

**PEER RELATIONS OF MENTALLY HANDICAPPED ADOLESCENT
PUPILS AT AN ORDINARY SCHOOL ¹⁾**

G. LO-MEI GILKEY AND ANDREA G. ZETLIN ²⁾

INTRODUCTION

According to psychologists and educators, peer relationships throughout the developmental period, offer opportunities for personal growth and increased social skills which have far reaching implications for adult adjustment (Conger & Peterson, 1984; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Michelson et al, 1983; Sullivan, 1965). With this as an impetus, one of the goals of mainstreaming was to afford special education students the opportunity to interact with a wider range of peers - both regular and special education students.

Much research has followed to examine the effects of mainstreaming on the social adjustment of special education students. Such studies have focussed primarily on the interaction between mildly learning handicapped students and their *non-handicapped peers at the elementary and junior high school level* (see for example, Flores De Apodaca et al, 1985; Gottlieb, 1980; Morrison & Borthwick, 1983). Only one study has looked at the peer relations of mainstreamed secondary school students and found that most of the mildly handicapped students observed appeared to form easy associations, some with regular education students and others with similarly handicapped peers, spending their time together during breaks, between classes and during the lunch hour (Zetlin, 1986).

Little attention has as of yet been given to the interaction patterns and peer relations of severely handicapped secondary school students in a mainstreamed high school setting. Previous research with severely handicapped individuals has examined almost exclusively the extent of their peer relations while in institutional or sheltered workshop settings. MacAndrew and Edgerton (1966) documented a close and intimate association between two institutionalised severely retarded young men who mutually sought each other's company and spent almost all of their time exclusively with each other. MacAndrew described the mutual sharing of "possessions", light bantering and teasing with each other, and the overall closeness of their association. Fox-Henning (1979) also found evidence of close friendships within the structure of a sheltered workshop setting. In her sample, peer relations were not as exclusive or as intense as in MacAndrew's sample, none-the-less, workshop clients sought others out on a daily basis, and formed dyads in which one member assumed the role of helper (such as pushing a wheelchair or getting food during lunch).

It was the intent of this study to examine the interaction patterns of severely *learning handicapped students in a mainstreamed high school program* as they emerged in the context of the formal classroom and the less formal school cafeteria. An attempt will be made to describe the three distinct interaction patterns as they were observed and to provide possible explanations for their development. From a theoretical perspective, it was assumed that mainstreamed severely learning handicapped students would form close associations among themselves based on the

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2) University of Southern California, Department of Special Education, Los Angeles, California 90089-0031,
U.S.A.

view that obvious demographic similarities such as age, school performance and culture as well as sociability, co-operative activities, intelligence and educational aspirations provide the necessary basis on which to build a relationship. (Hartup, 1979).

METHOD

Sample

Subjects for the study were 17 severely handicapped students in a mainstreamed special education program in a Southern California high school. The study was conducted over a period of three months during the spring semester of 1986. Chronological age ranged from 17 to 21 years (mean = 19.7 years) and IQ ranged from 40 to 85 (mean = 59.5). Four girls and thirteen boys attended the class. Thirteen students were Caucasian and four were of varying ethnic backgrounds. All had been classified by school authorities as severely learning handicapped (diagnoses included Down's Syndrome, autism, moderate mental retardation, schizophrenia, and severe learning disabilities) and were assigned to the special education class where they spent most of the school day. All had at least one period during the day in such classes as swimming, home economics, and history, so that the actual number of students in the classroom varied from period to period. All students were observed in the special classroom at some point during the day.

Procedure

A field researcher (the first author) spent two days a week for three months in the special classroom and the cafeteria during the lunch time, observing the students. Initially, she was introduced to the students as an "instructional aide", who would help them with their school assignments. However, in subsequent interviews with individual students, she informed them of the research study and her interest in their relationships at school. In a relatively short time, the researcher was perceived as a "helper" and was quite accepted within the structure of the classroom.

Direct observation and interviewing techniques were employed. The researcher took notes while observing classroom activities and tape-recorded structured interviews with the students. Later, field notes were constructed in a narrative, descriptive style which included as much information as possible to provide an in depth description of the activities and peer interaction in the classroom.

The site. The classroom in which the research was conducted was one of seven special education classrooms at the high school. The classrooms varied by ability level and this classroom was comprised of the lowest functioning special education students. The seven classrooms were dispersed throughout the school buildings with the intent to integrate the special with the regular education classrooms.

