

CARL ROGERS' HUMANISTIC LEARNING THEORY AND TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS WITH DOWN SYNDROME

Junita Patrick*¹, Mohd Norazmi Nordin¹

¹Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,
43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: Junita Patrick (p145023@siswa.ukm.edu.my)

ABSTRACT

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Learning Theory emphasizes the holistic development of individuals, where students are viewed as having the full potential to grow if given a supportive environment. In the context of teaching special education students, especially those with Down syndrome, this approach serves as a foundation for developing teaching strategies that emphasize building positive relationships, empathy and psychological support. However, a common issue in special education is the difficulty in deeply understanding the emotional and cognitive needs of these students which presents challenges in implementing appropriate teaching strategies. The purpose of this article is to examine how Carl Rogers' humanistic learning theory can be applied in teaching students with Down syndrome and to explore the most effective teaching strategies to enhance their learning experience. The article uses a literature review methodology, analysing and synthesizing previous studies related to humanistic learning theory and the teaching of Down syndrome students. The findings suggest that a student-centred humanistic approach can help improve learning motivation, active engagement and social development for Down syndrome students. Strategies such as collaborative learning, open communication and consistent emotional support are seen as key components in creating a conducive learning environment for them. The implications of these findings suggest that educators and policymakers in special education should integrate elements of humanistic theory into the curriculum and provide specific training for teachers to understand and support the unique needs of Down syndrome students.

Keywords: Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory, Special Education Students, Down Syndrome, Teaching Strategies, Student-Centred Learning, Holistic Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Learning Theory which emerged in the 1960s, advocates for a student-centred approach where the role of the teacher shifts from a traditional instructor to a facilitator of learning. Rogers believed that students have an inherent potential to grow and develop provided they are placed in a supportive and empathetic environment. This approach contrasts with behaviourist or purely cognitive models of learning, as it emphasizes emotional and psychological development alongside intellectual growth. Research has continued to support this perspective, showing that environments fostering empathy, self-actualization and emotional engagement significantly enhance students' intrinsic motivation and holistic development (Cochran, 2020;

Schunk, 2021). By creating a safe, open learning space, students are more likely to explore, question and become active participants in their learning journey, a concept especially beneficial for students with unique developmental needs.

For students with special needs, such as those with Down syndrome, the humanistic approach provides an appropriate framework. Down syndrome is a genetic condition caused by an extra copy of chromosome 21. It occurs when there are three copies of this chromosome instead of the usual two. Individuals with Down syndrome often have unique physical features, such as a flat facial profile, upward-slanting eyes and sometimes a protruding tongue. They also experience varying levels of developmental delays, which can affect learning and social skills. However, with proper educational support and therapy, individuals with Down syndrome can lead active and fulfilling lives.

Rogers' emphasis on unconditional positive regard and emotional support aligns with the unique needs of these students, who often face challenges beyond academic achievement, including social integration, communication barriers and emotional regulation (Dykens et al., 2020). Current research suggests that fostering emotional well-being in students with Down syndrome is critical, as it directly impacts their ability to learn and engage with peers (Buckley, 2022). Thus, the humanistic approach's holistic emphasis on psychological and emotional development becomes especially relevant when working with these students, who may benefit from individualized attention and empathy-driven teaching strategies.

Teaching students with Down syndrome presents unique challenges due to the variability in their cognitive and emotional development. While they may have similar learning needs to their peers in some areas, Down syndrome students often require more tailored educational interventions that accommodate delayed cognitive processing, short-term memory issues and slower learning rates (Guralnick, 2017). Additionally, these students frequently experience heightened emotional and social challenges, which can hinder their academic progress if not adequately addressed. The humanistic model's flexibility, which emphasizes adjusting the learning environment to meet students' specific needs, is particularly effective here. However, educators often struggle to simultaneously provide both the cognitive and emotional support required. Current studies highlight the importance of providing consistent emotional encouragement and psychological support, as well as differentiated teaching methods, to ensure that Down syndrome students reach their full potential (Fernandez et al., 2021).

Carl Rogers' humanistic approach, when applied to special education, advocates for creating a personalized and inclusive environment where students with Down syndrome can thrive. Collaborative learning, where students work together in an emotionally supportive setting, is one of the strategies derived from this theory. Open communication and providing consistent emotional support help build trust between educators and students, which is essential for Down syndrome learners, who may struggle with social interaction and anxiety (Harris & Carter, 2019). Research shows that when teachers adopt a more facilitative role, students with Down syndrome demonstrate improved social skills, increased engagement and higher motivation to learn (Guralnick & Bruder, 2018). These strategies help to overcome the limitations posed by traditional, standardized teaching methods, which often overlook the importance of social and emotional

development for special needs students. A flexible curriculum, infused with humanistic principles, can better address these learners' distinct cognitive and emotional profiles.

