A Characterisation of Out of Classroom Social Interactions of Students with Intellectual Disabilities at a Rural Day School in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The out of classroom activities of six pupils with intellectual disabilities attending a special class at a rural primary school were observed on four days of a week. The study found the children engaged more in solitary play than in play with peers. Children interacting with another were more likely to be engaged in pro social behaviour with a younger child. No same sex preferences for out of classroom social interaction partners were established. The study concludes that to make children with intellectual disabilities more acceptable to their peers there is need to research into issues affecting peer perceptions which contribute to the isolation of children with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities, children’s play, social behaviours, isolation

Introduction

The following is a report on the nature of social interactions of children with intellectual disabilities attending a special class at a large rural day primary school in Zimbabwe. The interactions were observed when the children were out of their classroom on the school playgrounds. The decision to observe the children’s interactions on the school’s playground was influenced by the opportunities available thereon for children with intellectual disabilities to learn and practice social skills which may make them more acceptable to their peers without disabilities.

The special class which the observed children attended was established according to Zimbabwe Policy Circular 36 of 9 October 1990. The policy is concerned with the provision of special needs education in Zimbabwean schools. The policy circular preserves the continuum of placements for children with special educational needs. In making available a range of alternative provisions for the children with various special educational needs the policy provides evidence that special needs education in Zimbabwe follows what Hallahan and Kauffmann (1994) have described as educational programming that is built on traditional assumptions of what service delivery options should be available. Retention of segregated classrooms can be seen as an attempt to guarantee the benefits accruing from an appropriate curriculum formulated for specific
children. It enables what Wang (2009) has described as an education that is adapted to the needs children and based on a correct conceptualisation of their disabilities.

Tredgold (1937) shows that it has long been recognised in the literature that there is a negative relationship between intellectual disabilities and social skills. La Greca (2006) has implicated social skill deficits with displays of interpersonal difficulties. Problems with social skills have also been linked to attention deficit disorders, aggressive and antisocial behaviour, challenging behaviour, social isolation and withdrawal (Chung, Reavis, Mosconi et al 2007).

Roberts and Zubrick (1992) agree that children with intellectual disabilities have difficulty entering into and maintaining age appropriate social relationships with peers without intellectual disabilities. Gresham (1982) believed that deficits in social skills may result in rejection of children with disabilities by peers without disability. In agreement Bellanti and Karen (2000) indicated a low peer acceptance of children with low cognitive ability.

Notwithstanding what Wang (2009) has said concerning the provision of education that is designed to meet the specific needs of children with disabilities at the school where the observations were carried out there was little useful guidance given in the assessment report used to place children in the special classes as to the specific needs of the children in terms of skills needing to be taught.

Casey, Jones, Kugler and Watkins (1988) suggested that it takes more than physical contact to obtain changes in social interaction. This makes it imperative for teachers to closely interrogate matters related to the social skill deficits of children with intellectual disabilities in order to identify issues that need to be addressed to enable children to join ongoing groups of their peers.

The researcher sought to obtain a vignette of the out of classroom interactions of children with intellectual disabilities attending a special class at the rural day primary school where this study was carried out. No generalisations were intended or appropriate. The results would be useful in illuminating the nature of interactions at this specific school for the specific children and could be used to indicate a direction in the designing of interventions to benefit the children.

At the school where the observations were done each of the classes was allocated a separate classroom in which they would have their lessons the whole school day. During the school day the time available for pupil attending different classes to engage in pupil initiated social interactions was break time and lunch time. On Tuesdays and Thursdays pupils attending regular classes had a further chance of social interaction in the afternoon from two to four o’clock during time scheduled for sports. The children attending the special class did not have this opportunity as their school day came to an end after lunch when they were released to go home.

Organisational arrangements related to the special class from which the observed children were drawn fell far short of those which may be deemed sufficient to warrant regard as fully
inclusive. The arrangements leant towards what Hallahan and Kauffmann (1997) designated as “Least Physically Integrated” placements. Teaching of the children with intellectual disabilities was done in a self-contained classroom. Primary responsibility for the special class children’s education belonged to the specialist teacher. The specialist teacher focused on functional numeracy and literacy and made little effort to follow the regular curriculum. The children who attended special class spent their typical school day in their own classroom with little opportunity to interact with those from other classes. There seemed little consideration given to enabling the children attending the special class to contribute to activities going on at age and grade level or to give opportunity for the formation of friendships with age mates in spite of the accepted view that friendships enable increased social interactions.

Three concerns regarding the out of classroom social interactions of the children were relevant to this study. First, the researcher sought to establish the ratio of time spent by the children in interactions. The researcher also sought to examine specific behaviours and make comparisons of the quantity of pro-social and antisocial behaviours. Last, the sex and comparative age of the interaction partners were to be established.

Method

The researcher adopted the small-N case study research design. This was influenced by the fact that at the school where this study was carried out only a few students with intellectual disabilities are enrolled.

Support exists in the literature for observing children’s behaviour in natural environments. Merrell (2001) suggests that behavioural observation be a method of choice when assessing social skills because data on children’s behaviour collected in that manner has high ecological validity.

