

## The story of R. (First Part)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwr4wROFChU>

In response to numerous requests for you to have in writing the approximate experiences of inclusion according to the orientations of the “emotion of knowing”, I think it is useful to report the story of R.- a story that has been deeply modifying the organization of the traditional school in the perspective of schools’ autonomies (those which demand radical laws for changing organization) and can be an important reference in which others that have theoretical and methodological foundations report operational causes- \*documented, verified, and verifiable. This is a story that is the result of years of planning with collaboration between teachers, parents, colleagues in the area of medical rehabilitation, psychologists, and the children themselves. The children that formed the class group stayed informed and involved in the project, their angle of first-hand observation was an important reference for setting the track of work, the teaching method plans.

The feelings of the children, although in an intuitive way, has revealed to the work team important aspects in the development of educational activity in the areas of relationships, communication, organization of space and time that, without their references, we would have done hard work to analyze and comprehend. When the children recognized the successes of R. as a result of their collaboration, the interventions had a jump in quality that unexpectedly curved our predictions.

The cooperative dimension was characteristic of a class group that is organized in a permanent laboratory where everyone has given to the other their own skills/abilities and everyone has taken to develop each others’ competencies. This is result of years of work together in which adults and children have played to look for the opportunity, occasions and instruments for the resolutions of the problems.

The setting is a school laboratory in which the emotion of knowing has been the energy of a splendid adventure of doing in the world of knowledge.

In this writing and those published in the future in the magazine “Learning is like the flight of a butterfly,” it will be my intention to reassert the importance of keeping in mind that the experiences in the field of education are unique where **the uniqueness does not conflict with the necessity of communicating and reflecting on the experience that has occurred, but underscores that a given day’s experience is not assumed to be repeatable “exactly the same” for all.**

An educational project goes well-grounded upon a strict, experimental attitude, attentive to observation, for the production of interventive hypotheses with basic reproposable opportunities which are theoretical and methodological assumptions- not as mere prescriptions.

A unique job in the hands of teachers takes an original style appropriate to the characteristics of the individual child apart from the class group. This is a uniqueness that goes to underline the fundamental importance of the school and of the value of these

professionals that, despite problems presented in school, succeed to make it work with high quality and prestige.

That the skill, the quality experience of the teachers can appear simple and spontaneous, has as reference a capacity of organizing selections of data in hypotheses that rapidly structure various interpretive possibilities. These series of insights and inferences must be organized with a capable expertise of different methods of observing the things, the phenomena and simultaneously maintaining the attention to the flow of information it is achieving.

Through reporting the experiences and the questioning of them, we will reflect together on the aforesaid competencies and expertise trying to retrieve those theoretical structures, methodological and operative, in which we find again the principles that can be a reference to us for educational-didactic projects.

In my experiences, constants that emerge that correlate the children's development of capacities with the context and manner of teaching were founded on the desire and emotion of knowing. These experiences have left a pleasing recollection of discovering that "carried" with these memories are the independent contents of the hierarchies that are divided into: "easy, difficult, and very difficult". It was discovered that the difficulty is not always in the contents, but essentially in the method, the situation, the context, the way of teaching, that if they are not geared towards the desire to know and the curiosity, then they will not stimulate the imagination, they will find it difficult to determine learning; in contrast, a situation of well-being produces constant, easy conditions for all.

The "emotion of knowing" can be a definitive energy that can determine the overcoming of difficulties, of labors that the courses of knowledge often lead to, transforming them into a pleasing adventure. In this adventure that the knowledge presents, they do not accept the level paths and those free of difficulty, errors, and labor. Like an explorer, a climber, one ventures into knowledge and knowing and decides to live with the efforts, the defeats, the labors... in this much they do a part of "emotion of knowing", enough to get a taste of the fascinations of the adventure.

The contexts, the situations, the styles, the tactics that emerged "bound" to the learning-independent from the definition of its difficulty (easy.. difficult...most difficult)- furnished a constant, persevering desire to know and understand which was provoked by the teachers.

## **The Story of R.**

R. is nine years old and has been integrated into the third year of elementary school. He is affected by Downs Syndrome (Trisomy 21). Those affected by such a syndrome also know the uncivil and offensive definition of mongoloid, a definition coined by a certain type of medicine and doctors: "...the symptomatic traits generally are considered unpleasant, those which are most assumed are: an awkward appearance, lack of coordination, eyes similar to those of oriental people, protruding tongue and inarticulate language." All of this contributes to the formation of the traditional "mongoloid" image. In their opinion, these individuals form a race of 'incomplete children'.

