Valeria Villegas-Jaramillo
Luis R. Ramos



Freinet Pedagogy in Practice

Fostering Social Skills in a Special Education Institution

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Website: www.elivapress.com

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FREINET PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE: FOSTERING SOCIAL SKILLS IN A SPECIAL EDUCATION INSTITUTION

Valeria Villegas-Jaramillo
Luis R. Ramos

ABSTRACT

From special education institutions to inclusive classrooms, how can we support students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID), deafness, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) not only to learn, but to connect, collaborate, and grow socially?

This book explores the transformative potential of collaborative learning in special education, rooted in the student-centered, experiential principles of Célestin Freinet's pedagogy. An action research approach examines how structured group strategies can foster essential social skills—such as communication, empathy, self-regulation, and conflict resolution—in second-year secondary students at a Special Education Institution (SEI). Drawing on theoretical foundations from Vygotsky, Piaget, and Freinet, this study combines customized lesson plans, qualitative observations, and quantitative assessments—including a tailored version of the Basic Social Skills Assessment Scale (BSSAS) and a student perception survey—to measure meaningful changes in behavior and interaction.

The findings reveal that thoughtfully designed collaborative activities promote equitable participation, empower students with diverse needs, and reshape classroom dynamics. Games, peer discussions, and cooperative tasks become powerful tools not just for learning but also for building community. Offering both a theoretical framework and practical insights, this book is essential reading for educators, researchers, and practitioners committed to fostering inclusion and social development in special education settings.

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION..... 3

3. CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK..... 9

3.1 International Context of Special and Inclusive Education..... 11

3.2 Attention to Disability and ASD within the Framework of Inclusive Education..... 16

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK..... 19

4.1 Disability and ASD in Secondary School..... 19

4.2 Social Skills..... 22

4.3. Celestin Freinet's Pedagogy..... 25

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY..... 31

5.1 Approach..... 31

5.2 Scope..... 32

5.3 Research Design..... 32

5.3.1. Participants..... 34
5.3.2. Freinet-collaborative work Intervention Proposal..... 35
5.3.3. Instruments..... 37

Field Journal Notes (Summary)..... 41
Preference for Teamwork..... 45
BSSAS – Pre-test and Post-test..... 46

6. CONCLUSION..... 51

1. INTRODUCTION

Collaborative work has established itself as an effective pedagogical tool for addressing educational challenges, as it promotes interaction, cooperation, and mutual learning among students. In this sense, collaborative work is a central axis for implementing strategies within the classroom to develop the social skills necessary for students to interact effectively in society. Within this context, this research analyzes how collaborative learning strategies can contribute to developing social skills—such as communication, taking turns, and conflict resolution—in students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID), deafness, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

To achieve this, we chose a methodological approach based on action research. This approach allowed us to observe and record changes in student behavior and implement and adjust strategies in real-time to optimize their impact.

The general objective of this study is to identify how collaborative learning strategies in the classroom contribute to the development of social skills such as autonomy, self-regulation, and communication in second-year secondary school students at a Special Education Institution (SEI) who are diagnosed with intellectual disability, deafness, or ASD.

The specific objectives are:

- To design and implement collaborative learning strategies tailored to the needs of the second-year secondary group at the SEI, integrating them into diversified lesson plans during the two professional practice periods.
- Record and analyze changes in the development of students' social skills throughout the Freinet collaborative intervention using a field journal and an observation guide based on the Basic Social Skills Assessment Scale (BSSAS) adapted to the SEI context.
- To analyze students' perceptions of collaborative and individual work by applying a Likert scale with specific questions at the beginning and end of the process.

The relevance of this study lies in its potential to improve inclusive practices in special education, offering a theoretical and practical framework that can be replicated in similar contexts. It is grounded in pedagogical theories such as Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural approach, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning, and the contributions of Jean Piaget and Célestin Freinet, who highlight the value of collective work and knowledge construction through experience.

By integrating these perspectives, the research seeks to understand the impact of collaborative learning on the development of social skills and generate meaningful changes in classroom dynamics. Such development will promote a more inclusive and equitable environment for all students, which may allow for application in other accessible contexts, helping to solve problems and better face daily life.

Quantitative data were analyzed using weighted averages, while qualitative records allowed for observing individual progress and group dynamics. The results showed significant improvements in active listening, empathy, communicative planning, self-awareness, and emotional regulation. Using games and collaborative activities in the Freinet-collaborative intervention encouraged equitable participation and integrated all students, including those with greater communication barriers. These findings support the idea that structured collaborative learning is an effective tool for social development within the SEI (Special Education Institution).

2. THE PROBLEM

Valeria was assigned to the Special Education Institution, specifically with the second-year secondary school group, composed of six students who have Intellectual Disability (ID), deafness, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Valeria identified a significant issue: the lack of social skills development. Such deficits in social skills include difficulties such as not respecting turns, displaying challenging behaviors, being unable to ask for help in everyday situations, recognizing emotions, making individual decisions, participating in group interactions, and engaging with others.

Thus, the central research question arises: How does collaborative work in the classroom contribute to developing social skills and autonomy in these students? To address this learning challenge, an observation process emerged using observation guides and field journal entries that capture information about students' attitudes, actions, and ways of being within the educational context—particularly how they relate to one another and resolve conflicts daily.

2.1. Statement of the Problem

The first encounter with the second-year secondary group was calm. They politely greeted Valeria in the classroom; however, she soon noticed they did not pay much attention to her. They barely noticed her presence, which felt unusual since Valeria tried to approach them. However, it made the students uncomfortable, who preferred to keep their distance.

At the Special Education Institution, during the professional practice and social service periods conducted with the second-year secondary group in the afternoon shift, a significant problem has been identified regarding the limited development of social skills among students with Intellectual Disability (ID), deafness, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This group of six students presents challenges that affect their daily interactions inside and outside the classroom. For example, some students exhibit challenging behaviors, such as "Julian," who responds with

gestures of displeasure when asked simple questions and displays attitudes of superiority and rejection of defeat during recess games. Others, like "Tamara," remain on the margins of social activities, observing without participating. At the same time, "Uriel" shows disruptive behavior at the beginning and end of the school day, although he follows instructions when directly addressed.

These observations reflect a broader pattern of challenges in developing key social skills, such as respect for taking turns, asking for help in everyday situations, self-awareness and recognition of other's emotions, and active participation in group dynamics. Additionally, the lack of autonomy in making individual decisions and minimal interaction with peers or adults highlights the need for intervention to strengthen these competencies. For instance, "Anika," a shy yet organized student, has started to interact more during informal moments such as recess, although she still resists socializing with her peers. In contrast, "Caleb," an engaged and curious student, sometimes interrupts others when speaking, suggesting the need to focus on self-regulation and respect for speaking turns.

In light of this reality, there is a growing interest in understanding whether implementing specific pedagogical strategies can contribute to the holistic development of these students. Collaborative learning emerges as a potential solution, as it promotes interaction, assertive communication, and peer cooperation —essential for strengthening social skills.

This research aims to fill that gap by analyzing how collaborative work fosters social skills and enhances student autonomy. Enhancing social skills will enable students to face everyday challenges more effectively and improve their quality of life within the school setting and beyond.

The proposed methodological framework is based on a socio-critical approach framed within action research, carrying out a Freinet-collaborative intervention with a descriptive-interpretive scope. Such intervention allows us to understand the impact of collaborative learning strategies on developing students' social skills, generating meaningful changes in the educational environment, and how students relate to their immediate surroundings. Combining qualitative techniques can be

helpful in a contextualized analysis of the results to assess and improve inclusive practices at the SEI (Special Education Institution).

2.2. Rationale

In recent years, as in the past, social changes have transformed patterns of human interaction, significantly impacting the educational field. In this context, there is a growing need to implement innovative pedagogical strategies that respond to current demands for inclusion and holistic development in specialized educational settings. The study responds to the need to explore collaborative work as a key tool for promoting the development of social skills among students with Intellectual Disability (ID), deafness, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), thereby fostering their inclusion and active participation in the school environment.

Social skills are essential for effectively interacting with others, solving problems, and adapting to daily situations. For students with disabilities, developing these skills is even more crucial, as it enables them to make decisions, understand basic social codes (such as taking turns and peaceful coexistence), and progress toward greater personal and academic autonomy. According to Goldstein et al. (1989), students may learn these skills through structured programs that include modeling, guided practice, and feedback—key components present in the collaborative approach proposed in this research.