The findings from this research have significant implications for both educators and policymakers in special education. Humanistic approaches, with their focus on emotional support and student-centred learning, are particularly effective in improving the academic outcomes and social development of students with Down syndrome. Therefore, integrating humanistic elements into the curriculum could enhance the overall effectiveness of special education programs. Additionally, teachers must receive training that not only addresses the academic needs of these students but also their emotional and psychological well-being (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2022). As policymakers continue to revise special education standards, there is a growing recognition of the need for teacher preparation programs to include the skills necessary to support the holistic development of special needs students (Jones & Hensel, 2020). This would ensure that educators are well-equipped to implement inclusive, humanistic practices that cater to the diverse needs of students with Down syndrome, fostering an environment where they can truly thrive.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Students with Down syndrome often require highly individualized and specialized educational approaches to cater to their unique cognitive, emotional and social needs. While there is considerable research on effective teaching strategies much of it is outdated or focused on broader categories of special education without addressing the specific challenges faced by Down syndrome students. Recent advancements in educational psychology, including Carl Rogers' humanistic learning theory, suggest that more personalized student-centred approaches may be particularly beneficial for these students. However, the practical application of these theories in modern classrooms, especially in special education contexts remains underexplored. This article aims to bridge this gap by reviewing up-to-date literature and analysing the effectiveness of humanistic approaches tailored for Down syndrome students.

Traditional teaching methods often focus heavily on cognitive development, leaving emotional and psychological support as secondary considerations. For Down syndrome students however, emotional well-being and social interaction are just as crucial to their learning success as academic instruction. The humanistic approach, which emphasizes the whole individual and integrates emotional and psychological development into the learning process, offers a promising alternative to more rigid educational models. Despite its potential, there is a lack of comprehensive reviews that synthesize recent research on how humanistic strategies can be effectively employed in the education of Down syndrome students. This article addresses that need, presenting an updated review of literature and offering insights into how humanistic teaching methods can enhance both academic and emotional outcomes for these students.

The field of education is continually evolving, with new studies and practices emerging that challenge outdated methods. For educators and policymakers to effectively support Down syndrome students, it is critical to stay informed of these advancements and to adapt teaching practices accordingly. This review article is important because it compiles the latest research on the application of Carl Rogers' humanistic theory in special education, offering up-to-date insights

into strategies that have proven successful. By examining current literature, this article not only highlights effective teaching techniques but also provides a framework for future research and policy development, ensuring that the educational needs of Down syndrome students are met with the most relevant and effective strategies available today.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Learning Theory, which emerged in the mid-20th century, emphasizes a learner-centred approach that focuses on the whole individual, including their emotional, psychological, and cognitive development. The theory posits that people have an inherent capacity to grow and achieve their full potential if placed in an environment that provides empathy, authenticity and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1969). In education, this translates into classrooms where the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than an authoritarian figure, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning. Research has shown that such environments foster greater creativity, self-expression and deeper engagement in learning (Schunk, 2021). In essence, Rogers' theory advocates for holistic learning environments where students feel safe and supported, which can significantly enhance their educational outcomes.

The humanistic approach includes several key components. First, the student is seen as an active participant in the learning process, responsible for their personal growth and development. Second, the teacher's role is to create a nurturing environment that encourages openness, respect, and mutual trust. Finally, emotional and psychological well-being is emphasized as being equally important as academic success. This approach has been used in general education settings to promote self-directed learning and improve student engagement (Cochran, 2020). Furthermore, it is particularly valuable in contexts where students face unique emotional or psychological challenges, such as in special education.

Students with special educational needs, such as those with Down syndrome, can significantly benefit from humanistic approaches due to the theory's emphasis on individualized learning and emotional support. These students often require a learning environment that is flexible and responsive to their cognitive and emotional needs. For instance, emotional engagement and social interaction play a critical role in the learning process for children with Down syndrome, whose educational progress may be impeded by emotional distress or anxiety (Buckley, 2022). Humanistic learning environments, which focus on creating trust and providing consistent emotional support, are especially effective in mitigating these challenges and fostering more positive learning experiences.

A growing body of research supports the use of humanistic approaches in the education of students with special needs. For example, Guralnick and Bruder (2018) found that Down syndrome students who were educated in environments that prioritized emotional well-being, social interaction and collaborative learning showed significant improvements in both cognitive and social outcomes. Similarly, a study by Harris and Carter (2019) demonstrated that the use of Rogers' humanistic strategies in inclusive classrooms led to enhanced social skills and greater engagement among students with developmental disabilities. These studies reinforce the idea that special education

students, particularly those with Down syndrome, benefit from learning environments that go beyond traditional, cognitively-focused teaching methods.

