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Increasing Sociability Towards Students With Disabilities Through Interaction and Education

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Increasing Sociability Towards
Students With Disabilities
Through Interaction and Education
Ann Fleshman
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Date of approval May 4, 1994

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Abstract

A t-test correlational design was used to test the improvement of regular education children's attitudes toward children with disabilities. Seventy-four sixth grade students participated in the study involving a pre-test and a post-test administration of the Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes Toward Children with Handicaps scale. The first of two dimensions used to improve attitudes involved education of the nondisabled group. The 74 students participated in role play activities as well as lecture during the first dimension. Interaction between children with disabilities and the regular sixth grade class comprised the second area of the study. Children played together and helped each other in a friendly, neutral area. Sociability increased between the two groups and attitudes in general improved between the two populations.

Acknowledgements

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Increasing Sociability Towards Students
With Disabilities Through Interaction and Education

A child diagnosed as a special needs individual either as a newborn, a toddler, or in his/her school-age years undergoes what appears to be a life-long stigma by peers. Harlan Hahn (1988) explains this prejudice as falling into two areas of anxiety. The first is anxiety occurring because the disabled person's appearance is unappealing. The second type of anxiety suggests that the sight of a disability only reminds a person that the same thing could have happened to him/her (Hahn, 1988).

Hazzard (1983) studied children's disability-related attitudes in grades 3 through 6. She found that a disabled person seemed to be viewed by children as someone who deserves pity and who is a helpless individual (Hazzard, 1983). The problem that exists may be confusion in the mind of the nonhandicapped child about disabling conditions. Furthermore, opportunities to interact as a team member (i.e., a nondisabled child paired with a disabled child) are infrequent in the majority of public school systems.

Studies have shown that the frequency of interaction between disabled and nondisabled children is positively correlated with the level of understanding the nondisabled population has of the child with a disability.

Thus, approaches to providing nondisabled students with a better understanding of their peers with disabilities appear to be worthy of investigation. As noted by Voeltz (1980):

Even if researchers were to document that nonhandicapped children exhibit an intolerance for their handicapped peers... this should posit a challenge to educators rather than a limitation. Surely such behavior of presumably "normal" children is as susceptible to change as the behavior of severely handicapped children, now apparently acquiring skills once thought unattainable. (p. 463)

Review of the Literature

The ultimate goal of attitudinal research is to discover the best method of mainstreaming students with disabilities with nondisabled students in a supportive, friendly atmosphere. Authors such as Drake (1977) tend

to agree that when nondisabled children understand the cause and consequences of a disability, they will treat children with disabilities as they would anyone else.

Goodman researched how disabilities are perceived in younger children (1989). He found that when young children are questioned as to what images the term handicapped evokes, often they are not positive character traits. The young tend to think an individual with a disability requires a wheelchair, has noticeable facial deformities, dresses in an unusual fashion different from peers, talks oddly, and basically looks funny.

The stigma of a disability generally fades very little even into adulthood. Stevens, Kinney, and McNeer (1986) studied the older population's reaction to individuals with disabilities in an accommodative housing setting. The common reactions found toward the disabled were discomfort and avoidance. Nondisabled people seldom interact with the disabled throughout life. In studying how to change a child's perception of children with disabilities, Jones, Sowell, Jones, and Butler (1981) found that by using a planned program of simulation, interviews, films, and discussions,

children's perceptions became more positive. This study involved students aged 6 to 12, and used 5 hours of activity and discussion to reach the desired goal.

Triandis (1971) proposed a three component model of attitudes which were used in the Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes Toward Children with Handicaps (CATCH) scale. The three areas in this model include: (a) an affective component involving feelings toward disabled children; (b) a behavioral intent dimension which involves statements of what a child would do with a disabled child; and (c) a cognitive component involving verbal statements of belief about disabled children (Ostrom, 1969; Triandis, 1974). Rosenbaum, Armstrong, and King (1986) have structured the CATCH questionnaire to leave the interpretation of the term handicapped up to the student's best understanding. Although commercials, advertisements, and television shows seem to portray disabled persons more often than ever before, there is still a lack of understanding about people with disabilities in the young child's mind. Hopefully, a better understanding of disabled individuals brought about at an early age will decrease negative stereotypes from the beginning.

Strategies to integrate children with and without disabilities in public schools have attempted to create more positive attitudes in the nondisabled population at an earlier age with the intent of avoiding stereotyping. Unfortunately, integration alone has not proven to be successful (Martin, 1974).

Experimenters have also studied the effects of providing play interactions between nondisabled children and children with autism with no better understanding between the two groups of children after the study was completed (McHale & Simeonson, 1980). A more complex method of social integration early in school is a possible solution to the problem.

