest of the students. The survey for the participating students is composed of two questions where the student should indicate his or her chosen answer. For the first question, the student should pick between free recess or guided recess; for the second question, the student should pick how many days a week he or she would prefer, in case it was mandatory, the PIAR project to take place (choosing 1 to 5). With respect to the non-participating students, a survey with just one question is proposed, and they should choose between free recess or guided recess with activities proposed by teachers.

b) Instruments

For the quantification of results, the following measuring instruments are designed into which the data corresponding to the following items is collected:

- Number of arguments on PIAR days and non-PIAR days:
 - Daily record sheet for number of arguments in four categories: threats, insults, aggressions, other.
- Reasons for arguments on PIAR days and non-PIAR days:
 - Daily record sheet divided into the following categories: soccer, discrepancy in other games, participation denegation; personal, cultural, racial, sexual, or other reasons.
- Participation of Students with Special Educational Needs (SWSEN):
 - Record sheet about PIAR participation
 - Individualized observation form for non-PIAR days
- Participation of general students.
 - Numeric record sheet
- Participation of students by grade.
 - Record sheet by grade.
- Student participation by sex.
 - Record sheet by sex.
- Student preference about free or guided recess.

- Survey for the students participating in the PIAR project where they answer the following questions by crossing one of the options:
 - ¿Do you prefer free recess or guided recess?
 - How many days a week would you like to have guided recess: 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5?
- Survey for the students not participating in the PIAR project where they answer the following questions by crossing one of the options:
 - ¿Do you prefer free recess or guided recess?

c) Analysis:

Upon data collection, a descriptive-quantitative analysis is performed. The descriptive aspect comprises getting to know the predominant situations, habits and attitudes through the accurate description of activities, objects, processes and people (Deobold B., Van Dalen and William J. Meyer, 1981). Given the fact that it is a collection of observable quantifiable data, the quantitative analysis of data ensures the scientific criteria for research on social sciences: credibility, transference, dependency, confirmation and utility (Sabirón, 2006).

Results

After data collection during the months on which the PIAR project took place, the results obtained are as follows:

Table 1. Arguments at the playground

Arguments	Non-PIAR days	PIAR days
Insults	3.25 per day	1.94 per day
Threats	0.22 per day	0.02 per day
Aggressions	0.10 per day	0.02 per day

The days on which the PIAR project takes place during recess, the average arguments per day decrease significantly. Insults among peers are the element that decreases the most, from 3.25 insults per day on average on non-PIAR days, to 1.94 insults per day on average on PIAR days; next are threats, which decrease from 0.22 to 0.02 per day, and lastly, physical aggression, which decreases from 0.10 to 0.02 aggressions per day.

Table 2. Reasons for arguments at the playground

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Argument reasons	Non-PIAR days	PIAR days
Soccer	76.15%	78%
Discrepancies in other games	21.50%	20%
Participation denegation	2%	1%
Personal reasons	0.50%	1%
Cultural o racial reasons	0%	0%
Sexual reasons	0%	0%
Other	0%	0%

As regards argument reasons, there is no significant difference between PIAR days and non-PIAR days. The highest argument percentage, both on PIAR days (78%) and on non-PIAR days (76.15%) is caused by soccer. The second most frequent argument reason arises in other games (basketball, dodgeball, hide and seek...), with very similar results: 21.50% on non-PIAR days and 20% on PIAR days. The other reasons are not deemed significant.

Table 3. Participation of SWSENs, and in cooperative games on PIAR and non-PIAR days

Typology	PIAR days	Non-PIAR days
Students with ASD	0 (0%)	5 (100%)
Students with mental disability	8 (26.66%)	20 (66.66%)
Students with motor disability	1 (25%)	4 (100%)
Students with social skill difficulties	3 (21.42%)	8 (57.14%)

With respect to the participation of students with special educational needs (SWSENs) in cooperative games, a clear participation difference can be observed on PIAR days and on non-PIAR days. On PIAR days, SWSENs participate on average above 50% in all cases in cooperative games stemming from the project; in this case, ASD students and motor disability students having 100% participation, meanwhile when there is free recess, SWSENs barely play with their peers in cooperative games (soccer, basketball, dodgeball, hide and seek, etc.)

Table 4. Student participation in the PIAR Project by month

Month	Participation average	% with respect to the total
February	51	16.55%
March	54	17.53%
April	57	18.50%
May	55	17.85%

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June	56	18.18%
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The average participation of students in the PIAR project remains steady, from a minimum participation of 16.55% of the total of 308 students in the center up to a maximum participation of 18.50%

Table 5. Student participation per grade in the PIAR Project

Grade	PIAR days
1º	15.15%
2º	30.20%
3º	33.25%
4º	11.40%
5º	7.00%
6º	3.00%
Open classroom	100%

With respect to the participation per grade, a higher, significant participation of students in the First Part of Elementary Education is observed, than from students in the second part. Third grade students report the highest participation (33.25%), very similar to the participation of second grade students (30.20%), and significantly higher than first grade students (15.15%). For students in the second part, participation gradually decreases from fourth grade up to sixth grade (4th grade with 11.40%, 5th grade with 7.00% and 6th grade with 3.00%). Regarding Open Classroom, participation reaches 100% even though the “voluntary” character of the participation is hardly verifiable.