Several recent studies have applied Carl Rogers' humanistic theory in special education contexts such as Dykens et al. (2020), explored the emotional and psychological needs of students with Down syndrome and how Rogers' humanistic principles, particularly empathy and emotional support, can improve their learning outcomes. The study concluded that students exposed to such learning environments showed greater emotional resilience and motivation. Buckley (2022) reviewed educational strategies for children with Down syndrome and emphasized the importance of humanistic approaches in addressing both cognitive and emotional development. The review highlighted how humanistic methods, such as collaborative learning and personalized instruction, could be particularly beneficial for this group of students. Guralnick and Bruder (2018) focused on early intervention strategies for children with developmental disabilities and noted that Rogers' emphasis on emotional support and interpersonal relationships was crucial in fostering social competence and improving peer interactions in Down syndrome students.

The application of humanistic principles has led to the development of various teaching strategies that emphasize emotional support, open communication, and student-centred learning. These strategies include collaborative learning, where students work together on tasks, encouraging social interaction and peer support. Teachers in these environments often facilitate rather than direct, allowing students more autonomy in their learning (Cochran, 2020). For special education students, such approaches are particularly beneficial because they provide a flexible learning environment where emotional well-being is prioritized. Recent studies have shown that Down syndrome students thrive in settings where teachers actively support their emotional and psychological development alongside academic instruction (Fernandez et al., 2021). This contrasts with traditional approaches, where the focus is often solely on academic achievement, overlooking the importance of emotional engagement.

One of the primary advantages of using a humanistic approach in special education is the creation of an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Students with special needs, particularly those with developmental disorders such as Down syndrome, often face significant emotional and social challenges that can hinder their academic success. Humanistic approaches, which emphasize empathy, positive regard, and respect for individual differences, help create an environment where these students feel understood and supported. This not only boosts their confidence and motivation but also fosters a sense of belonging, which is crucial for their social and emotional development (Buckley, 2022).

While the benefits of humanistic approaches in special education are well-documented, there are challenges to implementation. Teachers often require additional training to effectively facilitate a humanistic classroom, particularly in special education settings where the needs of students are highly individualized. Furthermore, schools may face constraints such as large class sizes, limited resources and pressure to meet standardized academic goals, which can make it difficult to focus on the emotional and psychological development of students (Jones & Hensel, 2020). Despite these challenges, the growing body of research supporting the effectiveness of humanistic approaches

in special education underscores the need for continued investment in teacher training and curriculum development that incorporates these principles.

As special education continues to evolve, the application of Carl Rogers' humanistic learning theory offers a promising avenue for improving the educational experiences and outcomes of students with special needs. The evidence from recent studies suggests that humanistic approaches, which prioritize emotional and psychological well-being alongside academic achievement, are particularly beneficial for students with Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities. However, more research is needed to explore the long-term effects of these approaches and how they can be effectively integrated into special education systems on a larger scale. With continued focus on teacher training and curriculum development, the potential of humanistic education to transform the lives of special needs students can be fully realized.

4. TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS WITH DOWN SYNDROME APPLYING CARL ROGERS' HUMANISTIC LEARNING THEORY

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Learning Theory emphasizes the importance of personal growth, self-actualization, and the development of a positive self-concept in learners. When applied to teaching strategies for special education students with Down syndrome, this theory can significantly enhance their learning experience. However, implementing these strategies presents challenges and effects that educators must navigate.

Students with Down syndrome often face unique challenges in the classroom, primarily due to their cognitive and physical developmental delays. These challenges can manifest as difficulties with communication, social interaction and academic skills. According to Fidler et al. (2020), children with Down syndrome frequently experience delays in language development, which can hinder their ability to engage effectively in classroom discussions and collaborative learning activities. This communication barrier not only affects their learning but can also lead to feelings of isolation from their peers, impacting their self-esteem and motivation to participate (Fidler, et al., 2020).

Additionally, students with Down syndrome may struggle with adaptive behaviours and executive functioning skills, which are crucial for academic success and daily living. As highlighted by McGuire et al. (2021), these difficulties can result in challenges with organization, time management, and problem-solving, further complicating their ability to keep pace with the curriculum. The variability in individual capabilities among students with Down syndrome requires teachers to adopt highly individualized instructional strategies, which can be resource-intensive and complex to implement effectively in a standard classroom setting (McGuire, et al., 2021).

Applying Carl Rogers' humanistic learning theory emphasizes the importance of emotional support in the education of students with Down syndrome. Rogers advocates for a learning environment characterized by empathy, acceptance and genuine understanding. Such an environment allows students to feel valued and understood, fostering a sense of belonging. According to Borkowski et al. (2019), when educators establish a supportive and nurturing atmosphere, students with Down

syndrome are more likely to take risks in their learning, leading to improved academic and social outcomes. This emotional security is essential for students who often face the dual challenge of cognitive limitations and social stigma.