Researchers agree that in order for children with disabilities to interact successfully they must be exposed to a range of interaction experiences. Strain, Shores, and Kerr (1976) found that integrating students with disabilities into regular classrooms does indeed improve their sociability. If the child with a disability has a pleasing experience when dealing with children different than him or herself, he/she is more likely to attempt a social integration at a later time in other situations (Kazdin, 1981).

While studying the social behavior between children with disabilities and nondisabled children, Strain (1983) discovered that disabled children will exhibit a higher frequency of social behavior toward the nondisabled if given several opportunities to play together and work as partners on projects than if not given such opportunities. Simpson (1980) suggests that researchers working with nondisabled children need to include the following two elements to see a significant change: (a) realistic information regarding individual differences, and (b) controlled positive experiences with handicapped students. We assume in this study that the same effect will occur with nondisabled students given an education and ample structured opportunities to interact.

Mainstreaming can be defined as integrating students with disabilities into general education classes (Hallahan & Kaufman, 1988). The concept of mainstreaming seems to be quite promising on paper, but in reality it can mean that the child with a disability is merely sitting in a regular classroom without becoming an active member of the class. Educating mainstreamed children with disabilities creates an

opportunity for integration, but it offers little assurance that real integration will occur (Hoben, 1980). When the child with a disability is accepted by his/her peers in a social capacity, it is assumed that mainstreaming is effective. The likelihood that disabled children will feel positive about themselves and will become involved in larger peer groups increases with each positive experience (Gottlieb, 1980).

Statement of the Problem

A special needs child can be defined as one who receives care by a professional for any of numerous disabling conditions. The distinguishing factor in this study is the fact that the child is separated from his or her peers for instruction. For the purpose of this study, learning disabilities will not be addressed as a disabling condition due to the lack of noticeable physical impairment. Rather, children with noticeable physical disabilities will be the focus of this study. These will include people with visual impairments, a person who uses a wheelchair, and a deaf person.

By middle school age, children may have developed negative attitudes toward children with apparent

physical impairments. Studies to date have focused on either education or social interaction but not both. For this reason a combination of the two factors will be used in this study to determine whether nondisabled children's attitudes toward those with disabilities change over time.

Statement of the Hypothesis

The literature suggests a need for the combination of education and social integration to promote positive attitudes toward children with disabilities. It is hypothesized that young children between the ages of 11-0 and 12-0 years exposed to a training period including both education about disabilities and structured opportunities to interact with children having disabilities will exhibit more positive attitudes toward children with disabilities at the end of the training period.

Methods

Subjects

The sample for this study included 74 students between the ages of 11-0 and 12-0 currently enrolled in regular sixth grade classes. Subjects included both male and female participants from differing ethnic backgrounds in a predominantly lower to middle class city in Western Virginia. Sixth-graders were the chosen subjects primarily because separation into different classes becomes more apparent to the rising teenager. This study hypothesized that any significant attitude change toward the special needs child must include an intervention at an early age to insure positive changes.

Instrument

The Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes Toward Children with Handicaps (CATCH) scale was used as a pre and posttest measurement. The CATCH scale was designed for children between the ages of 9 and 13. Statements are worded to apply to each child's own experiences. (See Appendix A)

Using the three component model of attitudes as a basis for developing the CATCH scale, Rosenbaum,

Armstrong, and King (1986) listed 36 statements with 12 items comprising each component (i.e., affective, behavioral, and cognitive). The items are in random order and scored by using a 5-point Likert scale with 180 representing the highest score possible.

Evidence of the reliability of the CATCH includes a total coefficient alpha of .90 for 304 children from four different schools (Rosenbaum, et. al., 1986). A test-retest reliability shows total mean scores to be 29.1 with the first administration and 26.5 during retesting.

Experimental Design

Subjects were tested before and after the training period using the CATCH scale. Answers were scored using the 5-point Likert scale with high scores reflecting a more positive attitude and low scores reflecting a less positive attitude toward children with disabilities.

Procedure

First, permission to conduct research was obtained from the office of research within the school division. Once this permission was obtained all sixth grade students in the designated classrooms received a

parental consent form before participating in the study (See Appendix A). Parents were assured that participation for their child was voluntary and that no information identifying their child would be used in this research study. Students who had permission to take part were assigned a number by the teacher corresponding to the grade book. The teacher called out the name of the student corresponding to the number written on the questionnaire before the pretest. All students were given the same introduction before answering any questions. The questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to administer.

When all forms were returned, the experimenter introduced herself to the class and explained that the class would be learning about people with disabilities. The students were told that they would participate in group discussions, play some games, and be given answers to any questions that may come up during the next week.

