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A Social Status of Students with mild Learning Disabilities Educated in Different Types of Schooling

Introduction

According to Polish educational law, one of the important goals set for schools educating students with disabilities, such as special schools, integrated schools or regular schools, is social integration of special needs children with their peers (Dz.U. z 2005r. Nr 19, poz. 167 oraz Dz.U. z 2005r. Nr 19, poz. 166). Nevertheless, social integration cannot be achieved simply by placing a child in one class together with his/her non-disabled classmates. It is rather a result of many actions aimed at accepting a child with disabilities as an important and willingly invited participant in social group activities, as a member of the class.

One of the indicators of the level of social acceptance of non-disabled students by their classmates is the social status they have in the structure of an informal social group. Therefore it is very important to identify what sociometric status disabled students have in their classes.

The paper presents results of research focused on comparative analysis of the social status achieved by mildly intellectually disabled students in their classes in three educational settings: special schools, integrated classes and regular schools. The findings may help to evaluate the effectiveness of activities focused on social integration of disabled students in an informal social group as well as to compare the effects achieved in different types of schools in this area.

Method

The aim of the survey discussed in this paper was to make a comparative analysis of the social status that students with mild learning disabilities have in different types of educational settings: special school classes, integrated classes and regular classes.

Participants

The study was carried out in the academic year 2004/2005, in 57 primary schools: 4 special schools, 18 regular schools with integrated classes and 35 regular schools. The research group consisted of both disabled and non-disabled students of selected classes, but social status was identified only for 122 students with mild learning disabilities, who didn't display any additional disabilities. 42 of them attended special schools, 40-integrated classes and 40 regular classes.

The respondents were boys 58%, girls 42%. The study sample consisted of first, second and third grade students. Most of respondents were third grade students (40.16%), while pupils in grade I (29.51%) and II (30.33%) were almost equally represented in the study sample.

Instruments and procedure

Data gathering was performed using sociometric tests. The results of the tests allowed the author to identify the social status of students with mild learning disabilities in different educational settings. In the case of students educated in special schools their teachers were asked to make judgments about social status of the disabled children. The sociometric questionnaire contained four nomination-procedure questions: two

concerning positive nomination and two- negative nomination. Students were asked to indicate which three classmates they would and which three they would not like to play with during recess (social attractiveness criteria), which three classmates they would and which three they would not cooperate with in the task assigned by a teacher (criteria of nomination to accomplish a common task).

To assess students' sociometric status, a method developed by J.D. Coie, K.A. Dodge, and H. Coppotelli (1982) was used. Students were categorized into one of four sociometric status group: popular, controversial, neglected, or rejected. Moreover, chi-square test were used to determine the relationship between students' sociometric status and the type of school they attended.

Results

Sociometric status

To survey the level of social acceptance of students with mild learning disabilities educated in three different educational settings, social statuses of respondents attending special school classes (S), integrated classes (I) and regular classes (R) were identified and compared. Table 1 and chart 1 present the results of this comparison.

Table 1. Distribution of students in different educational settings by social status

Social status categories	Types of educational settings					
	Special school (N=42=100%)		Integrated class (N=40=100%)		Regular class (N=40=100%)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
popular	11	26.2				
average	24	57.1	22	55	19	47.5
controversial	4	9.5	3	7.5	1	2.5
neglected	1	2.4	9	22.5	8	20
rejected	2	4.8	6	15	12	30
Test χ^2	$\chi^2=37727$, p= .000					
V Cramera	V= .393, p= .000					

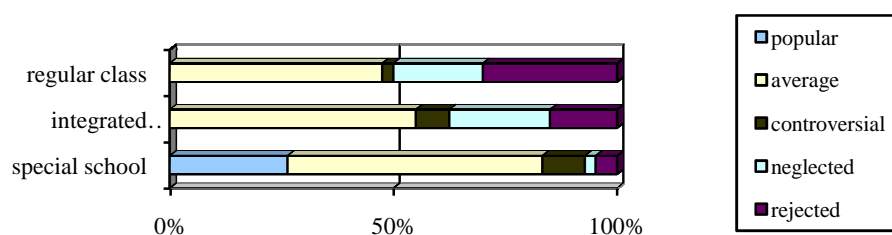


Chart 1. Distribution of students in different educational settings by social status

Special education. As can be seen from the chart, in the group of special education students all categories of sociometric status were represented. However, most of them were identified as average (57.1%), as much as 26.2% were considered as popular and 9.5% as controversial. Moreover, only a few were nominated as rejected (4.8%) and even less as neglected (2.4%). From the figures it is apparent that the social status of students with mild learning disabilities educated in special settings seems to be favorable. In comparison with the

results of regular education students, the rate of students nominated as popular and controversial is relatively high, while the rate of students identified as rejected and neglected relatively low. According to J.D. Coie, K.A. Dodge, and H. Coppotelli (1982) popular children are the most accepted by their classmates, while controversial ones have a highest impact on a group.