Still in the '70's some authors of qualified publications spoke of 'being like not being' and left the understanding that it would not be bad to leave these children to die for the simple reason that they had been struck by the sickness of Landon-Down. It was only in the last years of the 70's that children affected with Downs-Syndrome were considered educable and socializable because such a "syndrome" was founded in prejudices that made them take into consideration incapacities for learning to read and write, even at the elementary level, and of "conceptualizing a number".

R. presented to the teachers a series of problems relevant to the teaching and learning as well as behavior and socialization. In looking at the problems around teaching and learning, the teachers observed little attention and very little capacity for retention: "he does not remember much of what she teaches him". He has difficulty manually, "he does not have good manual ability, he avoids things for which he must use his hands, and he does not succeed well in holding a pen or marker".

That which worried the teachers the most was another of his behaviors that limited learning. It was the "violent" behavior of R. that used to disrupt the normal progress of the class. R. would "interrupt" the activity of the class with yelling, exposing himself, and swearing. "We find this in all styles of insertion for him. R. shouts swear words, spits at his classmates, and makes the normal schedule of scholastic activities impossible. He disturbed in a way that nothing could be organized for the others, they lost out because of him for the entire day".

The preliminary control that we consider during this formation-research was that R. should not be the reason for the failure of the group's objectives for the entire year. For this reason, a board was projected that would make us control the progress of R. during the time and also the progress of the class group so that they would not be obstacles but advantageous to each other. The board had four columns which included a) **case history** and medical information about the development of R. (anecdotes, particular circumstances during the year from doctors, parents, family friends, and teachers) b) **the problem of the boy as seen by the teachers:** in this column the group of teachers would highlight the problems that R. was making/could make to the class from the didactic point of view, the learnings, socializations, autonomies, and organization of the class, organizations of the teacher's group, and the relations between the classes, keeping in mind everyone in the school, (teachers and non-teachers) and their responsibility in relation to the danger (the teachers were very worried because of the uncontrollable behavior of R. (that he could hurt himself) and the problem that being in the class could be to R.). Separate teaching inside and outside the class- isolation- was considered but they were concerned that doing "different activities" would be a motive of "displeasure" for R. They were concerned that this "diversity" would be negative for R. c) **objectives of the class** were noted: the contents, the program, the knowledge, the final goals of the class independent from the presence of R. to see if his inclusion would be an obstacle to the projects of the class. (the hypotheses of the "inclusive teaching" were seeing the presence of R. as an "occasion" for the discovery of new didactic possibilities and "facilitation" was predicted in the reaching of objectives). d) **plans of work** , strategies, and methodology of the inclusion and integration of R. in the class group during the year was used to propose educational strategies in order to analyze the initial problems they would encounter with the teaching

plans that we were organizing. The curriculum that would integrate R. considered him an “active protagonist”. The objectives that the teacher would prearrange were designed to be controlled and become times where the group of teachers would reflect upon. This was done during formation meetings to understand the structure and the methodological criteria. Inclusion should not dequalify the level of the class group. This educational strategy and the curriculum that were hypothesized and planned during formation meetings and research was an occasion for new reflection and educational change.

## **The organization of the class group**

The class in which R. was included had different parallel activities with other third level classes. The two third level classes had “parallel” interdisciplinary programs together on the subjects of history, geography and science. There were also other “integrated” programs with a fourth level class that consisted of the periodic development of activities in mixed groups: physical education, sewing, cooking, pottery, music, painting/collage, and drama. The organization of the three classes (two parallel thirds periodically integrated with the fourth) allowed the permanent verification of the hypotheses, of the methodologies relative to the inclusive teaching as areas of experimentation and of verification:

- a) the class where R. was included with the problematics relative to the presence of the “handicap”
- b) the parallel class where there was not inclusion issues
- c) the fourth level class- future projections of what could be done on the interventive, didactic level.