The school is the ideal space for fostering the development of social skills, as it is where students spend most of their time and have multiple opportunities to interact with peers and teachers. From Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, learning occurs within a social context, where students progress significantly through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 2000). Collaborative work emerges as an essential strategy to achieve common goals and strengthen social skills, allowing students to learn from each other while receiving support from trained adults. Under these principles, Jean Piaget emphasized that "all operations of the individual become socialized, and cooperation, in the strict sense, consists of

a shared realization of each one's operations" (Piaget, 1983, p. 42).

Furthermore, Célestin Freinet's (1974) approach highlights the importance of collaborative work as a tool for academic learning and as a means to teach social values and practical life skills.

> All children know more or less what a cooperative is, and you, based on our various publications, can give them examples of exciting cooperative activities: school newspaper, celebrations, cooperative garden, school trip, correspondence; explain to them that they can count on certain monetary funds and manage them (Freinet, 1974, p. 25).

This approach becomes especially relevant in inclusive contexts, where the goal is to ensure equal opportunities and promote the full participation of all students. In this regard, the present research aims to address the need to design and implement collaborative learning strategies tailored to the unique characteristics of SEI students, evaluating their impact on the development of social skills such as autonomy, emotional self-regulation, and effective communication.

Through systematic observation and Freinet-collaborative intervention, the aim is to identify how collaborative work contributes to the development of social skills. It generates meaningful changes in the educational setting, promoting an inclusive environment where all students can actively participate and reach their full potential.

3. CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Special Education Institution (SEI) operates on the afternoon shift. It is near major thoroughfares such as Avenida 11 Sur and 5 de Mayo Boulevard—key roads connecting different locations in Mexico's Puebla City. This location facilitates access to public transportation and various service areas. The institution is in an urban area where nearby commercial activity is limited to small businesses such as bakeries, water purification stores, stationery shops, and convenience stores.

The neighborhood shows socioeconomic diversity, with mostly middle- and lower-middle-class families, although there are also working-class sectors. Reforma Agua Azul is a well-established neighborhood home to residents who have lived there for many years and enjoy a stable community environment. In this neighborhood, there is a good range of basic services, including education (elementary schools, secondary schools, and special education centers like the SEI, health care (clinics and private practices), and commerce (stores, markets, and supermarkets). Residents also have access to essential public services such as potable water, electricity, transportation, and waste collection, contributing to a relatively good quality of life.

As with many urban areas in large cities like Puebla, safety remains a constant concern. While the neighborhood is not considered one of the most problematic, occasional reports of minor crimes, such as house thefts, occur. This situation highlights the need for community vigilance and collaboration with local authorities. Encouraging stronger social cohesion and community participation could help address safety and urban infrastructure issues.

The area surrounding the Special Education Institution includes some green spaces and recreational areas where residents can engage in community activities. However, these spaces require maintenance and attention and would benefit from increased investment in urban infrastructure.

The institution's teaching staff is incomplete. Only two physical education teachers, eight classroom teachers, and one male group teacher are present, along with

two social workers and administrative staff. There is no psychology department or speech and language therapy area available. Currently, the SEI director holds a temporary appointment and serves as a classroom teacher.

The first interaction with the second-year secondary group, Group "A," was calm. They greeted Valeria politely in the classroom; however, they did not notice her presence much, which felt unusual since she tried to approach them. Their distance suggested that her presence made them uncomfortable.

An analysis of the dynamics within the second-year secondary group at the Special Education Institution reveals a significant issue: the lack of appropriate teaching strategies to address students' specific needs, particularly regarding developing social skills and autonomy. Each student has unique characteristics requiring tailored pedagogical approaches, yet they also share challenges with everyday social interaction and active participation.

Some students displayed challenging behaviors and attitudes of superiority toward their peers, avoiding collaboration and showing little tolerance for frustration. These behaviors reflect a lack of emotional and social tools to manage difficult situations, presenting a significant challenge for teachers: effectively intervening to help students develop empathy, self-regulation, and respect for shared norms.

Some students were participatory and enthusiastic, although even among them, interruptions and taking more speaking turns than appropriate are common, suggesting a need to work on recognizing and respecting others' boundaries. These situations illustrate a frequent problem in inclusive settings: the absence of pedagogical strategies that promote individual participation and group harmony. Similarly, some students show disruptive behaviors at specific times of the day and difficulties setting limits during physical interactions. These behaviors reveal a significant gap in teachers' knowledge regarding holistically addressing students' emotional and social needs.

Other cases highlight the importance of encouraging initiative and participation among more introverted or insecure students. Although some have made progress

in communicating with adults, they still struggle to interact with their peers. Meanwhile, some students appear interested in group activities but lack the confidence to get involved actively. These situations reflect the need to implement strategies promoting social integration and autonomy while exposing the lack of clear methodological resources to achieve these goals. Students with hearing impairments, in particular, face additional barriers due to the lack of adaptation of teaching practices to their communicative and educational needs. This gap in teacher knowledge limits their full inclusion and reduces their ability to participate actively in classroom dynamics.

Initial observations revealed a challenge among the teaching staff beyond a mere lack of material resources. Despite the teachers' strong preparation and willingness, the implemented strategies did not yield the desired results in meeting either individual or group needs. Similarly, tools for assessing and addressing each student's difficulties appeared insufficient. The variety of behaviors and challenges observed in the group reflects the complexity of working with this diverse population, where students' needs vary significantly. However, there is a clear need to develop pedagogical modifications—such as collaborative learning and project-based learning—that foster social skills and autonomy and strengthen teachers' capacity to respond effectively to the diversity present in the classroom.

3.1 International Context of Special and Inclusive Education

Attending to diversity refers to inclusive processes and educational adjustments in which the teaching-learning process emphasizes students' characteristics and needs. Therefore, we adopted appropriate teaching practices to meet the student population's needs. The inclusive education paradigm proposes that education should adapt to the individual conditions of each student rather than expecting students to conform to the existing educational system. Schools should take down all Barriers to Learning and Participation (BLP).

Students' access, participation, and learning suffer when they encounter barriers.

Such obstacles emerge through interactions with certain aspects of the school: its physical infrastructure, organizational structure, cultures, and policies; relationships between students and adults; or the teaching and learning approaches used by educators. Barriers may also exist beyond the school setting—in families, communities, and even at national and international policy levels (Booth & Ainscow, 2015, p. 44).

The goal is for all students in an educational community to feel a sense of belonging within their context, become involved, make decisions, learn to set boundaries, and respect them. Countless projects help students develop through interdisciplinary learning, experiential education, and the consistent practice of critical thinking so they can achieve quality education and acquire the necessary skills to build a more just, beautiful, and free world (Fernández & Sañudo, 2014, p. 95).

As education professionals, we understand that all human beings have the opportunity to participate fully in different contexts—specifically, in education. However, this requires knowing our students and understanding their situations so that we can design appropriate intervention plans or activities that support their learning.

Inclusive education has become a central theme in global educational policies, driven by the need to ensure the right to quality education for all, regardless of individual, cultural, or social background.

> Inclusive Education means that all children and youth in a given community learn together, regardless of their personal, social, or cultural conditions, including those with disabilities (Fernández, 2003, p. 9).

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to education... Education shall aim at the full development of the human personality and at strengthening respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms..." (United Nations, 1948, online).

Diversity in education encompasses various learning styles, the unique circumstances of each student, and the individual needs they present. Attending to

diversity in the educational field involves recognizing and valuing differences among students—physical, contextual, cognitive, and others—and adapting pedagogical practices and learning environments to meet each student's needs. Each country faces different challenges that prompt reforms in the educational system, such as migration, individual conditions, economic factors, and health issues. For this reason, educational interventions vary from country to country (UNESCO, 2021, online). Each country updates its educational systems over time, and the terms and approaches used evolve due to societal changes and emerging needs.

However, the ultimate goal is still far. Although many countries have tried implementing inclusion, it is still not fully realized. As is well known, this is partly due to ongoing societal changes over time. One factor is that teachers often lack adequate preparation to address classroom diversity. However, inclusion should not be solely the responsibility of teachers or educational agents—it must be built collectively by society, where everyone participates in integrating vulnerable or marginalized individuals into society. "In Uzbekistan, where the transition to inclusive education is still in its early stages, a survey revealed that 70% of people believed children with disabilities should attend special schools" (UNESCO, 2021, online).

In addition to teachers responsible for educating students academically and holistically, families play a key role in these processes. Teachers and parents must work together in the classroom and at home through activities, values, and behaviors that promote students' comprehensive development.

