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Friendship quality among children in three educational settings

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Abstract (Summary)

Heiman investigated the quality of friendship as reported by adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities in different educational settings. Results indicated significant differences between students in mainstreamed schools and those in special education schools.

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[Headnote]

This study investigates the quality of friendship as reported by adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities in different educational settings, compared with similar reports by students without disabilities. Participants included 121 students with intellectual disability in special education schools, 189 students with intellectual disability in self contained mainstreamed schools and 265 students without disability. Results indicated significant differences between these groups in their perception of friendship. Students with intellectual disability in special schools tended to have fewer friends than students with intellectual disability within mainstreamed schools, most of them meeting friends at school only. The students in special education schools responded more passively, and felt lonelier, than students in the other groups.

Friendships are found in virtually all of life's situations, and play a crucial role in the social life and adjustment of all children. Various types of friendships exist at all stages of life but their cognitive, social and emotional characteristics differ with age, gender and social norms. Friendship can be explained in terms of interaction (Clegg & Standen, 1991; Wright, 1984), a connection between people which satisfies personal needs (Weiss, 1974). Meaningful friendships between children are based on affection, mutuality the willingness to share their innermost thoughts and secrets, loyalty, openness and intimacy (Guralnick, 1992; Parker & Asher, 1993; Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997); they also involve mutual aid and trust (Parker & Asher, 1993; Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hofman, 1981). Social connections between students and their peers enrich their private world by providing emotional support, offering means of relaxation and providing opportunities to voice various frustrations. Another important aspect of friendship is those occasions during which children spend time together and encounter new experiences.

Researchers investigating the developmental perspective of friendship in preadolescent and adolescent students have found different profiles. Friendships among pre-adolescents are described in terms of shared activities (LaGreca, 1997). During the adolescent years, however, the individual develops a better understanding of other peoples' needs and has greater consideration in regard to the society in which he lives (Selman, 1991). Certain qualities of friendship, such as frankness, sensitivity, and intimate disclosure, take on increased significance for adolescents, and the centrality of friendship becomes increasingly important (LaGreca, 1997). Opportunities to share mutual experiences increase, while peer support and shared friendship may help adolescents overcome their problems.

Friendships are developed to create a network of relations which provides an answer to adolescents' need, are perceived as having a significant influence on the individual's future, and indicate a better social adjustment (Pierce, Samson, & Samson, 1991). Relationships within the network are based on openness, the sharing of secrets, mutual support, mutual trust and intimacy (Niebrzydowski, 1995).

Although integrating students with mild disabilities into mainstreamed schools is becoming regular education policy, and reform efforts have many school districts moving toward more inclusive models of service delivery for students with disability, the quality and the quantity of friendships of students with mild intellectual disabilities, has barely been investigated.

Various studies emphasise the importance of friendships and their emotional influences both on students without disability and on those with special needs (Fritz, 1990; Margalit, 1994; Wiener, 1987).

Recent research on students with learning disabilities (LD) have showed that students with LD are less liked by their peers and are more frequently rejected in inclusive settings than students without disability (Stone & LaGreca, 1990; Vaughn, Elbaum, & Schumm, 1996). LD students tend to be ignored by their classmates (Bryan, 1976), have a low social status (Taylor, Asher, & Williams, 1987), have few friends (Margalit, 1994), or remain socially isolated (Faught, Balleweg, Crow, & van den Pol, 1983; Peterson, 1982; Peterson & Haralick, 1977). Similar findings have been demonstrated in a sample consisting of preadolescent and adolescent students with behaviour disorders and LD, studying in special education settings (Margalit, 1994).

More than half the students with learning disabilities noted that a good friend is first someone who helps them, and second,

someone with whom they can have fun, a companion in entertainment activities, going to school together, playing together, talking on the phone (Margalit, 1994). Wenz-Gross and Siperstein (1997) found that students with learning problems "had less positive features in their friendships than children without learning problems" (p. 187). Adolescents with mild disabilities assessed friendship qualities as being composed of helping attitudes, devotion to and support of a friend (Camerer & Smith, 1993).