The activities of the two parallel classes were planned together by the group the teachers and had as a common reference a “workbook” where their experiences were documented and organized- a memory of each class group and the possibilities of confrontation. For the activities concerning the three classes (two third levels and one fourth) six work groups (mixed) with six different activities were formed. Each of the groups was developing their own project one day each week for three times a day. Afterward there was a meeting between the three classes and each group would inform the others of their activities. Then there was an exchange of activity so that each group was giving another group the responsibility to continue the work they had begun. The need to exchange the information and entrust the commission of continuing the activity to another group made the experiences of one group become those of another. The occasion of information and the exchange became a moment of reciprocity that was managed by the children. The document organization- posters, drawings- were explaining each one’s activities to the others so that the group would continue the work began. This was constituting an activity of research of instruments that would facilitate the communication of messages. The children were making sure, before entrusting the continuation of their work, that other children would understand and have the competence to “go ahead”. The objectives produced had an affective validity and were fostering affective relations with the other groups. One was entrusting their own work to a companion when he/she was sure that it

would continue “well” and he/she was teaching in a way that they would easily understand. Furthermore, the verifications were continuing in other times of activity: between the children, when they were meeting in the hall, on the street, they were exchanging information and recommendations on the work that was proceeding. All groups were supposed to have an experience of each of the six programmed activities and the organization in order to have verification of the exchange of permanent information. The groups that were not working for a determined argument became pre-informed and had indirect knowledge and competence in the other activities. This greatly facilitated future work because they never began uninformed: the last group, even if it was the first time they had encountered the activity, had already acquired, during the large group meetings, a minimum of competence and information. The organizations of the classes in the research of situations in which the communication was to circulate in the most simple and appropriate manner for the diverse competencies within the class groups, time by time, were becoming a formation, were determining a search on the part of the children for diverse modes of communication and transmitting of competencies. With the presence of R., in this dimension, the opportunity of inclusion was found in multiple occasions of work because each project would not begin from “zero” competence but was based on the individualization, of the class group, of the minimum competencies from which came the supporting/integrating of a new job and its evolution. The capacity of R. in a different situation could remain isolated ( for example, knowing how to turn on and off the water faucet). In this situation, other ways of accomplishing, of participating were discovered and transferred (he was able to learn to use the drain plug). The reciprocal observation of the class group and their exchanged activities, as well as the activities that would be developed in the future (exchange of activities between groups) was proposing the “retrieving” of gestures, abilities, of competence in a functional and structural analysis for the purpose of being reused again in their potentialities in other situations. The gestures and manualities, the doing, were becoming a motive for reflection and, therefore, of conceptual and theoretical meditation. The exchange of theoretical and practical situations that the organization of the work was determining, was becoming a cause of experience and of “intellectual” afterthought for R. (as well as the class group), the possibility of anticipating ‘intellectually’ the ‘doing’.

The difficulties of R. in the sphere of language and manual capacities (difficulty in the fine motor abilities, pincer grasp) were found to be supported in the permanent possibility of imitation in a dimension of collaboration. He was not just hearing someone talk but someone who was explaining to him what to do while he watched, helping him with the words, the gesture, guiding, many times, with the hand, with his hand. The explanation was not based on emptiness, on a first try, but was connected to situations that were directly or indirectly analogical and had come based on interior potential that R. had been accomplishing. Practical and manual capacities, and the level of knowledge, usual practice and theoretical reflection in their daily development (in the function of a doing, a project, an itinerary, a plan of work and resolutions of problems) were becoming fundamental reference for the cognitive and intellectual development, for the capacity to create a project manually, individuating the instruments.

The logic of the path that the project was proposing for the realization of the structure was an interventive, educational itinerary, that permanently, in collaboration with the class group, was correctly indicating and orientating the ideas, the doing, and the gestures. The learning foundation, the ability of the known was enabling the reflecting on competencies and abilities that the children have independently from what the school, many times, means for "knowing". Many competencies, abilities, conceptual capacities of the children with special needs pass by unobserved and the information presented to us is very often reduced to list that which he/she does not know how to do. "The most simple capacity like opening door, throwing and retrieving a ball are never considered an activity and also more complex ones like: operating a TV or VCR. These gestures, these competencies, are included in the category of the neglected and are totally ignored, and, if they are sometimes noted, they emerge as a problem or as an anecdote.

It was discovered that some children who are unable to learn gestures easily could play "table soccer" or pool. Boys "judged" to be unable to memorize could remember the names and last names of members of the soccer teams, as well as, dates, places, victories, and numbers of goals for each team or player. Those thought of as having little capacity for using work instruments have constructed at home, with waste material (cans, bottles, foil) fairly sophisticated copies of a robot in the cartoon Goldrake. The existence of previous capacities are many times ignored in the school which reveals the fundamental prejudice within our schools, present more in the traditional positions than in those which are innovative: the belief that these 'notions' are separate or separable from the experience and the global conduct of each of us.

