

A Preliminary Study of Modifying School Children's Attitudes Toward Students With Specific Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Classes for children with specific learning disabilities in Sweden have for many years been located in ordinary schools. Nevertheless many studies indicate that there are relatively few contacts between children in regular classes and children in classes for the learning disabled. This study aimed to determine whether children's attitudes toward learning disabled schoolmates could be favourably modified by a program designed to provide specific information about retardation as well as to encourage cooperation between the two groups. A series of structured questions was developed to determine present knowledge and attitudes toward the learning disabled. These questions were presented both at the beginning and end of a school semester (6 months). Interventions attempting to modify children's attitudes about the learning disabled included information sessions, role playing and a joint field trip. The study suggests that children's attitudes can be changed in the direction of greater acceptance of the learning disabled.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1960s it has been the official policy in Sweden to normalize education for the learning disabled as much as possible. Thus, for many years, it has not been possible to build either special schools or special buildings on regular school premises for children with specific learning disabilities. In spite of these attempts to provide normalization, radical changes have not developed. Even though all classes for the learning disabled have been located in regular schools for many years, a number of studies indicate that there have been very few and mostly very cursory contacts with regular students (Brygg, 1982; Nyberg, 1983; Söder, 1979; Wadström, 1979). The present study reports an attempt to modify regular school children's attitudes toward learning disabled students and to encourage more positive interactions between the two groups.

Method

Subjects

The present study was carried out during the period extending from January 23 - June 2, 1989, at a small elementary school in Malmö, Sweden. Malmö is a city of 235,000 inhabitants. The school is situated in a high socio-economic area and consists of approximately 170 regular students and 35 learning disabled students. There are six classes for the learning disabled, three of which are for educables and three for trainables. The regular children live in the vicinity of the school but the learning disabled children reside in all areas of the city.

The study involved one class of regular students and one trainable class (TMR). The regular class consisted of 25 third grade students (12 girls and 13 boys). The TMR class consisted of 6 students (2 girls and 4 boys). The TMRs were classified as grades 4 - 5, although all were functioning at a significant lower academic level.

Procedure

In order to establish a baseline of information the normal children had about learning disability, a structured interview was developed. The children were interviewed in two groups; 12 in the first group and 13 in the second group. The interview consisted of the following six questions:

1. What do you know about handicaps?
2. Do you know of any handicapped children at this school, and in which way are they handicapped?
3. Do you ever play with them?
4. Would it be possible for them to be part of your own class? And, if so could they be part of your class for just a few hours a week or the whole week?
5. Would you like to have a "fun hour" with the learning disabled students? (The class is permitted one hour per week of pleasant

unstructured activities, e.g., choosing games to play).

6. Would you invite a child from the learning disabled class to your home?

Following the initial interview the TMR teacher presented basic information about retarded children to the regular class students. At that time it became apparent that these students were using the term, being handicapped, synonymously with being "retarded".

The next step involved presenting information about the project to the parents of the regular students. At the same time, an attempt was made to sensitize the regular students to the problems of the learning disabled through a short series of role playing activities led by a drama teacher. Finally both classes participated in a field trip to an animal farm.

Five months after the project began, the initial interview was repeated to determine if any changes occurred in the perceptions of the regular students toward the learning disabled class.

Results and Discussion

The basis for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions was an assessment of the pre- and post responses to the interview questions. An analysis of changes in responses to each interview question is presented below:

Question 1: *What do you know about handicaps?*

Initial responses indicated a wide variety of ideas about handicapping conditions. Many students presented responses indicating reasonable clarity about the nature of handicaps, while others expressed gross misconceptions. On follow-up interview five months later all children expressed very relevant conceptions of the nature of both physical and mental handicaps. It is fairly apparent that the students' knowledge of handicaps had substantially increased.

Question 2: *Do you know of any handicapped children at this school, and in which way are they handicapped?*

In the initial interview, the regular class children selected several learning disabled children as handicapped and presented their rather negative views of what they considered to be a wide variety

of undesirable behaviours. Such behaviours included descriptions such as "drooling on food while eating", etc. On follow-up interview descriptions became more objective. They understood some of the limitations of learning disabled students, but it continued to be difficult for them to totally accept some of the negative behaviours they observed. These comments referred primarily to those learning disabled students who did not participate in the integrated activities. By contrast, the regular students voiced many positive comments aimed at the learning disabled in the project.

Question 3: *Do you ever play with them?*

In the initial interview many of the boys declared that they never played with the learning disabled children. Some of the girls said that they "sometimes" played with them. It was obvious, that there were only a few contacts between the regular students and the learning disabled students. The children gave one explanation that ought to be considered in future planning. They remarked that they did not have all breaks at the same time as the learning disabled students. In follow-up interview it was still obvious that the regular students very seldom played with the learning disabled children. The contacts they had were almost without exception with the retarded students in the project. They made many positive comments about them, indicating that they behaved better and were "smarter" than the rest of the learning disabled in their school.

Question 4: *Would it be possible for them to be part of your own class? And, if so, could they be part of your class for just a few hours a week or the whole week?*

In the initial interview many of the children expressed that it would be too difficult for the learning disabled to spend the whole time in their class. They thought, however, that it could be worth trying if the learning disabled children got plenty of assistance. On the other hand, they thought that learning disabled children could spend one or two hours a week in their class engaging in unstructured activities such as playing and painting. In follow-up interviews all children thought that no learning disabled student in the project could be placed in their class. They were even more convinced than during the initial interview. They still thought that it would be a good idea to have the learning disabled in their class for one or two hours a week.

Question 5: *Would you like to have a "fun hour" with the learning disabled students? Excursions? Sports?*

In the initial interview most children thought that a "fun hour" would be all right. Some of the boys in particular were more reluctant about excursions. They thought that they would have problems with the behaviour of the learning disabled, and that they would "get behind". Most children also thought that it would be difficult for the learning disabled to participate in sports. An exception was one girl who thought that she could learn something from spending time with the learning disabled children. In follow-up interview the children still thought that a "fun hour" would be all right. In addition they now were in favour of going on excursions with the learning disabled. They all remarked that the trip to the animal farm had been very pleasant. Still, most of the children thought that sports would be difficult. This time, however, they discussed ways to arrange such activities in order to suit and cater for the learning disabled children.

Question 6: *Would you invite a child from the learning disabled class to your home?*

Initial responses indicated that most students were very reluctant. Most of the boys gave excuses such as "They live so far from school." Some of the girls remarked that it would have been much easier if the learning disabled children had been part of their class. At the end two girls declared that they would like to try. In follow-up interview, no child volunteered to invite a learning disabled child to their home. Most of them declared that they mostly played with their class mates or with children in the neighbourhood.

Discussion

Even though this is a preliminary study, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions:

- The information and the time spent together clearly decreased the estrangement and created a sympathetic view of the learning disabled.

- If we strive to attain increased contacts between regular students and learning disabled students the activities, at least for a lengthy period of time, ought to be carefully structured.

- If a learning disabled child is going to be placed in a regular class, it is important to give information to the staff, the students and the parents as soon as possible.

- Increasingly the trend in Sweden is to place greater numbers of learning disabled children in regular classes. It is necessary to actively address the problems involved in this exercise. For too many years we have trusted that attitudes to handicapped children in regular classes will change in a favourable direction without any interventions. This paper has suggested that this is not the case.

References

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