The family is a social institution undergoing continuous transformation, with phases of stability and change. At each stage, the family must adjust to its members' demands and needs and external requirements such as school and work (Gastañaga, 2005, p. 256).

Families are diverse and constantly changing, but flexibility and adaptation to different contexts and challenges each member faces are essential. Encouraging stronger social cohesion and community participation could help address safety

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3.2 Attention to Disability and ASD within the Framework of Inclusive Education

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulties in social communication, repetitive patterns of behavior, and restricted interests. Its manifestation varies significantly among individuals, which has led to its conceptualization as a "spectrum" (García-Franco et al., 2019). Within the conceptual framework of ASD, it is crucial to highlight its multidimensional impact. Individuals with ASD face barriers in areas such as education, employment, and social participation, which affect both their quality of life and that of their families. Therefore, the support and regulation of ASD have become a priority for international organizations and national governments.

In recent decades, ASD has gained visibility on the international stage—not only due to its increasing prevalence but also because of the need to guarantee the rights and inclusion of individuals diagnosed with the condition. A person diagnosed with ASD may exhibit stereotyped behaviors and difficulties in social interaction and communication and, depending on their level of functioning, may or may not present intellectual disability. Some factors related to symptom presentation include chronological age, developmental level, sex, and developmental stage. During development, individuals learn behaviors that help improve functionality and reduce dysfunctional ASD behaviors, thereby alleviating symptoms and enhancing the quality of life for people on the spectrum.

> A neurological developmental disorder that causes neurodiversity, ASD is characterized by reduced social interaction, delayed development of verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and inflexibility in behavior, including repetitive actions and restricted interests (Alcalá et al., 2022, p. 9).

ASD manifests differently in each individual. Recognizing the specific characteristics of the disorder is essential for early detection, followed by diagnosis, so that teachers may implement effective strategies and methods.

ASD consists of persistent communication and social interaction deficits across multiple contexts, including social reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors used in interactions, and the ability to develop, maintain, and understand relationships. In addition to these social communication impairments, a diagnosis of ASD requires the presence of restrictive or repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. Given that symptoms may change over time and can be masked by compensatory mechanisms, diagnostic criteria can be met based on historical information, even if the current presentation results in significant functional impairment (Alcalá et al., 2022, p. 9).

The international regulation of ASD is grounded in instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations, 2006). This treaty recognizes the right of persons with disabilities—including those with ASD—to inclusive education, health care, employment, and full participation in society. Additionally, organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) have developed guidelines for early detection and comprehensive management of ASD, promoting evidence-based approaches and respect for human rights.

On the international scene, various countries have implemented public policies to address ASD. For example, in Spain, the Estrategia Española en Trastornos del Espectro Autista (Spanish Strategy for Autism Spectrum Disorders) establishes a framework to ensure comprehensive care and social inclusion. In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees specialized educational services for children with ASD. However, challenges persist, including lack of resources, insufficient professional training, and social stigma (Manjarres Fernández, 2022). While progress has been made in understanding and supporting individuals with ASD, ongoing commitment to research, policy development, and inclusive practices is essential to ensure that all individuals on the spectrum can thrive in an accepting and supportive society.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents the research's theoretical foundation of the project, which focuses on three key topics: collaborative work as a pedagogical strategy, the concept and development of social skills, and the principles of inclusive education.

Anthony Booth (2017) considers collaborative work a key approach to promoting inclusive education through constructive student interaction. It encourages classroom communication and exchange, fostering basic social skills development within the Special Education Institution (SEI).

For the purposes of this research, social skills are abilities that allow individuals to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, regulate emotions, and work as part of a team—key aspects for student integration and active participation. In particular, these skills are essential for students with Intellectual Disability (ID), hearing impairments (deafness), or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

From the perspective of inclusive education, how teachers may adapt strategies to meet the individual needs of each student has been analyzed, aiming to create an equitable and participatory educational environment. This theoretical exploration may help us understand whether collaborative learning is viable for developing social skills in contexts like Special Education Institutions.

4.1 Disability and ASD in Secondary School

Social skills are a set of learned behaviors that enable individuals to interact effectively in social contexts. Adolescence is a critical period in human development, and these skills become particularly significant.

> Within the context of adolescence, it is essential to consider the implications of factors—whether from the adolescent themselves or their environment—that promote the development and execution of risky behaviors affecting their physical and/or psychological health (Orcasita & Uribe 2010, p.74).

Adolescence is a complex stage during which individuals experience numerous changes and interpret daily situations differently. These changes affect physical development and significantly impact emotional and social growth.

Social skills are acquired throughout life, beginning early when individuals interact with those around them. Bonds are formed with caregivers, schoolmates, and friends, making this a lifelong developmental process. Social skills must be taught and practiced, not innate (Goldstein et al., 1989).

An important consideration is that, according to human development, these social skills should be appropriate for the individual's age and life stage. "Social interaction produces cognitive activity, which emerges in individuals when they participate in social interactions" (Serrano, 2020, p.135). Developing these skills in environments such as schools, where individuals spend much of their day interacting with peers, is important. Through guided practice and positive reinforcement, adolescents can develop the social competencies to navigate interpersonal relationships successfully (Goldstein et al., 1989).

Special education institutions, as well as ordinary ones, must address social skills. Everyone deserves an education that meets their needs. When referring to people with disabilities, they, too, must receive fair opportunities to access and participate in the teaching-learning process. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019), the concept of disability is broad and includes three interconnected aspects: impairments, which refer to problems in body structures or functions; activity limitations, which are difficulties experienced by a person in performing actions or tasks; and participation restrictions, which are problems faced in engaging in life situations.

With this in mind, students with individual conditions should receive personalized —but not isolated—education. In other words, they should be part of the class, but the information should be conveyed in a way that is accessible to them, just as it is for their peers. Here, collaborative work plays a vital role, as the teacher acts as a guide while classmates and others in the group can actively contribute to the inclusion process. Combining collaborative learning with Freinet methodologies can enhance social and academic skills development in children and adolescents with ASD, as it encourages "participation in activities that promote engagement and value their knowledge" (SEP, 2019, p.25).

Disability is a condition that hinders intellectual, sensory, and motor functioning, affecting psychomotor, cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development. These limitations manifest as difficulties in learning, acquiring knowledge, and achieving mastery and representation—for example, in reading and writing, number concepts, spatial and temporal notions, and basic mathematical operations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division (SEP, 2010, p.17).

Individuals with Intellectual Disability (ID) often show limitations in cognitive processes. They tend to get distracted easily and have short attention spans, as attention requires concentration and retention. Memory has functions such as registering experiences for later recall, and limitations are evident in remembering past events.

This population frequently faces discrimination, especially when living in urban areas and belonging to socioculturally and economically competitive groups. School and job programs are typically designed for individuals with average IQs, making meeting expectations difficult (CONAPRED, 2010, p.32).

Social skills are fundamental for effective interaction and adaptation in various social settings. In the case of individuals with intellectual disabilities, these skills may be limited, which affects their ability to build satisfactory interpersonal relationships and function adequately in society. According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), intellectual disability means significant intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior limitations, including conceptual, social, and practical skills.

Social skills include interpersonal competence, social responsibility, self-esteem, problem-solving in social contexts, and adherence to rules. "People with intellectual disabilities face challenges in these areas, showing difficulties in interpreting social cues, communicating effectively, and adapting to different social contexts. These limitations can lead to social isolation and negatively impact quality of life" (Ramos, 2011, p.33).

To address these difficulties, it is essential to implement activities and situations that promote the development of social skills. Social skills training, modeling appropriate behaviors, and practicing in real-life environments have proven effective.

The recently updated DSM-5 classification system reorganizes pervasive developmental disorders into one overarching category: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It eliminates all previous diagnostic categories included under this condition as separate entities, such as Asperger's Syndrome, Rett Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (Guerrero et al., 2017, p.47).

As socially active individuals, we must develop specific skills to express opinions, engage in dialogue, and form friendships. However, "some conditions such as ASD limit these social interactions due to deficits in emotional perception, which in turn affect emotional development" (Miguel, 2006, p.170).

4.2 Social Skills

Social skills are fundamental to human beings. They encompass a set of behaviors, thoughts, and emotions that facilitate the appropriate management of interpersonal relationships. Being socially skilled not only implies satisfying one's own needs and interests but also considering and responding to those of others, always seeking constructive solutions to conflicts.

"Moreover, it is important to reflect on the significance of these skills, as they are positioned as a key element for personal and social well-being" (Bances, 2019, p. 6). For this reason, their development promotes harmonious relationships and serves as an essential foundation for leading a complete and balanced life.

