



ACCEPTANCE OF CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND POSSIBILITIES OF DEVELOPING FRIENDSHIPS

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Abstract:

Acceptance as a measure of popularity involves the social position of the individual in a certain group in terms of the attitudes of the members of that group toward the individual. The aim of this paper is to review the articles regarding the acceptance of children with developmental disabilities (DD) by typically developing (TD) peers in inclusive education and the possibilities of developing friendship relations in the school context. The literature was searched through the engine Google Scholar. Results show that students with DD are often not accepted by TD peers in the school context. This is manifested through a lack of friendship relations between children with DD and TD peers in the school context. Teachers need to prompt and reinforce acceptance of children with DD and model socially desirable behaviors towards them.

Keywords: children with developmental delays, acceptance, friendship, sociometric status, inclusive education

1. Introduction

People are social beings and have the ability to obtain a great number of social skills based on which define their social identity and have adequate social relations (Krstić, 1974). In line with that comes the basic psychological need of having to interact with others in the social environment (Dučić & Kaljača, 2018). Criteria that define successful interpersonal

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relations involve the quality of the interaction, reciprocity, safety factors and attachment style (Kuruzović, 2018).

There is a difference between social and personal relations and it is emphasized that social relations include a spectrum of relations that are formed in social context by individuals, groups or organizations, while personal relations include more intimate and personal relations between two individuals (Kuruzović, 2018). Following this classification, friendships can be included in personal relations.

Since school-aged children have frequent contact with peers, it is important to determine the difference between acceptance and friendship. The popularity level is the social position of the individual in a group and regarding that this individual can be either accepted or not accepted. Acceptance refers to the attitudes of peer groups toward a certain individual. If group members have acceptance of a group member, this does not involve them interacting, but is a prerequisite for friendship development in a school context. Friendship is defined by its reciprocity and quality of interactions between two individuals (Bukowski et al., 1996).

The idea of inclusion was brought up by UNESCO at the end of the previous century and it was consistently promoted by them in numerous conferences under the name *Education for all*. Since then, inclusion became a part of educational practices in almost all European countries. Inclusion consists of the involvement of children with developmental disabilities (DD) in a regular school system, followed by involvement in all other social segments (Jablan & Kovačević, 2008). People with DD have significant delays in accruing and maintaining social relations with their peers and necessary prerequisite includes the acquisition of social skills which can be obtained more easily in the inclusive environment because it enables numerous social interactions (Žić Ralić & Ljubas, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to gain insight into the level of acceptance of children with DD by their typically developing (TD) peers in an inclusive school setting.

2. Methods

The literature was obtained through the search engine Google Scholar. The articles were found by using keywords: children with developmental disabilities, acceptance, friendship, sociometric status, and inclusive education. The keywords were used independently and in combination during the literature search and were in English and Serbian language.

3. Literature review

A meta-analysis conducted by Banković (2016) included articles published in the range of the mid-twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The results show that that child with DD is not accepted by TD peers and that are socially excluded.

The reason for this is that the physical placement of children with DD in a regular school system is not enough to ensure inclusion. In order to ensure full inclusion, TD children's curricula should include some classes where they are taught to accept children with DD. This idea is supported by research that shows that, in addition to students with DD socializing less when they do, they mostly socialize with students who also have DD (Boutot, 2007).

Dević (2018) conducted research with the aim of evaluating the social acceptance of children with DD in the regular school system, on a sample of 694 pupils in the third and fourth grade of TD who have a child with DD in the class and 30 pupils with DD. The selection criteria for children with DD was that they attend school with individual educational programs. The children of the TD were expected to name three friends from the class with whom they would like and those with whom they would not like to sit in the class and be friends with. The analysis of the answers allowed the authors to examine whether students with DD have friends (if the answers of two individuals in their questionnaire were reciprocal, i.e. if the names of a pair of friends were found on their individual lists, the authors would distinguish it as reciprocal, friendly relationship). In addition, the scale involved determining the extent to which the respondents would like or not like to associate with each member of the class, by choosing one of three answers (I would like to, I cannot decide, I would not like to). The results indicate that students with DD are less socially accepted compared to TD students. The largest number of these students (26 out of 30) are in the category of "neglected" and "rejected", compared to the most represented categories of students in the control group ("popular" and "average"). The second part of the analysis, which included the processing of data from the rating scale, showed that only 30% of students with DD achieve reciprocal relationships, compared to the control group, where this percentage is almost three times higher (86.7%).

A study (Petrović & Luković, 2012), which also aimed to assess the level of acceptance of students with DD of primary school age, was realized through the use of the Inductive Distance Scale (Petrović, 2010). The sample consisted of 180 fourth and eighth-grade children. In this instrument, ten types of relationships are offered, which are ordered by the intensity of closeness (that he goes to your school, that he goes to your class, that you share a room with him on an excursion, that he is your best friend, etc.), to which the respondents answer in relation to each of the seven categories of students who need educational support. The categories were students with visual impairment, students with physical disabilities, students with DD, students with speech and language difficulties, students of Roma nationality and those from families with low socioeconomic status. Students of TD show the highest degree of inclusive distance towards children of Roma nationality and children with DD, while the lowest inclusive distance was determined towards children with speech disorders and those from families with low socioeconomic status. Gender differences are present when it comes to children with DD, towards whom boys have a greater distance than girls with TD. Among children who

have better school success, there is the least expressed distance, so these children are most often ready to help students with special educational support. The percentage of children who refuse to be best friends with a student with DD is 50%

Analyzing the sociometric status of pupils of TD, pupils with DD and those with health issues who attend grades from five to eight it is concluded that pupils with DD are less accepted and have worse sociometric status compared to the other two groups. Even though pupils with health issues were the second, results showed similar acceptance rates as TD students (Jablan et al., 2017).