General education. The data would seem to suggest that results of students educated in integrated classes and results of students educated in regular classes are similar. However, most of them were nominated as average (I=55%, R=47.5%), but none of regular and integrated classes students was identified as popular. Furthermore, the rate of students nominated as rejected and neglected is relatively high. In the group of regular education students as many as 30% of respondents were judged as rejected, and 20% as neglected. The results of respondents attending integrated classes show slightly different proportions as 22.5% of pupils were nominated as isolated, while 15% were identified as rejected. From these data we can assume that the social status of students with mild learning disabilities educated in integrated and regular classes is not favorable. None of them was identified as popular, while a relatively high rate of respondents were nominated as neglected and rejected.

The results described above are similar to findings of previous studies held by Polish researchers in respect of the sociometric status of students with learning disabilities (J.Bąbka 2001, J. Lipińska-Lokś 2004, A.Nowicka i H.Ochonczenko 2004, G.Wiącek 2005). Their results indicate that the social –emotional status of intellectually disabled pupils educated together with their non-disabled peers is highly unfavorable. Further analysis shows that in this population the rate of rejected and neglected students is very high, and in some cases reached even as much as 80% of the study sample. Moreover, results of these pupils are usually the lowest in comparison with results of students with other kinds of disabilities (M.Chodkowska 2004). These children are often isolated and rejected by their non-disabled peers, their relationships with them are usually poor and disturbed. Furthermore, relatively higher levels of social adjustment disorders in the population of intellectually disabled children results in low social integrity of a group.

Comparative analysis. Further analysis revealed that the social status of intellectually disabled students educated in segregated settings was significantly higher than the social status of students educated in integrated or regular classes ($\chi^2=37727$, $p= .000$). Only students of special schools were nominated as popular. Moreover, taking into consideration the whole study sample, they constitute half of the population of controversial pupils and represent a relatively low rate of neglected and rejected members of a group. In contrast to their results, none of the integrated or regular class students was nominated as popular, while a relatively high rate of them were judged as neglected and rejected.

Discussion

The phenomenon of a low social status of students with learning disabilities can be explained in different ways. N.L. Frederickson and A.F. Furnham (2004) try to find an explanation of this problem in social exchange theory. According to this theory students are nominated as rejected because they display high cost and low benefit behaviors, due to their disruptive activities, a tendency to be seeking help and starting fights.

Another theory explaining low social status of intellectually disabled children is the J.D. Coie's (1990, M. Margalit 1994) model of peer rejection, which is based on the assumption that there are two sources of peer rejection: the behavior of a child and the dynamics of the group. Taking into consideration the first source, Coie states that children's social difficulties seems to be caused by the way they interpret specific social situations and their emotional reactions and acquired strategies for dealing with these situations. Similar to Coie's views, H.

Goethe (1995) admits that the main reasons for the lack of acceptance of intellectually disabled students are their aggressive behavior and difficulties in understanding social contexts of interaction. Furthermore, J.A. Kistner, D. Gatlin (1989) points at a correlation between nominating students with learning disabilities as rejected and their withdrawal, inattentive and overactive behaviors.

When group dynamics are taken into account, J. Coie states that the conceptualized opinion about a child may both affect the behavior of rejected children and affect the perceptions and behaviors of the group members toward them.

T.W. Farmer, R. Pearl, R.M. Van Hacker (1996) were looking for explanations of peer rejection in the rules of creating the social group structure. They pointed at the principle of likelihood as an important criteria of choosing a partner for social interaction. In regular class placements, students with disabilities are usually grouped with non-disabled students, some of which display characteristics similar to their own, while many are quite different from them. Because children have a tendency to nominate similar partners of interaction, they may more often choose these displaying antisocial behavior, as many students with learning disabilities have a proclivity for different kinds of behavioral disorders. Therefore, students with disabilities are at risk of more likely associating with peers displaying similar negative behavior, which consequently can negatively influence their social development.

The significant difference between the social status of special school students and the social status of these educated in integrated and regular settings can be also explained in different ways. Firstly, it may be caused by different rules of grouping children in these settings. In segregated schools, students with mild learning disabilities are usually placed together with classmates with the same or lower (moderate) level of learning disability. Their social statuses in these groups are usually average or popular, as they seem to be attractive partners for classmates with similar or lower level of intelligence. On the contrary, mildly intellectually disabled students of integrated or regular classes are placed in the same group with non-disabled classmates. Due to their intellectual deficits and behavioral disorders, they are usually consider as not attractive partners both for social as well as task-oriented interactions.

Conclusion

The main conclusion from this study is that the mildly mentally disabled students of integrated and regular classes, seem to be unattractive partners for their non-disabled peers both in social as well as in task-oriented interactions. Their social statuses are unfavourable. On the contrary, significantly higher social status is achieved by their intellectually disabled peers educated in segregated settings. Therefore, it is necessary to take actions focused on improving the social status of students educated in integrated and regular settings. As their low social status seems to be caused by difficulties in understanding social contexts of interaction, and antisocial behaviour, M.Chodkowska (2001) suggests introducing social skills training and teaching classmates how to react to their negative behaviour.

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