In this research, social skills are the abilities that allow individuals to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, regulate emotions, and work collaboratively—key aspects for the integration and active participation of students, particularly those with Intellectual Disability (ID), hearing impairments (deafness), or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The social skills considered and measured in this study fall into several key categories. These skills reflect interpersonal, emotional, communicative, and problem-solving competencies. According to Goldstein (1989), the main areas and specific examples of social skills are effective communication, empathy, cooperation, emotional self-regulation, problem-solving, assertiveness, self-awareness, gratitude, and adaptability (Goldstein et al., 1989). We measured these skills with the "Social Skills Scale" instrument in this research's pre-test and post-test phases. We present the instrument in the "Methodology" section of this study.

The development of social skills and collaborative learning strategies are intrinsically linked, as they mutually support and enhance each other within the school setting. Social skills such as effective communication, empathy, conflict resolution, and active listening are essential for successful collaborative work, as they enable individuals to interact constructively, share ideas, and reach consensus. On the other hand, collaborative strategies—such as role distribution, positive interdependence, and group feedback—promote the development of these skills by creating spaces where participants "must negotiate, cooperate, and support one another to achieve common goals" (Dávila et al., 2021, p.7). Collaborative work can generate a cycle of interpersonal learning and growth that benefits students and the class.

Collaborative work emerges as a highly relevant pedagogical strategy within inclusive education, especially when addressing the needs of students with disabilities. This approach promotes a learning environment in which cooperation, mutual support, and peer interaction are central elements—particularly beneficial for students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID), hearing impairments (deafness), visual impairments, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), among others.

Participating in collaborative activities allows these students to develop social, communicative, and emotional skills—areas often requiring greater attention in their learning processes. "Moreover, collaborative work allows tasks to be adapted to the individual needs of each student, fostering their participation and assertive communication" (Ordaz, 2023, p.80). In this context, non-disabled peers also play

a fundamental role, acting as facilitators and allies who build bonds of empathy and solidarity, enriching the educational environment. From an inclusive perspective, collaborative work not only contributes to the academic and personal development of students with disabilities but also "promotes a culture of respect for diversity, breaking down stereotypes and building more equitable and cohesive learning communities" (Montero et al., 2011, p.80).

In the educational field, collaborative work has proven to be an effective strategy for promoting the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities. This approach involves all students interacting in joint activities to achieve common goals, fostering an environment of mutual support and shared learning. "Collaborative work is encouraged through musical creation activities in small teams, and formative assessment systems are implemented in which students self-assess and co-assess their learning" (Salarirche et al., 2021, p.2). The goal is to achieve shared objectives, from decision-making and sharing responsibilities to combining knowledge.

Implementing collaborative work in inclusive settings offers multiple benefits. On the one hand, it facilitates the development of social skills in students with intellectual disabilities, allowing them to interact effectively with their peers. On the other, it promotes a culture of respect and empathy among all students, strengthening group cohesion and reducing discriminatory attitudes. Recent studies have shown that "teachers do not apply special methodologies for students with this type of disability, making it necessary to design a methodological strategy that incorporates activities based on collaborative work."

Furthermore, collaborative work benefits students with intellectual disabilities and enriches the learning experience of the entire group. Diversity in the classroom fosters students' competencies such as tolerance, solidarity, and teamwork. "As noted in studies on inclusive education, collaborative work is considered key for coordinating joint actions among professionals from different disciplines" (Arguedas, 2021, p.126).

Thus, the intentional cultivation of social skills through collaborative pedagogical strategies empowers students with diverse needs to thrive in inclusive educational environments and fosters a collective ethos of empathy, equity, and mutual growth —cornerstones for building a society where every individual's potential is recognized and valued.

4.3. Celestin Freinet's Pedagogy

The relationship between collaborative work, cooperation, and Freinet pedagogy is deeply rooted in the educational philosophy developed by Célestin and Élise Freinet. At the heart of this approach lies a strong belief that learning should be meaningful, experiential, and centered on the needs and interests of students. In Freinet's pedagogy, education is not simply about transmitting knowledge from teacher to student but rather about building knowledge collectively and democratically. This vision makes collaborative work and cooperation essential to the learning process, reinforced through specific Freinet techniques that bring these values to life.

One of the most emblematic practices in Freinet classrooms is the class assembly (Prot, 2024). At this regular democratic meeting, students and teachers discuss classroom matters, resolve conflicts, and make collective decisions. These assemblies give students an authentic experience of democracy, encouraging them to express their opinions, listen to others, and take responsibility for the learning environment. For Freinet, the assembly was a grave matter, neural to real-life organization:

> Cooperation should extend to the entire life of the classroom, especially to the social and moral dimensions of its organization. We have outlined the techniques for this, particularly the wall newspaper (journal mural) and the weekly General Assembly of the Cooperative (Freinet, 1964, p.23).

Through this practice, children learn how to negotiate, collaborate, and contribute to the common good—skills fundamental to personal development and active citizenship. Collaborative work is central in Freinet classrooms, where students are encouraged to learn together rather than in isolation. Group projects (Guven,

Yurdatapan & Sahin, 2014), shared research tasks, peer editing, and cooperative planning are standard practices that allow students to engage actively with content and with one another, from preschool to the university (Francomme & Laffitte, 2022). Collaborative work reflects the real world, where people address most challenges collectively. It prepares students for active social participation by fostering teamwork and shared responsibility.

Teachers often organize the classroom with desks arranged in groups of five to seven students, fostering interaction, communication, and mutual support.

> C. Freinet emphasizes encouraging discussion and cooperation among students. To this end, the educator arranges students' desks in small groups. (Sauzeon, 2021, p.13)

This spatial configuration reflects the pedagogical emphasis on teamwork and encourages spontaneous daily collaboration. Through these activities, learners develop communication abilities, critical thinking, and mutual respect.

Such organization of the classroom responds to the principle of cooperation, a foundational value in Freinet's pedagogy. Unlike traditional educational systems that often emphasize competition, Freinet-inspired environments promote a culture of solidarity and mutual support. Students are encouraged to help one another based on individual strengths and needs, reinforcing a sense of community and interdependence.

> The child naturally enjoys competition, which most commonly manifests in games and sports. However, when money is wagered in a game of bowls or when personal interest distorts the course of a sporting competition, everything goes wrong, and cheating, lying, and even crime and murder reappear once again. Classification as it is currently practiced and used, along with exams—whose flaws we know all too well—are today among the most disruptive elements in the school environment (Freinet, 1960, p.71).

Cooperation develops into democratic decision-making because students have a voice in shaping classroom life and through shared responsibilities, where tasks such as organizing space or managing resources become collective duties. "Freinet's concept of cooperation is pervasive; it is far more than shallow participatory democracy" (Clanfield & Sivell, 1990, p.12). This cooperative spirit extends beyond the classroom, modeling a way of living and learning that values

empathy, inclusion, and collective progress. Teachers in Freinet settings act more as facilitators than directors, guiding students toward autonomy while ensuring the group's well-being. Freinetian teachers often organize themselves in Freinet networks that strengthen democratic practices, mutual care, and critical reflection (Pantazidis & Moisiadou, 2025) and even become part of the International Confederation of Freinet Movements. (FIMEM, n.d.)

The two elements—collaborative work and cooperation—are closely interconnected. They create a dynamic and inclusive learning environment where students grow as independent thinkers and responsible group members. This integration of collaboration and cooperation supports one of the core aims of Freinet pedagogy: to model democratic and socially engaged education (Temple & Rodero, 1995). By experiencing these values firsthand, students are better prepared to navigate a complex and interconnected world. They experience how to think and learn effectively but also how to live and work ethically with others because "work creates thought, which in reaction impacts on the conditions of work" (Freinet, 1993, p.347). In this way, Freinet's pedagogy offers a transformative vision of education that goes beyond academic achievement to cultivate active, empathetic, and democratic citizens.

In Mexico, inclusive education has gained significant importance, as it has worldwide—although the scope and implementation vary across regions. Inclusion has been promoted through legal frameworks such as the General Law of Education (2019) and the Model for Inclusive Education (MEI) by the Ministry of Public Education (SEP, 2022). These policies establish the need to guarantee access, retention, and participation of students with disabilities, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

In this context, collaborative work and Freinet pedagogy represent key tools for addressing diversity in the classroom, fostering autonomy, and developing social skills in students with ASD. Freinet and Salengros (1976) state that schools should confront life head-on, mobilize and serve it; it must motivate. It must abandon old practices and adapt to the present and future worlds to achieve this. Collaborative

learning is an approach that enables all students to participate within specific contexts. Collaborative strategies promote inclusion, coexistence, and the strengthening of essential skills. "Freinet pedagogy emerges as a key approach for inclusive education; it consists of experimentation, active learning, and collective work as fundamental principles" (Freinet, 1976).