Recent research has shown that students with intellectual disability experience difficulty in establishing close, intimate relationships, as well as frustration and dissatisfaction with existing relationships (Williams & Asher, 1990). Santich & Kavangh (1997), who examined the social adaptation of students with mild intellectual disability in both partially integrated and separated classes, concluded that partial integration can have negative consequences for these students. Collaboration between students with and without intellectual disabilities was marked by low levels of cooperative play, shared decision making and roles (Siperstein, Leffert, & Wenz-Gross, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to compare the effects of inclusive and non-inclusive education systems on friendship from the perspective of students with mild intellectual disabilities, and to examine their perception of friendship quality and quantity, using students without disability (SWD) as a control group. I hypothesised that students with mild intellectual disabilities in special education schools (SE), would exhibit different patterns of meeting friends, that they would feel lonelier, have fewer friends and demonstrate a more passive response to loneliness compared to students with mild intellectual disabilities in self contained classes in mainstreamed schools (SCM).

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 575 students (304 boys and 271 girls), aged 12.2 to 15.2 years from central Israel. The students were classified into three groups: (a) 121 students with mild intellectual disabilities attending 19 classes in special education schools (SE) (age $M = 14.03$, $SD = 1.63$); (b) 189 students with mild intellectual disabilities studying in 15 self-contained classes in mainstreamed schools (SCM) (age $M = 13.37$, $SD = 1.62$); (c) 265 students studying without disability in general education schools (age $M = 13.59$, $SD = 1.74$).

Both groups of students with mild intellectual disabilities (DSM-IV, 1994) had been placed either in SCM or in SE from their first year of schooling due to academic failure and difficulties in adaptive behaviour, after having been referred to a placement committee and identified as eligible for special education services. The selection of placement was based on the results of educational diagnostic and psycho-educational assessments (including the WISC-R Intelligence Scale, 1991). Students who were placed in SE had demonstrated greater academic difficulties (especially in reading, writing and mathematics skills) than students placed in SCM schools. Because the Israeli special education law protects confidentiality, individual IQ scores were not available, but school counsellors reported ranges of approximately 55 to 75. The control of students without disability (SWD) had not undergone a psychological evaluation; the assumption is that they are of average intelligence.

Students with intellectual disabilities in SE did not participate in any mainstreamed school programs. All of their activities, academic as well as social, took place in their own school according to the special education program. Students with intellectual disabilities in SCM also required alternative instructional environments, special teaching strategies and materials which could not be provided in the general classroom. They therefore spent most of their time in the special education classroom, but were involved in all aspects of school life and participated in school activities with their nondisabled peers. For example, they had the opportunity to interact with nondisabled peers during recess, to be part of a football team, to travel on a school field trip with their own age group, etc. Students without disability (SWD) were randomly selected from the same mainstreamed elementary and middle schools, and were matched by age, gender and middle-lower socioeconomic levels with students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Instruments

Friendship Quality Questionnaire (Parker and Asher, 1990)

The Hebrew adaptation of the friendship quality questionnaire (Margalit, 1991) consisted of 6 open-ended items: (1) the definition of a good friend, (2) where the student meets with friends, (3) how the student feels when alone, (4) the reaction to loneliness, (5) the frequencies of feeling lonely, and (6) advice on how to make friends. Qualitative data analysis procedures were used to examine participants' self-perceptions and the constant comparative method to analysis was applied as a method of coding and categorizing the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to classify the categories of each item, the answers were examined by three evaluators, graduates with a second degree in special education and familiar with this type of research. Categories were defined and rules established for inclusion in each category; categories were then reviewed for completeness and to ensure compliance with the rules. The process of revising the categories continued until all categories were exhausted. Exact agreement on all the units belonging in each of the categories was found to be between 86% to 95%. The reliability score for the categories for the entire sample was 97%.

Procedures

To eliminate reading difficulties, students from both groups with mild intellectual disabilities (students in SCM and students in SE) were individually assessed in the classroom during school hours. The individual interviews were conducted by the author and lasted approximately 20 minutes for each student. The students without disability completed a written assessment in their classrooms, without their teachers being present, and were not interviewed. They accomplished their task in approximately 10 minutes.

