

GLOBAL VOICES

A systematic approach in Cuba

Assessments, systems and focused competence development are a part of the everyday work of Cuban special needs teacher, Hortensia Diaz, who works at a school for developmentally disabled children in Havana

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Support for Benjamin Moreno

The National Federation of Social Educators has provided support to the Benjamin Moreno special needs institution with a minor donation. This included used computer equipment and a monetary donation of 500 euro, which is to be used for the common good of the institution. The money comes from the Social Educators' solidarity fund.

Special needs teacher Hortensia Diaz vividly remembers the surprised expression.

The mother of the new student looked in disbelief at Hortensia when she asked the daughter to go down to the break room.

The mother's eyes signalled the teacher: "No, no, she isn't capable of doing that!"

But the daughter left without hesitation and found the way without any problems.

The mother began to cry.

"She was so surprised that her daughter could do it by herself. Many of our students can develop much more than their parents think is possible. They develop thanks to our focused, systematic approach. A systematic approach and care are the most important requirements of our work," says Hortensia Diaz.

The 45-year-old Cuban works at the Benjamin Moreno special needs institution in Havana, a home and/or school for a total of 115 clients with Down's Syndrome or other types of developmental disabilities.

Here, Hortensia Diaz is responsible for teaching nine students from 10 to 22 years of age. All of these students live at home with their families and arrive by bus in the morning.

"It is completely free of charge. The families do not pay a centavo. The government pays for everything," says Hortensia proudly.

The front side of the medallion

Outside of the institution's doors, Cuba looks very much like a society that is literally falling apart.

Peeling walls filled with holes. Rotten woodwork and rusty railings.

In Havana alone, over 600 buildings have collapsed in about the last 15 years and the lack of maintenance is evident everywhere.

One doesn't need to take an especially critical look around to see the problems in this society, which according to its constitution is a socialistic state:

Long rows of empty store shelves.

Cars that haven't been replaced since the revolution in 1959.

The newspaper, Granma, the Communist Party newspaper and the only daily paper in Cuba. In this country it is forbidden to criticise the government or to discuss issues freely in general.

Inside of the Benjamin Moreno institution, one can also experience some of the benefits of the Cuban society, which in many ways is a welfare society with 12 years of free schooling and free medical care for all.

Hortensia Diaz tells enthusiastically about how her work focuses on skills development, both in relation to her students and herself.

Scheduled teaching

A school timetable hangs on the wall in the small classroom. Today, a Friday, the schedule is the following:

9:15-9:40 – Independence

9:45-10:10 – Psychomotor

training

10:10-10:25 – Break

10:25-11:05 – Language development

11:10-11:50 – Patriotic class

Hortensia finds a vest made



Hortensia Diaz (foreground) works as a special needs teacher for a group of developmentally disabled students in Havana. "A systematic approach and care are the most important requirements of our work," she says.

out of an old sack in the materials cabinet.

"We used this morning for Independence class. The buttons and buttonholes are large, so it is easier for the students to button and unbutton them. Then they practiced putting it on and taking it off, and they also helped each other," she says.

At Benjamin Moreno, the goal is to enable all students to become as self-reliant and independent as possible. Classroom instruction must be carried out into everyday life; Hortensia teaches parents how to let their children do as much as possible by themselves, such as when they are getting dressed and undressed at home.

The next point on the agenda was psychomotor instruction, which today dealt with gluing small pieces of paper on a bigger sheet of paper.

"I said that it was to be a gift for the students' mothers,

so they are more motivated to work," says Hortensia.

Language instruction

All of the students in Hortensia's class have spoken language, although two of them can only use a very limited number of words. Twice a week, including on Friday, they receive instruction from a speech therapist.

"But in everyday teaching, I am the one who must constantly ensure that they develop their language, verbal and non-verbal. Every day I must make sure to use new words, so that their vocabulary grows. I coach them by speaking very, very slowly and clearly, and repeating the same thing many times," explains Hortensia.

The last item on Friday's schedule was the patriotic class.

"It is not only political, but is also about culture and leisure. The students must know what is happening in Cuba. For exam-

ple, today we have discussed there is a book festival here in Havana. One of the mothers brought a colouring book so that we see it and talk about it – but we could not colour in it, because we only had one copy," she says.

Hortensia conducts ongoing assessments of the students' development.

Each student has a book in which she writes a status report once a month:

How is the student's discipline? Is the student attending school every day, or are there absences? What is going well? What can be improved?

She must take a systematic approach and cover all of the points on the curriculum, which includes development of independence and language development.

The students at the Benjamin Moreno institution are divided into levels from one to seven;

Hortensia teaches level five students. Once a year, the students are assessed as to whether they can move up a level or if they should remain in the same class.

Ongoing professional development

It is not only the students that must develop – all of the special needs teachers at Benjamin Moreno are also obliged to make ongoing improvements in their teaching. Currently, all of the teachers are conducting their personal methodology development project, in which they must develop something new that will then be conveyed to the rest of the group, as well as similar special needs institutions throughout Cuba.

Hortensia is examining how she can improve parent education when it comes to sexual guidance.

"Many parents today just say that their children are not permitted to have any sexuality and that they are not allowed to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. But what happens when somebody says that you are not allowed to eat candy? You just feel even more like eating candy," she says.

In her project, Hortensia has focused on the importance of parents understanding that their children have the same sexual needs as all other people, even though they have a different level of intelligence.

Hortensia is very pleased with her job, which she has had for seven years.

"I used to think that I wouldn't have the patience at all to work with this group of students, because I thought that they would develop far too slowly. But now I can see that we truly can make a difference. We believe that the students can learn something, and we teach the parents to believe in their children."