Based on a consultation with teacher Ireri Figueroa from the Prometeo Freinet Center in Puebla, we developed the following table listing some of the main Freinet techniques for collaborative learning:

FREINET TECHNIQUES	
The Assembly	The Assembly is a democratic space where students and teachers gather to discuss coexistence, activity planning, or conflict resolution topics.
Free Writing	Students write freely on topics of their interest without grammatical or thematic restrictions. They then collectively correct these texts to provide feedback and learn how to write based on important experiences.
Day Trip	An educational outing to the natural or community environment, where students explore, investigate, and learn through shared direct experiences.
Cooperative Workshops	Spaces where students work in small groups to complete projects or solve specific problems. The level of teacher guidance depends on the autonomy of the teams. The level of teacher guidance depends on the autonomy of the teams.
School Newspaper	A publication created by students where they share news, ideas, reflections, or projects.

Table 1. Freinet Techniques

(Source: Own creation based on consultation with Figueroa Fernández (2025)

From an international perspective, inclusive education is important for organizations such as UNESCO (1994), which emphasizes the need to transform educational systems to address student diversity through flexible and participatory methodologies in the Salamanca Statement.

Célestin Freinet's pedagogy emphasizes freedom of expression, cooperation, and active learning. This educational approach naturally aligns with cooperative learning, as both promote students' active participation in their learning process

and encourage the collective construction of knowledge. As stated by Figueroa and Dávila from the Prometeo Freinet Center in Puebla: "Just as we live in society, we also learn in society: a group with as many opinions, ideas, and knowledge as there are people allows us to see many other perspectives that help us grow" (Fernández et al., 2021, p.5).

Freinet believed that learning must be rooted in students' daily lives and authentic experiences, which teachers make possible through collaborative activities such as workshops, group projects, and the creation of shared teaching materials (Fourcade & Go, 2012). In this sense, cooperative learning strengthens students' social and communicative skills. It allows them to take on responsible roles within the group, promoting solidarity, mutual respect, and autonomy. Furthermore, working in teams helps students develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the familiar sound—key principles in Freinet's philosophy.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is conducted within the socio-educational intervention paradigm, using a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative and quantitative elements with a descriptive-interpretive scope.

An assessment tool—the Basic Social Skills Assessment Scale (BSSAS)—was used as a pre-test and post-test to measure progress. The intervention included collaborative learning activities, cooperative games, and curricular adaptations to promote the development of students' social skills.

5.1 Approach

The objective of the socio-critical approach is to promote meaningful changes in the school environment. It aims not only to understand how collaborative learning strategies influence the development of social skills in students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID), hearing impairments (deafness), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) but also to generate actions that support their inclusion and active participation in the classroom.

> The socio-critical paradigm or approach encompasses the idea that critical theory is a social science that is neither purely empirical nor merely interpretive; its contributions stem from community-based studies and participatory research (Alvarado et al., 2008, p. 190).

This approach facilitates the connection between theory and practice, encouraging reflection and collective action to transform educational dynamics for the benefit of students. The following intervention aims to identify and improve teaching practices by implementing collaborative and cooperative strategies in the classroom. Action research is a cyclical process that includes phases of planning, action, observation, and reflection, allowing for adjustments to the plan as results come.

Such a model is especially suitable for working with students with disabilities, as it allows interventions to be adapted to their specific needs while continuously evaluating their impact.

Triangulation of data collected through various techniques and instruments (observation, interviews, field journals, and the BSSAS used as pre-test and post-test) will help strengthen the findings. The active participation of key stakeholders —such as students, teachers, and parents—will facilitate the validation of the study's results. Additionally, critical reflection will be encouraged throughout the entire research process, facilitating adjustments and improvements to the strategies used.

5.2 Scope

The scope of this research is descriptive-interpretive, referring to the depth with which the study addresses the phenomenon under investigation while also establishing the boundaries and objectives of the analysis. According to Hernández Sampieri et al. (2022), the scope of a study can be exploratory, descriptive, correlational, or explanatory, depending on the level of prior knowledge about the topic and the research objectives.

This research explored and analyzed students' perceptions of collaborative work, and by implementing related strategies, it observed changes in student behaviors throughout the study. Every line of research begins with an exploratory character and progresses through different scopes of investigation until it reaches a more explanatory understanding (Ramos, 2020, p. 4).

5.3 Research Design

This research adopted a socio-critical approach within the framework of action research, following a socio-educational intervention design with a descriptive-interpretive scope, as it sought to gain a deep understanding of how collaborative learning strategies influence the development of social skills in students. The selected research design is a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design, which combines qualitative and quantitative elements to address both the general objective and the specific objectives. This design is appropriate for the context of the second-year secondary group at the Special Education Institution (SEI), where a random assignment of participants into control and experimental groups was not

feasible due to the specific characteristics of the population. Instead, we used a single-group pretest-posttest design to evaluate changes before and after the implementation of collaborative learning strategies. Moreover, since we carried out the intervention over one academic cycle, the design also adopted a longitudinal character, allowing researchers to observe the development of social skills over time.

Subsequently, we adapted and implemented collaborative learning strategies to the group's needs, taking into account their specific conditions, such as Intellectual Disability (ID), deafness, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The strategies included structured group activities, such as cooperative games and collaborative projects, as well as the use of visual and technological tools to support communication and emotional regulation for students with hearing impairments or ASD. Role rotation within the group was encouraged to promote autonomy, and Valeria received continuous feedback to adjust activities according to observed needs. These strategies were integrated into the group's diversified lesson plans, ensuring alignment with curriculum guidelines and contextual features.

During the intervention, the researchers conducted continuous monitoring to record and analyze changes in the development of social skills. For this purpose, We used the field journal and an observation guide based on the Basic Social Skills Assessment Scale (BSSAS) over again. The field journal facilitated detailed documentation of student interactions and progress. At the same time, Valeria completed the observation guide at the beginning and end of the school year to measure quantitative changes in social skills related to autonomy, self-regulation, and communication. This process ensured a rigorous evaluation of the impact of the implemented strategies.

Once we completed the data collection, we analyzed the results accordingly. For quantitative data obtained through the observation guide, we compared scores before and after the intervention (pre-test and post-test) using t-tests. Meanwhile, we analyzed qualitative data recorded in the field journal through thematic

categorization, identifying patterns, progress, and areas for improvement in the development of social skills. This combination of methods provided a comprehensive and balanced view of the results.

Regarding population and sample, the study focuses on second-year secondary students at the SEI, working with the entire group without a control group due to the specific nature of the context. The variables included collaborative learning strategies as the independent variable and the development of social skills—specifically autonomy, self-regulation, and communication—as the dependent variable. We considered factors such as type and degree of disability, prior socio-emotional level, and group dynamics as intervening variables.

It is also essential to consider the study's limitations, such as the absence of a control group and the potential influence of external factors. Ethical considerations were respected, including obtaining informed consent from parents or guardians and ensuring the confidentiality of collected data.

> A socio-educational intervention aims to improve the quality of life for individuals or groups in vulnerable contexts while also generating knowledge (González et al., 2024, p. 19).

Additionally, a participatory approach was employed, involving students, teachers, and other educational stakeholders in the research process to promote a comprehensive analysis of the findings.

5.3.1. Participants

Participants were six second-year secondary school students from the Special Education Institution (SEI) －two females and four males－ who were diagnosed with Intellectual Disability (ID), hearing impairments (deafness), or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The students in the second-year secondary group exhibited challenging behaviors, difficulties with self-regulation and decision-making, and limited autonomy by their specific conditions and developmental stage.

5.3.2. Freinet-collaborative work Intervention Proposal

As part of teaching practice, classroom intervention offers the most authentic way to engage with students. It consists of strategies, methodologies, and actions implemented within the classroom to make learning accessible to all students. It goes beyond knowledge transmission by fostering an inclusive environment and developing social-emotional skills. Practice is critical:

> Practice enables teachers to reflect on their role, refine their teaching methods, and tailor their approach to meet students' needs, thereby supporting quality and equitable education (Herrera, 2024, p. 21).

Freinet-collaborative work and classroom coexistence aim to help students establish agreements, communicate ideas, and define rules and regulations, creating a collective organization where all students agree on how the classroom should function. Valeria implemented these activities within the regular curriculum and planning throughout the semester.