RESULTS

This section provides the results of the analyses relating to the qualities of friendship, as perceived by SWD (students without disability), SCM (self contained mainstreamed students), and SE (special education students). The data were analysed on a personal computer using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software for Windows (SPSS, 1997). Chi-square analysis was used to compare the differences between the perceptions of the three groups. In order to compensate for multiple comparisons, the significant levels which evaluate the significance of chi-square were set at $p < .001$.

Students were asked to describe "a good friend". The results indicated four different sub categories: there was an initial agreement level between researchers of 92% for "one who helps" (e.g., if I ask for help, I can always ask my friend for it; my friend will do for me whatever I need); 87% for emotional support (e.g., she understands me; he cheers me up when I'm sad); 90% for partners to their thoughts and secrets (e.g., a good friend is someone to whom you can tell everything; he can keep secrets), and 95% for mutual entertainment (e.g., I invite him and he invites me; we are going together to the mall).

Number of friends

Table 1

As shown in Table 2, there were significant differences in the reported numbers of friends between students without disability and students with intellectual disabilities in SCM, as compared with students with intellectual disabilities in SE ($F(2, 434) = 35.70; p < .001$). Based on students' responses, four categories were defined: (1) students with no friends, (2) students with one friend, (3) students with two to four friends, and (4) students with five or more friends.

As shown in Table 2, there appear to be only negligible differences in the category of "no friends" among the three groups of students (4.5%, 6.5%, 5%). As in the category of "one friend," only a small percentage (6%) of SWD students and 7.7% of SCM students had one friend. However, a very large number of students in SE (60%) reported having only one friend. Differences were also seen in the column of five friends and more for SWD and those attending SCM (46.8% and 34.3% respectively), compared with only 3.3% for students in SE.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to investigate the differences in the quality and quantity of self-reported friendship among students with intellectual disabilities in different educational settings. Current research supports the argument that a distinction should be made between different aspects of peer relationships (Parker & Asher, 1993). The results of the study presented here give us a better understanding of students' perceptions of friendship, confirming the research hypotheses regarding significant differences among the three groups of students: students without disability, students with mild intellectual disabilities in SE and students with intellectual disabilities in SCM.

Table 2

The analysis of the students' responses emphasised the wide variety of aspects of a good friend. Students with disabilities in SE stressed the characteristics of helpfulness fun and entertainment, while the students without disability pointed to intimacy. Similarly, Buhrmester (1990) and Kerns (1994) proposed that intimacy is the key feature of friendship in adolescence.

The results indicated that few students with intellectual disabilities in either educational system were concerned with the emotional aspects of a close friendship. This correlates with Wenz-Gross and Siperstien' findings (1997) that students with learning problems tended to turn to people within their homes for emotional support and less to peers for all types of support, while students without disability had a greater tendency to include their friends in their secrets and thoughts, and to create a certain sense of intimacy with them.

The variation in results regarding friendship quality can be explained in a number of ways. First, the differences between students without disability and those with intellectual disabilities in the open-ended questions may have been partially due to the limited vocabulary of the students. Such students may have mentioned fewer definitions of a "good friend," not because their concept of friendship is necessarily different from that of students without disability, but because their ability to articulate this concept is more limited. Another possible explanation is related to the academic difficulties they have had to

overcome, or the preoccupation of SE students with homework, causing them to define a good friend in association with academic help.

Significant differences among student responses were found with regard to the places where students meet with friends. According to many students in SE, the primary place to meet friends or to engage in social interactions was school, unlike both SWD and SCM students. From the responses of SWD students, it can be inferred that shared playtime with a classmate is not proof of a close friendship, unlike students with intellectual disabilities in both educational settings who consider the students in the play-group as friends. It is necessary to clarify that the research design and analysis do not allow us to determine the relative importance of differences in student characteristics and environmental factors. It is likely this difference is due to the fact that their special schools are not in or near their neighbourhoods, and the distances between their homes make afternoon activities more complicated, requiring special organisation on the part of parents, such as making appointments, specially preparing their children to go to their friends and chauffeuring (in Israel afternoon social activities tend to be spontaneous, and usually take place within neighbourhood frameworks).