The present researcher was mindful of the views of Patterson (2008) who noted three components of behaviour observation. First, behaviour was recorded at the time of occurrence in the natural setting. Second, observers were trained to be objective. Last, observers used an instrument where behaviours were described explicitly so as to require minimum subjective inferences in interpreting the activities.

The school had a total enrolment of one thousand and fifty nine (1059) pupils. All the school children took the morning break and lunch break at the same time. Break time and lunch time were spent on the school’s sports fields.

There were thirty five regular education classes and one special class at the school were the study was carried out. The thirty five regular classes were organised into five mixed ability streams of grades one to seven. All regular classes were largely homogeneous in terms of age. Ten mixed age and mixed grade children attended the special class at the time the observations were done. The ages of children in the special class ranged from eight to fifteen.
When the observations were done two teachers taught the special class. One was the full time class teacher with both regular education and special needs education teaching credentials. The other was a student teacher on specialist teacher training. The student was himself a qualified regular education teacher who was in the seventh week of the practical attachment component of his specialist training course. The two alternated teaching roles in the classroom with one taking primary teaching responsibility and the other teacher aide duties during successive subject periods during the school day. Such being the case the researcher judged that both the full time special class teacher and the student teacher were sufficiently part of the scene that they could carry out unobtrusive recording of children’s activities.

The six children with intellectual disabilities aged 8 to 12 whose out of classroom interactions are the subject of this report were randomly selected from the ten children who attended the special class in the manner detailed below. Names of the ten children in the special class were written on pieces of paper which had been cut to a size of two centimetres by four centimetres. The pieces of paper were placed into an empty chalk box. Another ten pieces of paper cut to the same size as the first had the numbers one to ten written on them and placed in another box. The two teachers teaching the special class each took one of the boxes, gave it a good shake and held it above eye level. The teachers then took turns each drawing a piece of paper from the others box. The first paper drawn was from the box with numbers. This was followed by drawing from the box with names of children. In this manner names of children were matched to numbers. A name was allocated a number which had been drawn immediately before it. This was repeated until all the names of the children were drawn. Six children whose names were the first to be drawn out the box were chosen for observations. The four children whose names were drawn last were the children whose out of classroom interactions were observed during observer training.

An observation schedule was first prepared in readiness for the actual observations. The six children were randomly allocated five minute observation slots during midmorning and lunch breaks. This was done by having a blank table covering all the available observation slots filled by drawing the numbers of the children who had been selected to the sample from a box which again was held above eye level. The numbers were written from top to bottom as they were drawn for each of the observation period. Upon completion of scheduling for one observation period the next was done. The child whose number was written first would be observed first followed by the one immediately below until the end of the observation period. The resultant observation schedule was strictly followed during the observation periods.
Table 1. Observation Schedule Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Number</th>
<th>Monday Break</th>
<th>Monday Lunch</th>
<th>Tuesday Break</th>
<th>Tuesday Lunch</th>
<th>Wednesday Break</th>
<th>Wednesday Lunch</th>
<th>Thursday Break</th>
<th>Thursday Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Friday was not designated as an observation day as it would not have been possible to make observations during the lunch period as school was dismissed early before lunch.

Training of observers was done over two days. On the first day researcher first went over the observation instrument with the co observers describing and discussing each variable that would need to be recorded. This was done on a Tuesday after school. The next day two children were allocated five minute slots and observed by both teachers during morning break. The teachers observed each of the two children at the same time. No discussion was done during the observation. After the observation inter observer correlation was computed and found to be 0.67. Categories which had been coded differently were reviewed in discussion done during lunch hour of the same day. The observation procedure was repeated on Thursday morning break with the other two children. Calculation of inter observer agreement on the second day returned a percentage agreement of 0.81.

The two teachers did the observations which they recorded for this report on alternate days. The full time class teacher observed and recorded on Monday and Wednesday. The observations on the other two days were carried out by the student teacher.

Five minutes were allocated per child because it was anticipated that some time would be needed to follow and find the child on the playground. Actual observation of the child was done for twenty seconds immediately the child was found in the allocated five minute observation slot. If a child was found outside the allocated five minute slot the recorder would not disregard the interactions the child was involved in but would use them to more firmly establish the context of the child’s interaction. However the specific behaviour category that would be recorded would be that which occurred and was dominant in the first twenty seconds of the allocated five minute slot.

Observations were recorded on six prepared forms. All observations for one child were done on one form. On all the forms the names age and sex were pre-recorded. The date and period of observing was also pre-recorded. The recording forms used during an observation period were arranged on a clipboard in the order they appeared on the observation schedule.
A recording form had a total of twenty four columns that were used for recording children’s interactions. In the first six the position of the child in relation to others who were nearest in terms of distance was to be recorded. This was deemed the general situation context. The general situation contexts were as given in Figure 1. The observer placed checks in the column which best described the situation context the child was observed in. A further twelve columns were used to record the specific activity categories the child was engaged in. The twelve activity categories were as given in Table 2. Although the specific activity categories were conceptually broad consensus had been reached during observer training as to the meaning of the activity categories given on the form. Specific behaviour examples for each activity category were taken from the Microsoft Word thesaurus that comes with Windows 7. The last six columns of the recording forms were used to record the details of any partner the target child was found to be interacting with. Recording was done when the child was in the observer’s line of vision. Sufficient distance was kept from the child to avoid distracting the target child’s attention.