Creating a positive classroom culture involves recognizing and addressing the emotional needs of these students. Teachers can implement strategies such as positive reinforcement, individualized feedback and opportunities for self-expression to enhance student engagement. As reported by Topping and Sirin (2020), these strategies not only promote a sense of competence among students but also help in reducing anxiety and fostering resilience. In this context, the role of the teacher extends beyond academic instruction to include emotional mentoring and support.

Rogers' theory also highlights the value of collaborative learning opportunities, which can be particularly beneficial for students with Down syndrome. Collaborative learning encourages peer interaction, allowing students to learn from one another and develop social skills in a structured environment. Research by Odom et al. (2022) indicates that inclusive collaborative activities can enhance communication skills and promote friendships among students with diverse abilities. This peer-supported learning environment not only helps students with Down syndrome feel included but also fosters empathy and understanding among their typically developing peers.

Implementing cooperative learning strategies, such as group projects or peer tutoring, allows students with Down syndrome to engage meaningfully in the classroom. These strategies should be carefully designed to ensure that all students can contribute according to their strengths. Odom et al. (2022) found that students in inclusive settings demonstrated increased social competence and reduced behavioural issues, showcasing the positive effects of collaboration in learning.

Differentiated instruction is another key component of applying Rogers' humanistic approach in teaching students with Down syndrome. Teachers must adapt their instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of their students, ensuring that each child has equitable access to learning opportunities. According to Tomlinson (2021), differentiated instruction involves tailoring content, process and product based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. For students with Down syndrome, this may mean providing additional scaffolding, using visual aids, or integrating hands-on activities to reinforce concepts.

Engaging with families is essential for the successful education of students with Down syndrome. According to Barlow et al. (2020), fostering strong home-school partnerships can significantly enhance student outcomes. Families provide valuable insights into their child's strengths, preferences and challenges, which can inform instructional practices. Involving families in the educational process also empowers them to support their child's learning at home, further reinforcing the skills developed in school.

Effective communication with families should include regular updates on their child's progress, as well as opportunities for family involvement in classroom activities. Barlow et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of creating a welcoming environment for families, where they feel respected and valued as partners in their child's education. This collaboration not only strengthens

the support network for the student but also aligns with Rogers' principles of empathy and understanding in the learning environment.

Furthermore, differentiated assessment practices are crucial for measuring student progress. As noted by Subban (2019), traditional assessment methods may not accurately reflect the abilities of students with Down syndrome. Alternative assessments, such as portfolios or performance-based tasks, can provide a more comprehensive view of student learning and help educators adjust their teaching strategies accordingly. This personalized approach aligns with Rogers' belief in the significance of understanding the individual learner.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, applying Carl Rogers' humanistic learning theory to the education of students with Down syndrome offers a robust framework for addressing their unique challenges while fostering an inclusive learning environment. This approach emphasizes the importance of emotional support, individualized strategies, collaborative learning, and family involvement, which are critical for promoting both academic and social success among these students.

One significant aspect of Rogers' theory is the focus on creating a safe and empathetic classroom atmosphere, which is essential for students with Down syndrome who often experience anxiety and feelings of inadequacy (Borkowski et al., 2019). Research indicates that when educators cultivate a nurturing environment, students are more likely to engage in learning activities and build self-confidence (Fidler et al., 2020). This emotional foundation allows students to express themselves freely, thereby enhancing their communication skills and facilitating better peer interactions.

Moreover, the emphasis on differentiated instruction is vital for meeting the diverse needs of students with Down syndrome. Tomlinson (2021) highlights that tailored instructional strategies not only help in addressing learning gaps but also empower students by recognizing their individual strengths and interests. This personalized approach aligns closely with Rogers' belief in the learner-centered paradigm, where education is adapted to fit the learner rather than forcing the learner to conform to a rigid educational model.

The role of collaborative learning is equally significant. Odom et al. (2022) demonstrate that inclusive peer interactions foster a sense of community and belonging, essential for the social development of students with Down syndrome. When students engage in collaborative activities, they not only learn academic content but also develop critical social skills and relationships that enhance their overall well-being.

Finally, engaging families as partners in the educational process creates a supportive ecosystem for students. Research by Barlow et al. (2020) emphasizes that strong home-school connections significantly contribute to improved student outcomes. When families are involved, they can provide insights that inform instructional practices, reinforcing learning at home and ensuring a consistent support network for the child.

In conclusion, the application of Carl Rogers' humanistic learning theory to the education of students with Down syndrome is not just beneficial but necessary for fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment. By prioritizing emotional support, individualized instruction, collaborative opportunities, and family engagement, educators can help students with Down syndrome realize their potential, paving the way for their academic success and personal growth.

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