

Embodied socio-affective learning in adults with intellectual disabilities: an educational intervention based on consent practices and personal boundaries

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INTRODUCTION & AIM

The development of socio-affective competencies represents a crucial dimension of inclusive education, particularly in educational work with young adults with intellectual disabilities and mild autism spectrum conditions. Difficulties in interpreting interpersonal boundaries, understanding consent, and recognizing socially shared norms may significantly affect relational wellbeing, participation, and autonomy in everyday contexts (Schaafsma et al., 2015; McDaniels & Fleming, 2016).

Within the field of social and emotional learning, relational awareness and social competence are increasingly considered central educational goals rather than secondary outcomes of instruction (Durlak et al., 2011). However, these competencies are often addressed through verbal or rule-based approaches that may be insufficiently accessible for individuals with cognitive and communicative difficulties.

In this perspective, embodied cognition provides a relevant theoretical framework, emphasizing how understanding emerges through bodily experience, action, and interaction with the environment (Wilson, 2002). Body-based and experiential educational settings may therefore support the comprehension of relational concepts that are difficult to acquire through abstract verbal explanation alone (Shapiro & Stolz, 2019).

This study presents a practice-based educational intervention grounded in an embodied socio-affective learning approach. The aim of the study is to explore how experiential, movement-based, and relational activities may support:

- awareness of personal space;
- understanding of consent;
- recognition of public and private behaviors;
- development of socio-relational competencies in inclusive educational contexts.

METHOD

The study adopts a small-scale qualitative exploratory design focused on the observation of relational and participatory dynamics emerging during an experiential educational workshop. The intervention involved young adults with intellectual disabilities and mild autism spectrum conditions and was structured as a two-hour embodied socio-affective laboratory. Activities were designed to promote experiential learning through movement, guided interaction, role-playing, and situational simulation.

The workshop included:

- movement-based activities aimed at exploring interpersonal distance and spatial regulation;
- “stop-and-go” interaction tasks focused on consent and respect for refusal;
- simulations of everyday situations related to public/private behaviors;
- guided relational activities involving peer interaction and negotiation;
- collective reflection moments following embodied experiences.

The activities were intentionally concrete, situational, and action-oriented in order to facilitate accessibility and participation.

Data collection was conducted through:

- structured observation grids;
- narrative field notes;
- external non-participant observers.

The observation protocol focused on:

- management of personal space;
- negotiation of consent;
- recognition of socially shared norms;
- group dynamics and peer influence processes.

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis aimed at identifying recurring relational and behavioral patterns across activities.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The observational data reveal recurring patterns in participants' socio-affective behaviors, particularly regarding interpersonal distance, consent management, and interpretation of social norms.

With regard to personal space, participants demonstrated variable abilities in regulating interpersonal distance. Situations of excessive proximity frequently emerged, although forms of emerging self-regulation were also observed, including spontaneous repositioning and reactions to discomfort signals. Some participants progressively adjusted their behavior during the activities, suggesting an initial development of spatial awareness.

Consent emerged as one of the most critical dimensions. Requests for permission prior to interaction were not consistently present, and several participants showed difficulty recognizing or respecting refusal. Observers reported situations in which interactions continued despite verbal or non-verbal signs of discomfort. However, guided activities appeared to facilitate a gradual recognition of the importance of asking and stopping when necessary.

The distinction between public and private behaviors represented the most fragile area. Participants frequently showed uncertainty and confusion, particularly in situations requiring explanation or justification of their choices. In several cases, responses appeared strongly influenced by peer behavior, highlighting the social and co-constructed nature of the learning process.

Group dynamics played a central role throughout the workshop. Processes of imitation, conformity, and peer mediation emerged consistently across activities. Participants often modified their responses after observing others or engaging in collective discussion, suggesting that socio-affective learning developed through interaction and shared experience rather than through individual instruction alone.

Overall, the findings support embodied cognition perspectives, indicating that body-based and situational learning environments may facilitate the understanding of relational concepts such as consent, interpersonal boundaries, and privacy through concrete and socially mediated experiences.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the pedagogical potential of embodied socio-affective learning as an educational approach for young adults with intellectual disabilities.

Experiential and movement-based activities appeared to support:

- relational awareness;
- recognition of interpersonal boundaries;
- initial understanding of consent;
- interpretation of socially shared norms.

At the same time, the findings reveal the complexity and non-linearity of these processes. Difficulties in recognizing refusal, interpreting social cues, and transferring competencies beyond structured activities suggest the need for continuous, progressive, and context-sensitive educational interventions.

The study contributes to the dialogue between Educational Foundations and Special Education by emphasizing the importance of situated, relational, and embodied learning environments in inclusive educational practice.

FUTURE WORK / REFERENCES

Future developments may include:

- longitudinal studies on socio-affective competence development;
- larger participant groups;
- integration of interviews and multimodal qualitative data;
- investigation of competence transferability in everyday contexts;
- comparative studies between embodied and verbally mediated interventions.

References

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