## **The information, the context**

The circulation of news was inside the programming, in the informal occasions that the children were spontaneously determining. It was developing with diverse modalities, with various instruments, direct to the diverse, to better learn and understand a message. The situation was determining different ways to transmit a piece of information to the different people involved, to the diverse levels of intelligence. This was because the messages were prepared with different codes and instruments of communication in a way that was also, though unrefined, multimedial: oral, writing, with examples through schemes, posters, pictures, and photos made the objects visible. Moreover, the experience was presented as "now it is mine but in the future it is yours". It was introducing a new dimension in which the "teaching" was not to be a mechanical transmitting capacity, but a donation, something that would be of importance, given only when it was wished for. The objects were becoming the opportunity for a change of messages through the words, the expressions, the tones of voice, the touching, and the guiding of the appropriate hands; the object was the opportunity, "through the material gestures", to lead to "...most likely, affective communication by the physical stimulation that results from sharing objects, that is to say if there is the desire to communicate with the other, there is the desire to please the other...wanting to be the object of desire of the other, a situation that we constantly find happening spontaneously. It is the long awaited hope, the request of an invitation to the

exchange. Finding with the expression, the gesture, the imitation, the stillness. Waiting for the other to come to me... the situation came to a very symbolic level, in the question and the gift of the object". "Choice of the partner, spontaneous establishment of the groups in which the most important thing is not, perhaps, the choosing, but to be chosen." The "teaching", the "giving of competence" in the affective relation was making the behaviors, the words, the explanations develop, articulate, and determine an inclusive situation, making possible the contemporary presence of diverse or higher levels. The companion that had more manual abilities and "less" words was taught to see, to look for, in the explanation, the word, not one instrument for the transmission of information (the plan of the doing was helping the search for the words, was organizing the discourse); those who "possessed" the word, the writing, documented and wrote the posters, those who "knew" the drawing participated in the organization of the message with his competence, etc. Each one gave teaching of their own capacity, of their own competence to the other, and it was transmitted, with the pleasure of giving and the desire of receiving, with the pleasure of making known and the desire of knowing. R., in such a dimension, looked for and found the space for his own active presence. The change was functional and the itinerary was determining the possibility of change and teaching from ones own competence. Simultaneously the work between the classes was utilizing the abilities of each of the teachers to alternate styles and references that had gone from practical to theoretical.

## **R. and the school**

R., in his first encounter with the school, immediately had a course of literacy (in separate situations with the support teacher) that produced minimal and unsatisfactory results. He was taught to recognize the letters of the alphabet, some small words, and to write following a dotted line sketch that was previously prepared. For the most part, he attended to the activities passively. In didactic activities they saw that R. would do them without purpose; in addition, this was also the case when he was in an isolated situation. "R. is slow to learn to read, to write, to do counting and he needs someone to stay behind him, to teach to him and repeat with him the exercises as much as possible."

The educational intervention was linked to the strategies of repeating for learning. In addition, the support teacher felt more of a sense of propriety and responsibility (benevolent) towards R. ("my little boy") and she did not favor a project together with a group of teachers: because the program for R. was very specific to him and his needs.

R., as she pointed out, was not succeeding to "hold his attention" except for a few minutes: he was distracted, went towards his companions, other objects, or toys, ran away, screamed, imitated the animals in the poems, spit, cursed, and was disturbing the class group. Such behavior, they came to interpret as characteristic of Trisomy 21: "he has little intellectual capacity, is aggressive in character, nervous, and is easily tired." Of all the interpretations, the one most accepted was bound to the mental weakness and the relative strain in the learning of simple exercises. R. was going to the school for half of the time: "he is tired too much, he can not do it, we do not want him to strain himself..." When R.

was in the class group the teachers considered that time as a break, "he did not succeed to do anything."