Students with intellectual disabilities in SCM tend to fall between the two other groups in terms of where they meet with friends; like the students without disability, they do not perceive school as a social venue, and their responses regarding meeting with friends at home is more similar to those of students without disability. However, their neighbourhood venues were much like those of students with intellectual disabilities in SE.

The wide range in SCM students' responses regarding their emotional state while feeling alone, from sadness at one end, to unemotional responses at the other, again indicates the diversity of the SCM group. Their reaction tend to be between those of the SE and SWD group, and it is possible that it may be necessary in future research to re-examine the SCM students or to divide them into subgroups, according to their characteristics.

Because leisure activities are dependent on personal abilities and limited by a willingness to give up alternative occupations, it was found that students with intellectual disabilities in SE tend to be more passive. Thus, SE students engage in fewer leisure activities or in activities inappropriate to their age group. Many students reported that they "do nothing" when they are lonely or during their free time, or they "go to sleep," "help with house-work" or spend their time watching television. Only a few students with intellectual disabilities reported that they tried to find alternative activities, or initiated a direct action in order to find company during their leisure time or to combat loneliness, unlike nondisabled students who reported doing various activities at home (TV, computer games, listening to music, playing instruments, reading, phone calls) and outside the home (meeting friends, scouts, going to movies, and so forth). It could be that some of these activities are too complicated for students with intellectual disabilities (especially for those in special schools) in terms of geographical distances, transportation problems, parents' fears about their going out by themselves and personal limitations such as cognitive difficulties, problems in spatial orientation, deficient social skills or a lack of initiative.

As anticipated, there were differences between the groups of students as regards their advice for making friends. Students with intellectual disabilities in SCM are very concerned with having friends, so they tended to believe that conformist behaviour can be helpful in making friends, as well as giving things to others (such as candies, cards, small objects), or being willing to perform services. Awareness of this behaviour is important so that students with intellectual disabilities are not exploited by others in their need to "buy" friends, avoid loneliness or belong to a peer group.

The comparison between students without a disability, in SCM and SE students showed a significantly lower number of friends for the last group. It is possible that the SE students included their own brothers and sisters in their answers regarding the number of friends: siblings are often around, may feel very involved and may spend a great deal of time with their disabled brother or sister. Although brothers and sisters often bring their own friends home and the disabled students may participate in their games, there was still a large gap between the number of friends of SE students and other groups of students.

While interviewing students with intellectual disabilities in SCM, I received the impression that these students are confused by their social situations. Some of them feel isolated in the classroom or in school, rejected, ignored, or having few or no friends at all. Many students in SCM expressed feeling of emptiness, a lack of emotional support and an absence of close and meaningful relationships with peers. These results correspond with those of other studies which show a high degree of loneliness among students with intellectual disabilities in various special education systems (Heiman & Margalit, 1998).

The results of current research may reflect the fact that students in SCM are more independent in their activities, have better social skills and more opportunities to experience social interaction, both within their classrooms as well as outside. Students with intellectual disabilities in SE have greater difficulty in reaching friends, or making and maintaining close friendships, due to their cognitive difficulties, behavioural problems (Kazdin, 1987), or their social skills impairment (tufting, 1988; Margalit, 1994; Siperstein, Leffert, & Widaman 1996; Taylor, Asher, & Williams, 1987).

These findings support the hypothesis that students who are included in mainstream educational systems are influenced by nondisabled students, that they learn and imitate the conduct and attitudes of the general population, and appropriate more social and emotional behaviour than students in special education schools. It appears that students with intellectual disabilities in SCM have better social skills. They initiate activities and invite friends to their homes, play with friends in public playgrounds, are more independent and are significantly more mobile than students with intellectual disabilities in

special education schools.

In conclusion, an awareness of the importance of friendship is, in itself, not enough to produce changes in social interactions between students with disabilities and those without them. The perception of friendship and peer experiences should be tested more decisively in longitudinal studies, and different educational intervention programs must be developed. The efficacy of mainstreaming must be further examined in different domains, such as the relationship between self-reported friendship and feelings of loneliness, and sociometric status. Future research should also explore different methods of observation in order to assess behavioural aspects and developmental changes in groups of students with special needs.

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