Results

Figure 1. General Situation Contexts In Which Behaviours Were Observed

Whereas it would seem from the above that children were observed most frequently in the ‘Child Interacting’ context the picture is somewhat different when one considers that in all the other observations the children were not interacting with another child. In 69% of observations the children were not interacting with another child.
Table 2. Frequency of Specific Behaviour Observations Within Interaction Activity Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY CATEGORY</th>
<th>BEHAVIOUR EXAMPLES</th>
<th>NUMBER OF OBSERVATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competing</td>
<td>Challenging, contending, contesting</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperating</td>
<td>Obliging, accommodating</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demanding</td>
<td>Insisting, giving orders</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrupting</td>
<td>Being unruly, upsetting, making trouble</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring</td>
<td>Searching, investigating, studying</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping</td>
<td>Lending a hand (without evidence of knowing what it is about)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitating</td>
<td>Mimicking, duplicating, copying</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiating</td>
<td>Starting, instigating a behaviour sequence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading</td>
<td>Controlling, directing</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating</td>
<td>Showing, explaining</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating</td>
<td>Contributing and turn taking in an involved manner</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The twelve activity categories were divided into two groups. The one group was made up of supportive prosocial activities and the other of activities which indicate conflict and are antisocial. The antisocial group of activity categories comprised three which included competing, demanding and disrupting. The other eight made up the pro social group. There was a higher mean score 8.875 for the pro social activities to a mean score 4 for the antisocial activities.

![Figure 2. Other Person Child Was Interacting With.](image-url)

- **Number of other persons child observed interacting with**
  - During Lunch Break
  - During Mid Morning Break

**Sex and comparative age of person child was observed interacting with**
Discussion

Decisions to open special classes at regular schools have been informed by the assumed benefits derived when children with intellectual disabilities attend regular school. The benefits accrue to both children with disabilities and those without. On one hand children with disabilities have more opportunities to interact with their peers who model appropriate behaviour. This is understood to help children with disabilities to understand the importance of social rules, responsibilities and roles. On the other hand children without disabilities have an opportunity to “test, reject, modify or strengthen the ideas (on disability) that they obtained from other sources” (Vlachou 1993). For these benefits to be realised the children in integrated settings must be interacting.

It will however be recalled that children were observed more when they were not in interacting situation contexts than they were in the child interacting situation context. This becomes of particularly poignant concern when one considers Lavoie’s (2005) view that children who are often isolated do not practice behaviours that result in mastery of social skill competencies. While it is not the intention to arrive at a position where one declares that the children were either isolated by their peers or withdrew Lavoie’s (2005) view remains relevant to the findings as the children were observed in contexts where they could not practice social skills more often than they were in contexts where they could practice those skills.

Cobb (2001) has put it that children who spend time in solitary play are neglected. Children who have not mastered social skills are not likely to be accepted by their peers. Acceptance by peers is likely to result in friendships. Friendships provide the context in which the child with disabilities is free and safe enough to learn to solve social problems, predict consequences, choose socially accepted behaviours, learn to change and grow.

This study found that interacting children with intellectual disabilities were more often engaged in pro social than in antisocial activities. This finding and the former resonate with Cobb’s (2001) assertion that children with disabilities spend time in solitary play despite the numerous overtures they make to make friends. Cobb (2001) further puts it that peers may reject some children not in response to momentary exchanges but to a history of interactions or reputation. Siperstein, Leffert and Widaman (1996) found that not only a child’s behaviour but also peers perception of that behaviour have an influence on whether a child is accepted or rejected.

Lewis et al (1998) found that older children played in same sex groups more than younger children. Fabes et al (2003) report that although dyadic play with the other sex is rare about a quarter of interactions are with mixed sex groups. The reader will note however that the same sex play preferences given in the literature were not borne out in the present small study of children with intellectual disabilities. Rather than sex, age of the playmate seems to be a more critical variable at this school. In twenty seven cases the observed children were playing with younger children compared with only three cases when the children were observed playing with older children. In the light of the finding by Boulton (1991) that play partners among 8 to
11 year olds engaged in rough and tumble play were closely matched it would be interesting to identify the dimensions along which children who were interacting could be matched on.

Conclusion

This study found children with intellectual disabilities were almost twice as likely not to be interacting with other children than they were to be interacting. In instances when the children were found to be interacting they were likely to be engaged in pro social activities. The need for peer friendships between children with disabilities and those without that has been established in the literature both as a human rights issue and as a desirable variable in pedagogy. The need to foster friendships between children makes it imperative that further research to identify specific variables affecting perceptions which contribute to the isolation of children with intellectual disabilities be carried out. The authors propose that in carrying out the research the teachers of children be involved as this will help them to focus on the issues involved. Such research is likely to enable effective intervention at school level.

References