### **We discuss the rules (from the trouble to the learning)**

The disturbing behaviors of R. were constituting the principle problem for the class that was becoming the object of analyses and reflections. It was noted that the interventions for warding off such disturbance was to take R. out of the class or repeat to him continually: "You must not say that, you must not do that, you must not say that, you must not do that..." In alternative to: "You must not do that", it was the reading, the writing, the counting that R. did not wish to do; in fact, it was noted that the disturbing behavior of the boy was provoked by these causes. With the teachers we found that we were facing a "viscous circle" that had to be "broken." The "you cannot do that" had to be substituted by: "you can do it" but R. wanted to do things that disturbed the class group. It was decided to try the tolerating of the behaviors of R. by setting limits to them, determining the rules that they could permit R. to do and that the class group wished to tolerate for a certain number of times. It was thought of as limiting, controlling the disturbing behaviors of R. in a way that R. would do consciously. R. was able to "disturb", but within limits, he was able to hit, imitate the animals, say bad words, spit...but five times a day for each behavior. For each of the disturbing behaviors, instruments of control were furnished to R. as a way for him to see how many opportunities he had left for each behavior: for the hitting, five buttons, for the imitation of the animals, five rings, for the "bad words", a card prepared with five places to make a hole (a type of bus ticket where you punch a hole each time) etc.... It was decided that the instruments for learning the rules needed to be of such a form and color that would attract the attention of R. and that they should be presented as "precious" objects of "value" (R. and his companions chose together iridescent mother-of-pearl buttons, shiny metal rings, and different colored tickets.). Furthermore, the consignment of the objects and the withdrawal was organized like a ceremony, a ritual that underlined the moment as very important and the respect of the rules was to be underlined by an attitude of approval on the part of the class group. When R. was arriving to the school, they gave him the rings, the buttons, and the tickets and if he used all of them (for each disturbing behavior he would give the corresponding and agreed upon ring, button, or he would get one hole in his ticket) for that day, they would not tolerate other displays: he had to leave the class or he could not play ball with his friends, etc.... The teachers had to do it in a way (making a pretense of not hearing) that it was not to arrive to a point of forbidding R. to play with his friends (specifically with his best friend M.); in this regard there was not the intention to be punitive, a situation was wanted that furnished the long-term possibility of acceptance of the rules arranged together with the class. R. exceeded the expectations, he began early to adhere fairly to the rules that were given; however, the teachers did not know if it was a result of

respect for the rules or because he liked the buttons, the rings and the tickets so much that he did not want to be without them:

R. "tried to save and found that by not "spending" the buttons, rings, and tickets would not be taken from him. When he let a scream, imitation, or "rude word" *slip* he would catch himself as if to say, "I was distracted, it slipped out, let's hope they did not notice it otherwise they will take a button." Many times the teachers held the pretense of not noticing (so as not to pass from controlling to punishment). The teachers observed R. imitating a low voice and, so as not to lose a button, he was spitting and screaming in the bathroom where no one could see: "The other day, R. went to the bathroom and I heard make the sound of a dog. This is very problematic because in this way we cannot take the buttons."

## **Toward the learnings**

The toleration of the disturbing behaviors of R. was limited by the rules, and shifted the attention of the class group and of the teachers from the burping, spitting, saying of rude words... to considering the activities that the instruments for the control of disturbances suggested. Buttons, rings, and tickets were chosen in numbers of five so that R. could verify how many objects remain in front of him with his fingers (based on five), how much was given and how much remained, an *occasion* for calculation. "You had five buttons, and there were three of them taken, two of them remain ( $5-3=2$ ), you had five rings, there were two of them taken, three of them remain ( $5-2=3$ ), you had an unmarked ticket, you could say five bad words, now you have said three of them.....you have more buttons than rings...you have so many rings and so many buttons...." Having to conserve the objects that were given to him every morning without mixing them up meant for R. to invent, to find different places for the homogeneous objects, the left pocket for buttons and the right one for rings, the jacket pocket for tickets etc.... Also the research of putting together categories and forms as well as equal objects without mixing them up meant for him an occasion that suggested to the teachers other activities. R. was not only supposed to count, but also put together in categories and forms diverse objects in various places. The remembering to take the buttons from the right pocket, the tickets on the top, front jacket pocket, the rings in the back pocket of the pants etc. was for R. the *occasion* for other new discoveries and learnings, his own body could be a reference for a functional organization, the right, the left, the top, the bottom, his own body had dimension and he could use such dimension for comparing himself with the others, with the objects: taller than, shorter than, to the right of, to the left of, in front of, behind, under, above, etc. In addition, having to put quite small objects in pockets, taking them out, putting them back, was refining his manual abilities with isolated exercises mere and without sense, but with explicit finality, with strategies belonging to overtaking the relational problems of the group.

**....second and last part in next number...**