Table 6. Voluntary participation of students by sex in the PIAR project

Sex	PIAR days
Male	27.20%
Female	72.80%

Participation of female students is very superior to male student participation. For every boy there are roughly three girls. For the total of the center, male students account for 51.60% (159 students out of 308 total), while female students account for 48.40% (149 students out of 308 total).

Table 7. PIAR project preference of all students

Preference	PIAR days
Guided recess	22.22%
Free recess	77.78%

The survey conducted on students, boys and girls, in the center, revealed that 77.78% shows preference for free recess, while 22.22% shows preference for guided recess.

Table 8. PIAR project preference of participating students

Preference	PIAR days
Guided recess	87.80%
Free recess	12.20%

With regard to students participating in the PIAR project, most of them opt for guided recess (87.80%), while only 12.20% opts for free recess.

Table 9. Preference of number of PIAR days per week

Preference	PIAR days
1 day	20.5%
2 days	46.12%
3 days	23.22%
4 days	9.15%
5 days	1.36%

With regard to the preference of the number of occurrence days of the PIAR project in case it was mandatory at least one day, students participating in the PIAR project chose as preferred options 2 days per week (46.12%) and 3 days per week (23.22%), while the least preferred option was that corresponding to the whole week.

Results analysis

With respect to arguments, on PIAR days the number of arguments at the playground is reduced during recess (Table 1), even though arguments arisen are due to reasons very similar to the ones on non-PIAR days (Table 2). The average percentage of participating students during both PIAR days (Tuesday and Thursday) is about 17%. This implies that percentage of students is doing a guided activity, which favors fewer conflicts than in a free activity, either because they are surveyed by teachers or because they are more participative and cooperative activities and not purely competitive. Moreover, the steadiness of this metric proves that the number of participating students is usually constant. Nonetheless, despite that throughout the weeks students are reminded of the existence of the program, student participation does not increase.

As regards participation of students with special educational needs in the PIAR project, participation higher than 50% is observed in all cases (Table 3). This is due to two main reasons: on one side, in many cases teachers remind this type of students the activity is going to take place and they motivate them and take them to the part of the playground where the project is to take place; and on the other hand, student self-motivation to participate in this type of activities. A third reason may be added to the prior two; a low competitiveness rate of the PIAR program activities, which facilitates the acceptance of participation by the rest of the students. Even so, it can be detected that there are students, boys and girls, with special

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educational needs who do not want to participate in the project. However, on days there is no guided recess, this type of students does not usually participate in group activities (Table 3). Their play is individual or, at most, by pairs (observation). The students with the biggest social skill problems are the ones that participate the least. Furthermore, there seems to exist very weak transference on days without the project. On non-PIAR project days, students, boys and girls, go back to their usual games, not particularly including students with the most serious needs and difficulties.

With respect to voluntary participation in the PIAR project per grade, it is observed that in two of the first grades (2nd and 3rd) participation is high, meanwhile in the most advanced grades (5th and 6th) it decreases considerably (Table 5). This is essentially due to the fact that at an early age students still feel a predisposition towards cooperative games and a distinct leaning toward game competitiveness is not observed yet. Likewise, at this age the solidary attitude seems stronger than at an older age, and they give more importance to helping a peer than winning in an activity. Moreover, it must be pointed out that the following day to the occurrence of the PIAR project only a small number of students try to repeat the games played the day before, but given the lack of external organization, they desist after a few minutes. Even so, most students go back to their usual games.

With regard to sex, there is a strong participation of female students in comparison to male students (Table 6), which might be due to the tendency of male students to engage in purely competitive activities.

With respect to the PIAR project preference of students, most of them prefer free play during recess (Table 7). Nevertheless, if we only take into account the opinion of participating students, boys and girls, in the main, they prefer the PIAR project than free play (Table 8), which may point out that the ignorance of the activities carried out in the PIAR project might be one of the reasons for which students who did not participate in the activities prefer free recess than guided recess.

Furthermore, regarding the number of days in case at least one day of PIAR project became mandatory, participating students, boys and girls, point out they prefer two days as first choice and three days second choice, and as least preferred choice, all days of the week (Table 9), which shows that students widely desire to dispose of at least one free day of recess.

Conclusions

Guided recess through cooperative activities with a low rate of competitiveness, organized, established, and supervised by teachers helps to noticeably reduce the number of conflicts (insults, threats and aggressions) during recess with respect to free recess.

When there is an activity organized, established, and supervised by teachers, the participation of students with the most serious motor, cognitive, sensorial or emotional difficulties considerably increases with respect to free play.

When there is an activity with a high level of cooperation and a low level of competitiveness, the participation of students with the most serious motor, cognitive, sensorial or emotional difficulties considerably increases with respect to free play.

When there is an activity with a high level of cooperation and a low level of competitiveness, organized, established, and supervised by teachers, the acceptance by the rest of students with the most serious motor, cognitive, sensorial or emotional difficulties considerably increases with respect to free play

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that -such as photographer James Mollison asserts after having taken pictures of playgrounds in 59 different countries around the world- “there is an amazing similarity of children’s games in every part of the world. Despite that schools, facilities or landscapes may be quite different, there is almost no difference in the behavior of kids from Los Angeles, Nepal or Kenya.”

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