

INCREASING STAFF RATIOS IN AN ACTIVITY WITH SEVERELY MENTALLY HANDICAPPED PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

The ratio of staff to clients required to provide a high standard of care in group settings is frequently under discussion. A common assumption is that the more staff available (the higher the staff/client ratio) the more time will be devoted to direct interaction with clients, although some studies have shown that settings with more staff do not have proportionately higher rates of staff interaction with clients than settings with fewer staff (Moore and Grant, 1976; Felce, Mansell and Kushlick, 1980). Cataldo and Risley (1972) reported on the effect of different staff ratios when these were changed in the same setting (an infant day care centre). They found that the simple addition of staff in the play area produced diminishing returns in interaction with children. The proportion of time each member of staff spent in interaction with children declined from 66% when one staff was present to 21% when four staff were present. When staff were individually allocated to separate planned activities more time was spent in interaction under each condition but the proportion of time each staff spent in interaction still declined from 92% with one staff to 72% with four staff.

Work in progress on the provision of group activities for the most severely and profoundly mentally handicapped people has permitted a similar analysis to investigate whether these findings are confirmed with this client group.

METHOD

The subjects were care staff present at a group activity for severely and profoundly mentally handicapped people held in the room of a residential home for one hour in the morning. Two staff were allocated to run this activity and other staff were free to attend if they wished and as the care of the clients allowed. A voluntary worker also attended on some days.

Each member of staff (including the voluntary worker) in this room was observed for a moment at specified five minute intervals in the hour. The observer recorded whether the staff was interacting with a client or not. Interaction was defined as speaking to or being face-to-face with a client. All other behaviours were coded as not interacting, including just arranging materials for a client or touching a client.

Observations were taken on 52 days. Days 1 to 12, 26 to 32 and 39 to 47 were baseline and reversal phases in which no special instructions were given to staff, who ran the activity as they had at the beginning of the study. On days 13 to 25, 33 to 38 and 48 to 52 the two assigned staff ran an organised activity similar to the 'room manager' procedure described by Porterfield, Blunden and Blewitt (1980), under which one member of staff was instructed to systematically prompt clients and differentially reinforce purposeful behaviour. The second staff was instructed to deal with individual client needs and any interruptions. Other staff were informed that they were still welcome to attend but they were asked not to praise or attend to disruptive or inappropriate behaviour.

A second observer took reliability observations on 7 days. Agreement on number of staff interacting at each observation was calculated by dividing by the number present any difference reached by the two observers in the number interacting, multiplying by 100 and subtracting this product from 100%. Where the observers recorded different numbers of staff

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present, the lower number was used. The mean percentage agreement per session was calculated by summing the percentages for each observation and dividing by the number of observations. Agreement on number of staff present was calculated following the same procedure.

The mean percentage agreement was 90.2% (range 81.8% to 100%) on number of staff interacting and 96.7% (range 89.6% to 100%) on number of staff present.

The observations were analysed to show, for baseline and 'room manager' conditions, the proportion of each member of staff's time given to interaction with clients when there were 1, 2, 3 or 4 staff in the room. There were 76 observations when only one staff was present (38 in each condition); 224 when two staff were present (118 in baseline and 106 in room manager condition); 173 when three staff were present (baseline 71, room manager 102) and 98 when there were four staff (baseline 55, room manager 43).

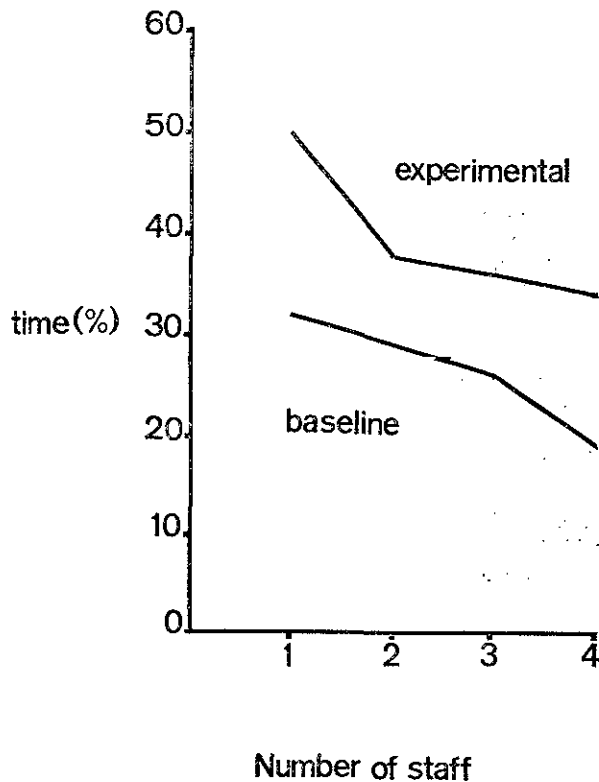


Figure 1: Proportion of time each staff interacted with clients.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows that each member of staff spent a diminishing proportion of their time interacting with clients as the number of staff in the room increased. When one member of staff was present in baseline or reversal phases he or she spent, on average, 32% of the time interacting with clients: two staff each interacted for 29%; three for 26% and four for 19% of the time. When staff followed the 'room manager' procedure, each spent higher proportions

of time interacting, although there were still diminishing returns as staff members increased. One staff interacted on average for 50% of the time; two staff each interacted for 38%; three for 36% and four for 34% of the time.

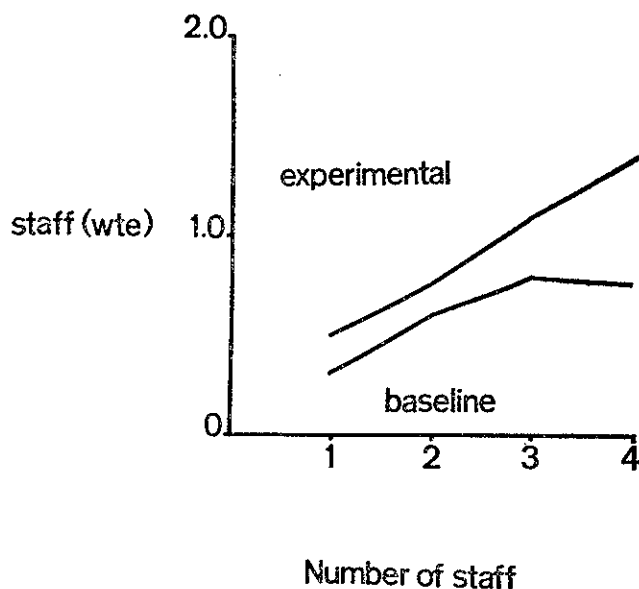


Figure 2: Number of whole-time-equivalent staff interacting with clients

Figure 2 presents these data in terms of whole-time-equivalent staff interacting with clients. During planned activities the average number of staff interacting increased from 0.50 when one staff was present to 1.37 when four were present. This contrasts with the baseline data which, as well as showing a lower number of whole-time-equivalent staff interacting at each point, shows a slight decline when a fourth member of staff is added.

These results confirm the finding by Cataldo and Risley. The lower proportions of staff time recorded as interacting in this study are probably due to the definition of the measure (Cataldo and Risley included holding children and presenting materials as interaction) but may also reflect the need for staff to spend a greater proportion of time preparing materials for severely and profoundly handicapped people to use.

The implication of these results for service managers is that simply increasing the number of staff allocated to a group of clients need not, in itself, produce corresponding gains in staff interaction with clients. Having two or three staff under baseline conditions does increase the amount of interaction over one staff, but rather less than when the same number of staff are given specific instructions on how to run the activity.

References

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