Quality requires evaluation to improve processes and manage new interventions. Therefore, a solid educational planning process is essential to achieving optimal quality standards. “We may answer key questions such as: What will I do? How will I do it? For whom am I doing it? Where will it take place? And what resources will I use?” (Díaz Carriazo et al., 2020, p.89).

Collaborative Work Activities Plan

Activity	**Description**
Diagnostic Activity "Find the Treasure and Assemble the Treasure"	Students will search the school in teams. Two leaders randomly draw names from pieces of paper until the team has the desired number of members (e.g., if there are 10 students, each team should have five members, so each leader draws four names). Each team will receive a map and must find the "treasures": two hands, two arms, two legs, two feet, and one head. They must follow clues to locate these body parts. Continuing the activity, students will place the body parts they found onto a large sheet of paper. One by one, they will collaborate to reach agreements and assemble the whole body. One team will create a girl's body and the other a boy's.
"Nervous System – Memories in Our Brain"	Students will write down memories they have with their families—those that evoke emotions and feelings—to understand how our brain works and stores information. After writing their memories, each student will share them with the class, describing what they enjoyed most about recalling those moments and how

	they felt. Other students will then comment on whether they've had similar experiences, sharing their emotions while listening to their classmates' stories.
"Group Reading"	The teacher reads aloud a short story about a girl who loved sports but was involved in an accident and now needs to know what to do to recover and continue doing what she loves. After the reading, triggering questions will be asked to encourage students to share opinions and discuss problems and possible solutions in a group setting.
"Stop Game"	In this traditional game, one player shouts "Stop!" or "Freeze!" and others must stop immediately. Variations include running, freezing, and sometimes guessing distances between players. In this version, the game incorporates content learned in class, such as the human body systems. Each student is assigned the name of a body system. When a player says “stop,” they must estimate the steps needed to reach another player. If the guess is incorrect, the other students may ask a question related to the assigned body system, and the central player must respond while others help complete the answer.
"Puzzle of the Locomotor System"	We go to the playground for this activity. Students play a game similar to "airplane tag," each tagged student unlocks a puzzle piece and places it correctly. All team members perform tasks toward the same goal, working collaboratively for a common purpose. Completing this activity unlocks the following classroom activities.
"Collage"	Students work together to create a collage showing things that benefit and harm the human body. Teams remix with images, cardboard, glue, scissors, markers, and words. They must make decisions and reach agreements within a set time frame, requiring teamwork and speed. Once completed, students present the collage to the class.
"Roundtable Discussion"	The topic of discussion is "Good and bad habits for taking care of the human body". The teacher poses questions, and one student responds at a time within a set time limit. Then, the rest of the class will share whether they agree with the response and contribute additional opinions or insights.
"Interactive Cinema"	The class watches Short films about life projects and achieving goals through effort and perseverance. After watching each movie, students engage in related activities, discuss their future professional or career aspirations, and share their reflections.
"Cooking Workshop"	Students cook recipes in the Kitchen workshop. They assume roles and share responsibilities for carrying out the recipe. They also agree on the commitment of keeping the workspace clean and organized.

Table 2. Collaborative Work Activities Plan

(Source: Own creation)

Previous to the implementation of these activities, a basic social skills scale and a Likert-type scale were designed to assess students' attitudes toward collaborative work. These instruments will allow for comparisons at two specific moments: before and after implementing the collaborative strategies.

5.3.3. Instruments

We considered an observation guide based on the Basic Social Skills Assessment Scale (BSSAS), adapted and validated for use at the secondary level of the Special Education Institution (SEI). The social skills scale was modified using items proposed by Arnold P. Goldstein:

> He is an American psychologist and professor known for researching social skills, conflict resolution, and intervention programs for youth with behavioral difficulties. He was a leading figure in special education, social psychology, and rehabilitation for youth with behavioral issues (Méndez, 2023, p.1).

The social skills scale contains 50 items that cover basic social skills that human beings should develop to function effectively in society.

Basic Social Skills Assessment Scale (BSSAS)
1. Pays attention to the person speaking and makes an effort to understand what they are saying
2. Talks with others about less essential topics before moving on to more important ones
3. Communicates with others about topics of mutual interest
4. Clarifies needed information and asks the appropriate person for it
5. Lets others know he/she appreciates favors done for him/her
6. Introduces himself/herself to others on his/her own initiative
7. Helps others get to know one another
8. Expresses appreciation for something about another person or their activities
9. Asks for help when facing difficulties
10. Chooses the best way to join a group or participate in an activity
11. Clearly explains to others how to perform a specific task
12. Pays attention to instructions, asks for clarification, and follows them correctly
13. Apologizes to others when he/she has done something wrong
14. Tries to persuade others that his/her ideas are better and more useful than someone else's
15. Tries to recognize the emotions he/she is feeling
16. Lets others know how he/she feels
17. Tries to understand what others are feeling
18. Tries to understand why another person is angry
19. Lets others know that he/she cares or is concerned about them
20. Thinks about why he/she is scared and does something to reduce fear
21. Says nice things to himself/herself or does enjoyable things when he/she deserves a reward
22. Recognizes when permission must be asked and then requests it from the appropriate person
23. Offers to share something valued by others
24. Helps those in need
25. Establishes a negotiation system that satisfies both himself/herself and those with differing positions
26. Controls his/her temper so things don't "get out of hand"
27. Defends his/her rights by letting others know his/her position

28. Handles teasing without losing control
29. Stays away from situations that could cause problems
30. Finds alternative ways to resolve difficult situations without fighting
31. Tells others when they have caused a problem and tries to find a solution
32. Works toward a fair solution to someone else&#39
33. Gives others a sincere compliment on how well they played
34. Does something to feel less shy or self-conscious
35. Is aware when excluded from an activity and does something to feel better at that moment
36. Expresses to others that a friend has been treated unfairly
37. Carefully considers the other person's position compared to his/her own before deciding what to do
38. Understands why he/she failed in a situation and thinks about what can be done to succeed next time
39. Recognizes confusion when others explain something but contradict themselves through words or actions
40. Understands the meaning of an accusation and why it was made, then thinks about the best way to relate to the person who made it
41. Plans the best way to express his/her point of view before a problematic conversation
42. Decides what he/she wants to do when others want him/her to do something different
43. Deals with boredom by starting a new and interesting activity
44. Recognizes whether the cause of an event is under his/her control
45. Makes realistic decisions about what he/she is capable of doing before beginning a task
46. Realistically determines how he/she can perform in a given task
47. Identifies what he/she needs to know and how to obtain that information
48. Realistically determines which of many problems is most important and should be solved first
49. Considers options and chooses the one that will make him/her feel better
50. Organizes and prepares himself/herself to carry out a task efficiently

Table 3. Basic Social Skills Assessment Scale (BSSAS)
(Source: Goldstein, 1978)

We used various techniques and instruments for data collection. Participant observation allowed the researchers to record student interactions during collaborative and cooperative activities. A detailed field journal was kept, including observations, reflections, and adjustments made throughout the process. The field journal is a methodological tool used in qualitative research, especially in approaches such as ethnography, action research, and case studies. It consists of a detailed and systematic record of observations, reflections, experiences, and data collected by the researcher during fieldwork. This instrument allows for "organized and critical documentation of all events, interactions, behaviors, and perceptions within the research setting" (Angrosino, 2012, p. 110).

The field journal analysis was qualitative, utilizing coding and categorization to identify patterns and recurring them

PREFERENCE FOR TEAMWORK			
How much do you enjoy working with your classmates?	1	2	3
How much do you enjoy working alone?			
How comfortable do you feel working in a team and making decisions with your classmates?			
Do you enjoy solving problems as a team?			
Do you feel comfortable sharing your ideas and listening to others' ideas?			
Happy = 3, Regular = 2, Sad = 1.			
Do you prefer reaching agreements within a team or receiving individual instructions from the teacher?	Individual ☐	Team ☐	

Table 4. Preference for teamwork
(Source: Own creation)

We calculated the weighted average by assigning an ordinal value based on absolute frequency: Happy = 3, Regular = 2, Sad = 1. We multiplied each ordinal value by its corresponding frequency, added the resulting products, and divided the total by the number of observed cases.

We multiplied each ordinal value by its corresponding absolute frequency, summed the resulting products, and divided the total by the total number of observed cases. This calculation allows us to identify the weighted average performance level for each observed category—for example, "Plans the best way to express his/her point of view before a difficult conversation." By combining qualitative insights from the field journal with quantitative analysis of students' attitudes toward teamwork, this methodological framework provided a comprehensive understanding of collaborative dynamics, offering valuable data to inform educational interventions centered on cooperative learning.