Day 1

1. The researcher administered the CATCH.
2. The researcher wrote the word **disability** on the blackboard.

3. Students named types of disabilities and they were written on the blackboard.
4. Examples of disabilities not previously mentioned were added by the researcher.
5. A brief definition of disabled people was stated by the researcher- One who has a physical or mental problem which makes it hard for him/her to learn, to work, or to get along with others.
6. The students learned about physical disabilities.
7. Students were told to form a group of approximately 6 students.
8. One group of students walked with crutches and used wheelchairs while other students discussed difficulties they would have in various circumstances.
9. Another group of student's fingers were tied together and their thumbs tied to palm of non-dominant hands. Students were asked to write their name and address.
10. The third group placed their tongue on the roof of mouth and gave a message while the

whole group listened.

11. Students in this group simulated vision problems by wearing wax paper and taped masks.
12. The students in group 5 performed various duties such as walking a straight line while looking through a paper towel holder.
13. The last group of students worked in pairs performing the help walk. Two students walked around the room together while one guided and the other student used the cane.

Day 2

The second group of students performed the same activities as the students had the previous day.

Day 3

Teachers facilitated the interaction of sixth graders with disabled students in their school.

Day 4

Students were administered the CATCH scale again.

Data Analysis

A 5-point Likert scale with values ranging from 0 (i.e., strongly disagree) to 4 (i.e., strongly agree) was used to score the CATCH questionnaire. Negatively worded items were inversely coded. Total scores were

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derived by summing items, dividing sums by the number of items, and multiplying by 10. A high score represented a more positive attitude toward children with disabilities.

Results

Seventy-seven students took the pretest of the CATCH scale and 76 students took the posttest. The results are based upon the 74 sixth graders who were able to complete both pre and post tests along with the interaction component of the study. Sixth graders participating were enrolled in one of the four sixth grade classrooms and were broken into six groups for administration of the survey.

Of the 74 students who completed the study, 36 had no exposure to people with disabilities prior to the study. The remaining 38 students fell into two different categories of exposure to people with disabilities. One of the two categories was a friend with a disability. Twenty-one of the students answered the survey that they had a friend with a disability whether the person attended their school or not. The second category comprised 17 students who stated they knew a relative with a disability. Higher scores on both the pre and post tests were exhibited by students who had had some form of previous exposure to people with disabilities.

The pretest scores were computed for 77 students who completed the survey. The mean for the pretest was 24.5 with a standard deviation of 4.33. For the posttest, scores were obtained from 76 students with a mean of 26.3 and a standard deviation of 4.36.

Only those students who participated in all aspects of the research (i.e., pre and post tests, education, and interaction) are included in the correlational t-test (See Appendix B). Scores for 74 students met this criteria, the t value between the pre and post test was significant (i.e., -4.53) at the .0001 level with a standard error of .403.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether attitudes toward people with disabilities improved with education and intervention. If only one child demonstrated improvement in his/her post-test score, then this researcher feels that the study was worth the time and effort. Many of the students noted on their Questionnaire that they know someone with a disability, although one student clarified the disability as being pregnant. Students are exposed to peers with disabilities more frequently in the media and through the inclusion movement beginning in school systems. These sixth graders were both knowledgeable and curious during a question and answer period. It was encouraging to notice that students did not refer to people as being handicapped, but rather as being disabled.

One of the criticisms with this study is that participation in the research project's second component (i.e., intervention with children with disabilities) was not completed as planned. During the administration of the educational aspect of the study, teachers were unable to coordinate a suitable time to

visit special education classrooms. To complete the project, arrangements were made for each sixth grade teacher to schedule a time in the day for their students to visit and interact with children with disabilities. The researcher was unable to oversee the activities. It must be noted that intervention activities are referred to only by what the researcher has been told.

The activities requiring interaction among the sixth graders and their disabled peers were varied. For example special educators informed the regular classroom students of special equipment around the room and allowed the nondisabled students to help with various activities. Such activities included helping the children with disabilities prepare for lunch. The sixth graders aided in pushing wheelchairs, carrying lunches, and helping with silverware or drinks. Another group of sixth graders participated in physical education time. Children with disabilities demonstrated how to use their special gym equipment and later the sixth graders joined in a game using the special equipment.

Testing itself did not take place over several weeks as originally planned, but instead over the course of two sessions involving education and the final interaction session which was done independently of the researcher as noted. A test of this nature assumes that all participants have answered the questions honestly and to the best of their ability.

