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Can typical students define the word “disability”? A pilot study about their knowledge or misconceptions

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Abstract

Disabled students are being integrated into the mainstream school setting. Students often reject their disabled peers because of absence of the appropriate knowledge and awareness about disabilities. This study is a pilot one and the aim is the investigation of typical students’ concepts of disabilities. Eight-five, 9-11 years old, students participate. The results reveal that typical students lack the appropriate knowledge and the common thought to describe a person with disability is physical disability. There are misconceptions about mental retardation and Down syndrome and almost none of them understand what “autism” means.

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1. Introduction

Disabled students are being integrated into the regular school environment, but this process is hampered by a series of obstacles, the most important of which is the absence of typical students’ awareness about disability. This unawareness as well as existing prejudices may be the cause of the social exclusion of students with disabilities (Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Laws & Kelly, 2005; Skar, 2010). Inclusion depends on positive attitudes and interaction between typical students and those with disabilities (Guralnick, 2006) but typical students often demonstrate rejection to their disabled peers (Favazza, Phillipsen, & Kumar, 2000). Behavioral and emotional problems emerge because of rejection, which has a negative effect on academic achievement and adaptation to the school setting. On the contrary, acceptance and friendships with peers influence positively children’s behavior (Laws & Kelly, 2005; Skar, 2010) and not only contribute to successful inclusion but also improve their social and emotional development (Laws & Kelly, 2005).

2. Method

When an intervention program is implemented in order to increase awareness of disabilities, to remove prejudices and to provide opportunities for social interaction between students with and without disabilities, attitudes turn to be more favourable (McGregor & Forlin, 2005). Attempts may be made, in order to incorporate students with special

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needs in mainstream classrooms. A lot of researches have been conducted in order to investigate students’ attitudes towards disability but most of them are quantitative and their results are based on questionnaires.

Children’s perception of the word ‘disability’ has rarely been studied (Skar, 2010; Nowicki, 2007). It is important for teachers, parents, and other persons around disabled children to be aware of how typical children perceive disabilities in order to promote successful integration and inclusion of disabled children in mainstream schools. Therefore, we highlight the importance of the clarification of misconceptions and try to provide children with the appropriate knowledge in a multi-dimensional disability programme.

2.1. Aim

We designed this pilot study in order to investigate typical students’ concepts and the existence of misconceptions, as attitudes are shaped according to one’s beliefs about members’ characteristics (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). As a result, students pre-examine their schoolmates’ characteristics and incorporate or reject them from their groups. The awareness about disability, the clarification of misconceptions and the elimination of bias is an important step leading to the inclusion of students with disabilities not only in the mainstream classes but also in their peer groups.

2.1.1. Sample

Eighty-five, 9-11 years old, students participated. Forty-three of them were girls and forty-two boys. Most of them had one or two brothers or sisters. In their school there were not any students with disabilities and 35.7% of them had met a disabled person but only 17.9% could refer the kind of disability.

2.1.1.1. Instrument

In order to investigate students’ knowledge about disability we designed an instrument which comprised 12 vignettes. This methodology is often used when dealing with sensitive topics or asking participants to voice their opinion (Finch, 1987). More specifically, we chose 12 pictures which depicted boys and girls, in the same age with the participants, with or without disabilities. A short text accompanied every picture and there was the same question in every set “Is this child a child with disability?” The depicted disabilities were blindness, physical disability, mental retardation, autism, hearing impairment and Down syndrome. After that, we randomly chose ten 9-year-old and ten eleven-year-old students and interviewed them. The questions were based on the pictures of the questionnaire and the answers were open. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The students had previously been informed about the process and their parents’ consensus had been asked.

3. Results

The findings revealed some very important and interesting findings. First of all, almost all students recognized physical disability as 95.2% of them answered “Yes, this is a child with disability”. But as regards less obvious disabilities the number of right answers began to decline. We concluded that because 58.8% recognized mental retardation, 58.8% Down syndrome and 52.9% blindness. Only half of the students, 50.6% of them recognized hearing impairment as a disability and 41.2% had heard the word autism before (Table 1). Also, 45.9% of them identified a girl with a broken leg as disabled and 22.4% thought obese boys were disabled, too. The interviews verified previous results and offered a deeper insight into students’ answers, as the questions were open. Hence, it was confirmed that almost all of them only recognized physical disability as disability. For that reason, they nominated the girl with broken leg as disabled. They explained that “she is disabled because she can’t move and she must have crutches or she must sit on a wheelchair”. Also, according to students’ beliefs, “obese boys are disabled because they cannot move properly and they cannot participate in playground games”. They believed that mental
retardation and the Down syndrome was the same. This misconception prevailed not only in the answers of the questionnaire where 58.8% of the children identified mental retardation and 58.8% the Down syndrome as