Fig. 1. Valeria and the class.

5. RESULTS

Since this research followed a mixed-methods methodology, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative instruments, we present the results by instrument.

Field Journal Notes (Summary)

The first interactions with the second-year secondary group at the Special Education Institution revealed clearly defined individual characteristics in each student. These observations helped identify strengths and areas for improvement in their social and academic development.

One of the most complex cases was that of "Julian." From the beginning, establishing a connection with him proved difficult. When I tried to engage him with questions like: "How are you?" or "How do you feel?" or about his preferences and interests, he would respond in a challenging tone: "Why are you asking this?" accompanied by gestures showing discomfort. Valeria would explain that she intended to get to know him better, but I stepped back when met with indifference. Julian displayed defiant attitudes toward the teacher during class and often argued verbally with her. He also tended to assert superiority, saying, "I am better than everyone else." This behavior was also evident during soccer games at recess, where he could not tolerate losing or being scored against, leading to frustration and denial of the game's outcome.

In contrast, "Caleb" stood out from the start due to his active participation and enthusiasm. He always responded to the teacher's questions during sessions, showed interest in learning, and attended class punctually every day. His curiosity spans various areas of knowledge, especially science, History, and cultural events. Often, he would share interesting facts he had researched after seeing something on television, starting his comments with phrases like: "Hey, did you know that…?" However, he sometimes shared these facts at inappropriate times, interrupting other activities. We believe there is a need to work with him on self-regulation so he can learn when it's appropriate to share his ideas. In physical education classes, he stands out for quickly understanding instructions, so the teacher often places

him at the front to guide his peers. Although Caleb demonstrates leadership, he sometimes interrupts others or takes over their turn. He is also perceptive to his classmates' actions—for example, when "Uriel" gets up from his seat, makes noise, or doesn't follow the teacher's instructions, Caleb will say: "Don't do that; it's wrong."

"Uriel" is an intelligent student who excels in mathematics. He masters complex arithmetic operations such as adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing large numbers. However, his behavior tends to be disruptive during two specific moments: arrival time and dismissal. Once integrated into the daily routine, he calms down. My observations indicated that Uriel mainly responds to the classroom teacher, especially when she raises her voice to gain his attention. Although affectionate and often giving hugs, some classmates feel uncomfortable with this type of physical contact, indicating the need to work on setting appropriate personal boundaries.

Regarding "Anika," her shyness marked our first encounter. Despite greeting Valeria with a smile, she didn't dare speak to her directly. She is organized and methodical; she does so patiently and carefully when writing the date. Although she occasionally needs support to manage her time more efficiently, she usually finishes tasks at the same pace as her classmates. Over time, our communication improved. During breaks, Valeria approached her to discuss her interests and favorite activities. Recently, she enthusiastically shared that she is taking aerial dance lessons and explained the moves she has learned. She also enjoys planning the recipes we'll prepare during the week, always responding positively. A special moment occurred when, while everyone was having breakfast, she asked me: "Hey, what did you bring for breakfast?" This interaction was significant because "Anika" rarely talks much with her classmates. Despite these improvements, she still prefers to remain on the sidelines in group situations. She interacts more in the classroom, although she prefers talking with male classmates. However, she does not participate in math classes or complete the assigned tasks. When asked what she needed, she would place her hand on her mouth with a confused expression

without speaking. There was no response when we explored what she didn't understand or how she felt.

Finally, "Julian" is a student with hearing impairments who uses home-based signs as his main form of communication. Although he knows some basic signs—such as those for numbers, days of the week, emotions, and months—he does not use sign language functionally. Julian constantly imitates his classmates' actions, suggesting he could benefit from modeling-based learning strategies. Unfortunately, his school attendance is irregular, which limits his academic and social progress.

The behaviors mentioned above were part of ongoing work and continuous interaction with the students within the institution. During the early strategies implemented, such as the diagnostic activity, We noticed specific dynamics when solving problems collectively. The student "Caleb" led the activity—not as a team leader but as the central figure. He didn't consider his classmates and wanted to finish the task independently. In contrast, "Anika" followed her partner but showed shyness and a desire to participate. Student "Tamara" did not get involved much in this activity; she just stood aside and watched her classmates, even though Valeria tried to motivate her to join in.

As time passed and Valeria implemented additional strategies, some changes appeared. At first, we used simple question-and-answer activities to encourage discussion around class topics. In these settings, "Caleb" and "Julian" answered all the questions while the rest of the group remained quiet. "Anika" hesitated between speaking and staying silent, while "Tamara" did not show interest in participating or debating with her peers.

During the collage activity, one of the last ones carried out, there was a noticeable shift. "Caleb" no longer worked alone without considering his teammates. Instead, he began to ask: "How would you like to work?" and "What ideas do you have to finish faster?"

For her part, "Anika" showed initiative in supporting her classmate "Julian." She chose to interact with him to complete a joint task. The group agreed that the four

students would form pairs: one pair would finish the collage on health benefits, while the other would work on the section about bad habits or the consequences of not caring for the human body. She demonstrated the acquisition and use of social skills to solve everyday problems. Likewise, the student "Julian" recognized that he had doubts or difficulties during the activity and asked the teacher to help resolve the situations as they arose. Such interaction highlights his flexibility and shift from a challenging, egocentric attitude to a completely different behavior, positively impacting the development of these social skills.

Playground games such as "Stop" gave "Anika" confidence. During recess, students from other groups approached to join in and asked: "Teacher, can we play? Teacher, how do you play?" Valeria used these moments to encourage our students by asking "Anika" to explain the game to the others. She eagerly began explaining without fear or hesitation, which shows collaborative games are a powerful strategy for promoting social interaction and developing key skills.

An essential factor in these applications was making the students feel comfortable and not judged or scolded in a safe and harmonious teaching and learning environment for students and the broader educational community. Implementing collaborative learning strategies that develop social skills also reinforced classroom content and improved the success rate in learning new topics. This collaborative work also allowed the student "Julian" to interact more directly and effectively with his peers. In fact, it strengthened the group's learning and use of Mexican Sign Language (MSL).

In later activities, such as "Interactive Cinema," the impact of collaborative learning strategies became evident. Students discussed necessary and relevant topics, sharing experiences and opinions about their interests and preferences. Their dialogue became more fluid and focused. There was greater self-regulation from "Caleb," increased empathy and respect for others' opinions from "Julian," greater confidence in speaking up and maintaining her point from "Anika," and more initiative to participate from "Tamara."

Students "Julian" and "Uriel " 'irregular attendance at school limited the visibility of significant progress. However, "Uriel" did show some improvement in self-regulation and following instructions. In "Julian's" case, there was a clear increase in peer interaction and problem-solving initiative.

Preference for Teamwork

We used a Likert scale to measure students' attitudes toward collaborative work with the three more consistent students at the beginning and end of the intervention process. We grouped responses Happy=3, Regular =2, and Sad=1 in the pre-test and post-test to calculate their preference for teamwork versus individual work.

The intervention consisted of implementing collaborative learning strategies within a second-year secondary school group at the Special Education Institution (SEI) involving three students diagnosed with Intellectual Disability (ID), hearing impairment (deafness), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Due to individual availability and participation conditions, only three students could complete the pre-test and post-test. The weighted averages per question were as follows: The results generally show a positive trend after implementing Freinet-collaborative learning strategies. Notably, there was an increase in preference for performing tasks individually (from 2.33 to 3) and in the perception of comfort when sharing and listening to others' ideas (from 2.67 to 3). These improvements suggest that the strategies promoted group participation and enhanced students' self-confidence and willingness toward social interaction.

While results do not observe numerical changes in other evaluated dimensions—such as collective work, decision-making, and problem-solving in teams—the high scores in both stages reflect a favorable attitude toward teamwork from the beginning of the Freinet collaborative intervention. It is important to note that, due to the small number of participants and the specific characteristics of the group (intellectual disabilities, deafness, and ASD), we read the results qualitatively and contextually. The focus should be on understanding each student's personal experiences and social development within the group setting.

BSSAS – Pre-test and Post-test

The initial and final evaluation using the Basic Social Skills Assessment Scale (BSSAS) (Goldstein et al., 1978) yielded pre-test and post-test results from six second-year secondary students. We organized according to frequency categories and then conducted a descriptive analysis to analyze the data obtained from the social skills checklist, considering that the categories used were qualitative and ordinal.

