Chapter 1
The Social Dimension of Inclusive Education for Students With Cognitive and Developmental Difficulties

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to present firstly - with a critical approach - a clarification of the terms and concepts describing the social dimension of inclusion, with regard to students with developmental and cognitive difficulties, in order to identify differences or convergences. These specific variables are usually examined within observational studies of the social interaction among peers, sociometric studies of acceptance, and studies that require self-reports from the students regarding themselves and their social relationships. Furthermore, the variables related to the social dimension of inclusive education for these students, and their development in each age period, are presented. Finally, the chapter focuses on school intervention programmes concentrating on the social dimension of inclusion, and evaluates the impact of such programmes on the daily school life of students with developmental and cognitive difficulties.

STUDENTS WITH COGNITIVE AND DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFICULTIES

Support for students with cognitive and developmental difficulties has been a subject of scientific study for several decades. Researchers from various disciplines, such as special education teachers, psycholo-

gists, speech therapists and others, have defined these specific difficulties, investigated their causality and determined appropriate educational frameworks. However, one of the most significant challenges that arise from studying the international literature on students with cognitive and developmental difficulties is the lack of a universally accepted definition (Genova, 2015). The confusion surrounding the identification of these difficulties is evident from the various terms that have been used over time to describe them, such as generalised learning difficulties, learning disorders, learning difficulties, etc. (Alkahtani, 2016). Nonetheless, most researchers agree that students' cognitive and developmental difficulties are accompanied by deficiencies in adaptive behaviour (social skills, self-guidance, development of learning strategies, functional academic skills, communication, etc.) and manifest during the developmental period (Messiou, 2017).

The term cognitive difficulties implies that these students present slower rates of development and learning compared to their peers and that these specific students are able to manage their cognitive difficulties with adequate support. Thus, with the term cognitive and developmental difficulties, it becomes clear that these students do not perform at the same developmental and cognitive level as their peers and that this deviation may have organic underpinnings and/or be connected to environmental factors (Schalock & Luckasson, 2021). Therefore, according to this approach, in most cases, students with cognitive and developmental difficulties are intellectually lagging compared to their peers and their development is slow and deficient (Richards et al., 2014).

Furthermore, when identifying specific difficulties, attention is devoted to the students' capabilities, the environment in which they are being educated and their broader functionality within the school and social context. Emphasis is placed on social factors (the students' socio-cultural background, dominant school culture, quality of provided support and education) that influence their school integration and performance (De Bruin, 2019). Thus, a student's cognitive and developmental difficulties are not determined as fixed characteristics of said student, but as a result of the student's interaction with the family, school and broader social context (Schalock et al., 2021).

This specific approach contributes to the more effective inclusion and acceptance of students with cognitive and developmental difficulties, as it does not attribute the difficulties solely to the students themselves, but also to their environment and particularly the social context in which they live and interact (Vlachou & Papananou, 2018). More specifically, it is observed that students with more severe cognitive and developmental difficulties are distributed across all socioeconomic strata. On the other hand, the majority of students with mild cognitive and developmental difficulties are found in populations belonging to lower socioeconomic strata; this is because greater challenges are associated with the design of learning programmes for these students, thus leading to more direct impact on the quality of the provided education. Therefore, the prognosis of students with mild cognitive and developmental difficulties can be improved by the fostering of adequate inclusive interventions (Vlachou & Fyssa, 2016). In conclusion, it is noted that the school and broader social exclusion experienced by students with cognitive and developmental difficulties is not directly linked to the difficulties themselves, but rather to the school environment. The type and quality of inclusive policies implemented can either facilitate or hinder students' cognitive and emotional development, as well as their access to social activities in the school daily life (Berghs et al., 2019).

Traditional approaches focus on the cognitive development and the challenges experienced by students with cognitive and developmental difficulties. Specifically, in regard to their cognitive development, these students seem to have difficulty in spontaneously activating and implementing certain cognitive functions. In some cases, the cognitive processes they adopt are insufficient for effective problem-

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