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disability but also in the interview the responses were exactly the same. Typical students said that these children must attend a special school because “they cannot understand mathematics or learn history”. They also added that “a special education school is the best solution for those children” because “there, there are children who face the same problems and have the same abilities”. Also, “there they have the opportunity to make friends as in general education school they cannot have friends”. As regards sensory impairments (blindness and hearing impairment) typical students believed that “this is a kind of illness not disability”. “For some reason, may be an accident, these children have this kind of impairment and an experienced doctor may help them”. “Otherwise, they must find a way in order to communicate effectively”. They added, “It is difficult for them to have friends and may prefer other persons with whom they share the same problems”. As far as autism is concerned, none of the nine-year-old students have ever heard this term and as a result they did not know what it was. Only four out of ten eleven-year-old students had heard the term but they also did not know what exactly it means.

4. Discussion

These results reveal a gap in typical students’ knowledge, which may lead to misconceptions. These misconceptions not only hamper the inclusion of disabled students but also perpetuate prejudices and negative attitudes toward disability. We all know very well that understanding and awareness are key factors in order to improve negative attitudes and acceptance of others (Shapiro & Margolis, 1988; Lewis & Lewis, 1987; Maras & Brown, 1996). As I have previously stated, this is a pilot study in order to design and implement a more extended one. We must seriously take into consideration the fact that the majority of typical students identified as disabled only the children with physical disability and only a minority could to identify other kinds of disability. These results confirm previous researchers’ conclusion who have stated that the younger the student is the less he/she knows about disability and this knowledge depends on their age and begins to develop throughout their school years (Nabors & Keyes, 1997; Tamm & Prellwitz, 2001; Smith & Williams, 2004; Skar, 2010).

In addition, typical students tend to associate disability with technical devices. For that reason, a girl in a wheelchair and a girl with a broken leg who uses crutches are both identified as disabled. Ramsey and Myers (1997) and Favazza and Odom (1997) have established that preschoolers tend to define disability through descriptions of persons in wheelchair or with hearing-aids. At this point, we should mention the dominance of medical model of disability in typical students’ thought. Nonetheless, it is notable that a blind boy who uses Braille in order to read or a girl with a hearing impairment who communicates with sign language is not nominated “disabled.” All these lead us to the conclusion that young students cannot conceptualize less obvious disabilities. As regards autism, students are unable to determine the cause and to understand the behavior of a child with autism. Glasberg (2000) has stated
that even children who have siblings with autism are initially unable to understand them but they improve their understanding as they grow up. These misconceptions may cause exclusion and rejection of peer groups and for that reason students with disabilities are often alone, without friends and their self-esteem is low (Skar, 2010). These negative feelings have a tremendous impact on their social and emotional development. This is confirmed by students’ answers who have stated that students with mental retardation and Down syndrome must attend a special education school because there, they have the opportunity to interact with other students with the same problems and have friends. None of them have mentioned that he/she wants to have a friend with disability. Furthermore, none of them have stated the possibility of having a classmate with disability. This is in accordance with previous researchers who have stated that contact does not always have a positive impact on students’ attitudes and they do not want to have friends with disabilities (Louari & Paparousi, 2009).

These findings make us think more seriously about the consequences of the inclusion of a child with disability in a mainstream classroom where students may ignore important traits of disability. We highlight the importance of awareness as it plays a major role in the acceptance and the development of positive attitudes so, the first step before the inclusion is the students’ awareness and the improvement of their acceptance of their disabled schoolmates, because limited relationships may lead not only to emotional but also to behavioral problems as well (Skar, 2010; Laws & Kelly, 2005). In typical students’ thought disability has social consequences as they have mentioned “a child in a wheelchair has difficulty in playing. As a result, he/she is alone, sad, unable to be part of a peer group or have the opportunity to participate in any kind of activities”. This is in accordance with previous studies, as researchers have pointed the exclusion of peer groups (Longoria & Marini, 2006; Roberts & Lindsell, 1997). A lot of them have stressed the importance of awareness and the need for the implementation of such programmes (Skar, 2010; Nowicki, 2007; Smith & Williams, 2001). For that reason, we are going to design an intervention programme in order to improve not only awareness but also attitudes. Before that, we are going to assess the students’ awareness and investigate their attitudes towards peers with disability. We strongly believe that such programmes should be implemented in every school, throughout the whole course of studies and aim not only at cultivating feelings of acceptance but also try to infuse the social model of disability into students’ conception. Typical students should understand that disability is not the real reason for the disabled students’ exclusion but it is the society that perpetuates the bias and negative attitudes towards them.

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