Once we coded the responses, we calculated two measures of central tendency for each evaluated social skill. We computed the weighted average by multiplying each ordinal value by its corresponding absolute frequency, summing the resulting products, and dividing this total by the number of observed cases. This calculation allowed us to identify the average frequency level at which each performance category occurred before and after the intervention.

$$\text{Weighted Average} = \frac{\sum (\text{ordinal value} \times \text{frequency})}{\text{Total number of cases}}$$

Based on this analysis, we observe a general shift toward higher frequency categories in the post-test, which is an improvement in the manifestation of the evaluated social skills. The overall data show that structured and inclusive collaborative work significantly helped students develop their social skills at the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. We selected the most significant changes in frequency between the pre-test and post-test.

Changes in the Group's Social Skills (BSSAS])

Indicator	*pre-test* ■ *post-test* ■	*pre-test*	*post-test*
Pays attention to the person who is speaking and makes an effort to understand what they are saying		2.17	3.67
Helps others get to know one another		1.17	3.17
Apologizes to others when he/she has done something wrong		1.83	3.5

Tries to persuade others that his/her ideas are better		1.83	1.5
Lets others know how he/she feels		2.17	4
Tries to understand why another person is angry		2.33	4
Handles teasing without losing control		2	3.67
Plans the best way to express his/her point of view before a difficult conversation		1.83	3.5
Makes realistic decisions about what he/she is capable of before starting a task		1.67	3.17
Frequency			

Table 5. Changes in the group's social skills

(Source: Own creation)

The findings of this study reveal that structured collaborative learning positively impacted the development of social skills among students with special educational needs. Throughout the intervention, students demonstrated a greater ability to interact effectively with their peers, express emotions, and actively listen. The skill of "paying attention to the speaker" and "making an effort to understand what was being said" significantly increased from 2.17 in the pre-test to 3.67 in the post-test. This shift indicates a more intentional and conscious approach to interpersonal communication, which became a foundation for other key developments.

Emotional awareness and empathy also saw considerable growth. Students showed enhanced recognition of their emotions and those of others, particularly in understanding anger, where scores rose from 2.33 to 4. Such improvement suggests a meaningful increase in the group's emotional sensitivity and empathetic responses. Additionally, the willingness to share personal feelings increased significantly—from 2.17 to 4—demonstrating greater student openness and trust. These changes contributed to a more cohesive and supportive classroom environment.

In terms of communication, students improved their capacity to plan and articulate their points of view, with scores rising from 1.83 to 3.5. They also gained confidence in explaining tasks clearly, as reflected by the increase from 1.67 to 3.

These developments highlight a growing ability to engage in purposeful dialogue and contribute meaningfully to group activities. Initiative in joining group dynamics also improved, increasing from 2.33 to 3.5, showing a stronger desire to be actively involved in shared tasks.

The intervention strengthened the students' self-regulation skills; they became better at managing their emotions in difficult situations, such as responding to teasing (from 2 to 3.67) and controlling frustration (from 2.17 to 3.5). These abilities helped create a calmer and more secure space for participation, allowing all students to feel more comfortable engaging with one another. Similarly, autonomy developed through improved self-assessment and decision-making, particularly in evaluating personal capabilities before starting a task, which rose from 1.67 to 3.17. The advance shows an emerging sense of self-awareness and realistic self-evaluation.

Notably, there was a slight decline in the tendency to persuade others that one's ideas are better (from 1.83 to 1.5), which may reflect a positive shift toward cooperation rather than competition. Finally, the ability to prepare for difficult conversations improved significantly, rising from 1.83 to 3.5, demonstrating greater communicative confidence and planning skills. These findings support the idea that inclusive, well-structured collaborative strategies can be a powerful tool for fostering social development and improving classroom interaction for students with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, and autism spectrum disorder.

Implementing collaborative learning strategies had a meaningful impact on academic engagement and social development among students at the Special Education Institution (SEI). Throughout the intervention, students demonstrated an increased ability to solve problems, share ideas, and work collectively toward shared goals. This approach not only supported their cognitive growth but also fostered a sense of belonging and motivation, highlighting the importance of teacher guidance that is empathetic and strengths-based.

Significant improvements were observed in key social skills areas, including autonomy, emotional self-regulation, and interpersonal communication. The Basic

Social Skills Assessment Scale (BSSAS) revealed a general increase in the frequency and quality of social interactions after the intervention, indicating that structured collaborative activities can effectively support students with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These findings suggest that when thoughtfully adapted, cooperative learning can be a powerful tool for inclusive education.

Student perceptions of teamwork, measured through a Likert scale administered before and after the Freinet-collaborative intervention, remained consistently positive throughout the process. Students expressed comfort working in groups and showed greater confidence in expressing their opinions and listening to others. Notably, there was an increased enjoyment of individual tasks and a stronger sense of ease in sharing thoughts, reflecting a growing balance between personal autonomy and group participation. All participating students preferred making decisions within a team rather than receiving individual instructions, reinforcing that collaboration created a motivating and engaging learning environment.

Direct observation recorded in the field journal allowed for real-time adjustments to teaching strategies based on each student's unique needs. For example, "Julian," who initially displayed challenging behaviors and a sense of superiority, gradually integrated into group dynamics thanks to clear expectations and assigned roles. "Caleb" maintained high levels of participation while improving his ability to regulate impulses and respect speaking turns. "Tamara," who began the process by staying distant from group activities, eventually engaged more actively with peers from other groups. "Uriel" made gradual progress in managing emotions and following classroom guidelines, though he still required support in understanding social boundaries. "Anika" advanced in emotional expression and communication, although she faced challenges in math-related contexts. Finally, "Julian," with hearing impairments, benefited from visual and kinesthetic learning strategies, showing improved peer interaction and early progress in Mexican Sign Language (MSL).

Although the small sample size limits broader statistical generalization, qualitative observations reflected significant growth in social integration, self-awareness, and cooperative behavior. These results highlight the potential of inclusive, well-structured collaborative strategies to enhance academic and socio-emotional outcomes in special education settings.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of this study demonstrate that the implementation of structured collaborative learning strategies grounded in Freinet pedagogy positively impacted the development of social skills among students with special educational needs at the Special Education Institution (SEI). Freinet-based strategies—such as cooperative work, student-led activities, and shared decision-making—encouraged active participation and fostered a sense of belonging and motivation. These methods emphasized experiential learning and peer interaction, supporting cognitive growth and socio-emotional development.

We notice a favorable trend in student attitudes toward teamwork, including an increased preference for working individually (from 2.33 to 3) and greater comfort when sharing and listening to others' ideas (from 2.67 to 3). These improvements suggest that the strategies promoted group collaboration and strengthened self-confidence and autonomy. While some dimensions—such as collective decision-making and problem-solving in teams—did not show numerical changes, the consistently high scores indicate that students already held a positive attitude toward teamwork from the start, which was further reinforced by the Freinet-inspired intervention.

We saw significant progress in emotional awareness, empathy, and active listening. The ability to pay attention and understand what others were saying improved notably from 2.17 in the pre-test to 3.67 in the post-test, reflecting a more intentional and respectful approach to interpersonal communication. Students showed greater recognition of their own emotions and those of others, particularly in understanding anger (from 2.33 to 4) and expressing personal feelings (from 2.17 to 4). These developments highlight a growing capacity for emotional sensitivity and empathetic responses within the group.

Regarding communication and engagement, students gained confidence in articulating their thoughts and explaining tasks clearly, with scores increasing from 1.83 to 3.5 and 1.67 to 3, respectively. There was also a noticeable increase in

initiative to participate in group dynamics, rising from 2.33 to 3.5, indicating stronger involvement and interest in shared learning experiences. Importantly, the slight decrease in the tendency to persuade others that one's ideas are better (from 1.83 to 1.5) may reflect a shift toward cooperation rather than competition—a core principle in Freinet's methodology. Additionally, students demonstrated greater preparedness and communicative confidence in handling difficult conversations, improving scores from 1.83 to 3.5.

Although the small sample size limits broader statistical generalization, qualitative observations revealed meaningful progress in autonomy, self-awareness, and emotional regulation across all participants. The field journal and direct observation were key in identifying these changes and adapting teaching strategies accordingly.

These findings support the idea that collaborative learning based on Freinet pedagogy can be a practical and inclusive approach to promoting social development and enhancing classroom interactions for students with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Integrating principles such as cooperation, experiential learning, and mutual respect reinforces the importance of designing inclusive educational practices that nurture academic and social competencies in special education settings.

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