Dević et al. (2009) analyzed the readiness of fifth-grade students to accept peers with DD in their class. The research included 471 students and 207 teachers from 10 schools in the Republic of Serbia that did or did not have enrolled pupils with DD. The results showed that almost two-thirds of TD children have positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with DD. 65% of the pupils believe that they are equal to children with DD and 25% believe they should attend classes with only children with DD. The majority of the children stated that their actions towards children with DD are the same as towards any other student. Also, there was no difference in answers between children who have children with DD in their class and those who do not.

A Norwegian study (Pijl et al., 2008) included a sample of nearly 1000 students aged nine to 13 with the aim of assessing the social position of students with DD. The sample consisted of students with behavioural problems, intellectual disabilities, speech-language difficulties and sensory or motor impairments. The authors used a sociometric scale, in which the children were asked to answer the questions with a maximum of 5 names regarding who is his/her best friend and two preference questions (whom would you like to go on school holidays with and who would you like to do your homework with). In this study, teachers were also asked to participate by writing down the names of the TD students they thought would list as their best friends a student with DD. The acceptance score was observed in terms of the nominations the student received (maximum five). The scores of students with DD are significantly lower compared to students without disabilities who received about two nominations on average. What is also notable is that about 10% of students with disabilities received one or no nominations, and the authors suggest that these students are either rejected or at risk for rejection. Students with DD have an expected percentage of fewer friends than students without DD. The number of friends of students with DD decreases with age, so fourth-grade students have a percentage of more reciprocal relationships than seventh-grade students. The results of the teachers' answers are somewhat in agreement with the students' answers, so about 50% of their answers agree with the results, while about 35% of the teachers overestimate friendly relations with students with DD.

Staub et al. (1994) in their research conducted with the aim of comparing social relations formed by children with DD and TD peers, gathered data based on video recordings obtained and observations in the school context that included interviews with the pupils, teachers and parents of both student groups. The authors noted that social

relations between both pupil groups started in activities unrelated to the school context. At the beginning of their interactions, TD students did not have the roles of peer tutors, however, those interactions gradually became helping roles. These peer interactions were supported by both parent groups, as well as teachers and teaching staff.

An inclusive school environment is the best for establishing social relations between children with DD and their TD peers, because it allows them to feel accepted through participation in activities with their peers. The acceptance of children with DD is a necessary step in developing friendship relations and the teachers should as well be included in this process (Kovačević & Maćešić-Petrović, 2012). The positive attitudes of teachers toward inclusive education and their methodological approach are crucial in the development of feelings of acceptance of children with DD in their TD peers (Boutot, 2007).

4. Conclusion

The literature review showed the unprivileged position of children with DD regarding their acceptance by peers in the inclusive school environment. It is uncertain which category of children with DD is the least accepted, however, some articles obtained results that children with problem behaviors and children with intellectual disabilities are least accepted.

Even though TD students have positive attitudes towards having a child with DD in their class, this could be because of their need to give socially acceptable answers, therefore it is necessary to develop a measurement system based on direct observations and not use indirect measurement. Students with DD very rarely make friends with their TD peers, and the data about students who do not have any friends should not be regarded. In one study, it was observed that the number of reciprocal relationships of students with DD decreases with age, which should be a signal for interventions that will be aimed at the timely promotion of acceptance of children with DD. It has been observed that when there is a positive and encouraging attitude on the part of the persons involved in daily contact with children of TD (teachers and parents), the relationship of TD children towards students with DD can go in the direction of developing friendship. The teacher's role could be to promote the strengths of the child, directing teaching situations so that other students have the opportunity to notice ways in which they are similar to the student with a DD, because acceptance is a prerequisite for the development of friendly relations.

The physical transfer of children with DD to regular schools is not enough for inclusion, which implies acceptance both at the educational and global levels (social inclusion). It is desirable to work on removing social barriers primarily among parents and teaching staff. TD children, by observing the positive attitude of teachers and parents towards children with DD, learn from the model and become more open to establishing such relationships starting from the school environment. It is known that the basic

criterion on the basis of which children establish friendships is the perception of similarities, which during school activities should be recognized as important and used in order to promote the complete inclusion of children with DD.

Summarizing the results of the study, it is necessary to work on the promotion of the acceptance of children with DD in an inclusive school context, which will contribute to the socio-emotional development of TD children. The main task of the special education teachers is to identify the skills that are necessary to participate in group activities according to the chronological age and to work with the DD students on acquiring these skills in order to encourage the acceptance of these children in an inclusive school context.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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