In conclusion, more research needs to be done with younger students. Prejudice may begin at an earlier age than is assumed. Activities designed to socialize nondisabled children with disabled children should take place in the school system, beginning in kindergarten if possible. Children are clearly curious about people who are physically different and they need to know the reasons these differences occur. Also, more structured activities should be planned collectively with special educators and regular classroom teachers. Socialization between the two groups can begin in natural settings with games and activities which help children with and without disabilities work together. Teachers need to be aware that the benefits are endless for both groups of children.

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Appendix A:

Permission Letter

Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes Toward

Children With Handicaps Scale

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Your child has been selected to participate in a study involving children with disabilities. The faculty at James Madison Middle School and Longwood College Ethics Committee have approved a project to heighten disabilities awareness among pre-teenage children.

The students will be able to express feelings about people with disabilities and ask questions. Your child's name will remain anonymous throughout the study.

Please allow your student's participation by signing the appropriate line below.

Yes, allow my child to participate.

No, do not allow my child to participate.

If you have any questions feel free to contact your child's teacher.

Thank you for your cooperation.

QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

GRADE _____

11

12 13 14 15 16 17

DATE / /
month day year

18 19

1. Do you have a handicap? Yes _____ No _____

20

a) If yes, in what way are you handicapped?

21 22

2. Do you have a friend who is handicapped? Yes _____ No _____

23

a) If yes, does he/she go to your school? Yes _____ No _____

24

b) What is his/her name?

25 26 27 28

3. In the last week have you talked to or played with a child who is handicapped? Yes _____ No _____

29

4. Is anyone in your family handicapped? Yes _____ No _____

30

a) If yes, is it your:

Mother _____ Father _____ Brother/Sister _____

31 32 33

Grandparents _____ Aunt/Uncle _____ Cousin _____

34 35 36

EXAMPLES OF HOW TO FILL OUT THE FORM:

1. I enjoy talking to old people.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

2. Old people have difficulty remembering things.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS. WE JUST WANT TO KNOW YOUR IDEAS.

PLEASE DO NOT READ AHEAD.

THINK ABOUT EACH SENTENCE CAREFULLY.

1. I wouldn't worry if a handicapped child sat next to me in class.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

37

2. I would not introduce a handicapped child to my friends.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

38

3. Handicapped children can do lots of things for themselves.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

39

4. I wouldn't know what to say to a handicapped child.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

40

5. Handicapped children like to play.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

41

6. I feel sorry for handicapped children.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

42

7. I would stick up for a handicapped child who was being teased.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

43

8. Handicapped children want lots of attention from adults.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

44

9. I would invite a handicapped child to my birthday party.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

45

10. I would be afraid of a handicapped child.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

46

11. I would talk to a handicapped child I didn't know.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

47

12. Handicapped children don't like to make friends.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

48

13. I would like having a handicapped child live next door to me.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

49

14. Handicapped children feel sorry for themselves.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

50

15. I would be happy to have a handicapped child for a special friend.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

51

16. I would try to stay away from a handicapped child.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

52

17. Handicapped children are as happy as I am.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

53

18. I would not like a handicapped friend as much as my other friends.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

54

19. Handicapped children know how to behave properly.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

55

20. In class I wouldn't sit next to a handicapped child.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

56

I would be pleased if a handicapped child invited me to his house.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

57

I try not to look at someone who is handicapped.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

58

I would feel good doing a school project with a handicapped child.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

59

Handicapped children don't have much fun.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

60

I would invite a handicapped child to sleep over at my house.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

61

Being near someone who is handicapped scares me.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

62

Handicapped children are interested in lots of things.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

63

I would be embarrassed if a handicapped child invited me to his birthday party.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

64

I would tell my secrets to a handicapped child.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

65

Handicapped children are often sad.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

66

31. I would enjoy being with a handicapped child.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

67

32. I would not go to a handicapped child's house to play.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

68

33. Handicapped children can make new friends.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

69

34. I feel upset when I see a handicapped child.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

70

35. I would miss recess to keep a handicapped child company.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

71

36. Handicapped children need lots of help to do things.

STRONGLY DISAGREE DISAGREE CAN'T DECIDE AGREE STRONGLY AGREE

72

Appendix B:
Tables 1 and 2

Table 1

Means of Pre and Post Tests

Variable	Number of Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error
PRE	74	24.44	4.40	.513
POST	74	26.26	4.372	.508

Table 2

Pre/Post Correlational T-test

Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t Value	2-tail Probability
3.47	.403	-4.53	.0001

Biography

Ann Fleshman was born and raised in Roanoke, Virginia. She has completed her Bachelor of Science Degree in Psychology and is currently working on a Master's Degree in Special Education. Her course work will be complete on May 14, 1994.