The target classroom was relatively free of decorations. There were no paintings or drawings by students or other visual stimuli displayed anywhere on the walls. One corner of the room was set up as a "hygiene center" where an assortment of deodorants, perfumes, shaving lotions and make-up were displayed for the students to use before the first period. Another corner provided the "entertainment center" where a radio, tape-recorder and APPLE computer were available for use during "informal classtime". A large square "teacher's table" beneath the window pro-

vided space for one-on-one instruction as well as a gathering place for the aides during breaks. Students' desks were arranged in rows in the center of the room, all facing in the same direction toward the blackboard. They were spaced far apart from each other to discourage contact between students while they did assigned work.

A typical day. Most of the students travelled to school by school bus and drifted into the classroom about fifteen minutes before the official day began. The girls usually busied themselves with the make-up, putting on blush and lipstick, while the boys played games on the computer or just walked around in the classroom without engaging in any specific activity.

During each of the periods, students engaged in structured activities which the teacher deemed appropriate for their ability level. Some read simple stories and answered questions in a workbook. Others performed simple maths calculations or wrote short essays about stories they had read. The least able students usually worked with the teacher at the teacher's table, where she would read a simple text with them and then allow them to color pictures regarding the story. During this formal classtime, the students were usually very quiet, and interacted only with the teacher or the aides; they interacted little amongst themselves. Before the end of each period, the teacher announced "free time" and the students were allowed to select an activity of their choice. Usually, they played simple games on the computer, listened to a tape or milled around. During this time, they talked with each other, even laughed and engaged in gentle bantering. For instance, while playing a simple match-up game on the computer called "Picadilly", one student who was considerably more skillful than the others, responded to an admiring comment with, "What can I say? I am GOOD!" But overall, they remained relatively subdued in their interactions, without ever getting too noisy or carried away.

At certain times during the day, the teacher conducted survival skill lessons to teach students about health care and personal hygiene, how to write shopping lists, how to find places on the maps, where to call or go in cases of emergencies and so forth. During these lessons, the teacher sat in front of the students and spoke in a conversational manner, often asking questions and having them respond to her. At lunchtime, the students went to the cafeteria where they had the most contact with the regular education students.

During 75 hours of observation in the classroom and during lunch time, a total of 95 student interactions were recorded. These were recorded as Verbal Communications (talking, bantering, demands, etc), Nonverbal Active Communications (smiling, nodding, waving, etc), Nonverbal Passive Communications (staring) and Rejections of Communication Attempts. Table 1 presents a breakdown of interaction categories across each of the settings. Three distinct patterns of interaction emerged: (a) interactions during formal classtime (where teacher and aides provide instruction and supervision); (b) interaction during informal classtime ("free" time within the classroom but under the supervision of teacher and aides) and (c) free time (time spent outside of the classroom between periods and during lunch, without supervision).

Classroom

Formal classtime. During "formal classtime", students interacted minimally with one another, as they were more or less involved with assigned work. When interaction occurred, it was usually initiated by the teacher, who asked certain

students to assist others with their reading or consisted of certain demands made by students such as "Get out of my way". Communication was most frequently nonverbal active, such as furtive glances or smiles from one student to another. During this time, the teacher exerted a great deal of control over the students by watching them closely and often admonishing them for not working or for inappropriate behaviour (such as yawning). The students appeared subdued and passive in the presence of the teacher.

TABLE 1
Interaction Incidents Observed in a Three Months Period

Total Number of Interactions Observed	TOTAL		
	95		
Observation Hours	75		
	CLASSROOM		CAFETERIA
	Formal Classtime Percent	Informal Classtime Percent	Free Time Percent
A. Verbal Communication (talking, bantering, demands, etc.)	6.3 (6)*	24.2 (23)	31.6 (30)
B. Nonverbal Active Communication (smiling, nodding, waving, etc.)	7.4 (7)	5.3 (5)	6.3 (6)
C. Nonverbal Passive Communication (staring)	6.3 (6)	—	—
D. Rejection of Communication Attempts	2.1 (2)	7.4 (7)	3.2 (3)
TOTAL NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS	22.1 (21)	36.9 (35)	41.1 (39)

*Raw numbers in parentheses

Informal classtime. During "informal classtime", the students took the initiative and interacted more frequently with one another, helping each other with the computer programs, laughing together and even engaging in good-natured bantering, such as "I'll beat you again today". They still talked in subdued voices and often directed furtive glances at their teacher, in reaction to a student's loud laughter or raised voice. The teacher frequently requested that they "keep it down" and continued to exert control, though to a somewhat lesser extent than during formal class time.

Cafeteria

Once outside the classroom, the students seldom stayed as a group, each going their own way. Occasionally, they would regroup in the cafeteria and engage in lively conversations, usually about the exploits of another classmate, but this occurred infrequently. Usually, they sat alone while eating their lunch and then

meandered about the school grounds until the bell rang. On those rare occasions, when they did sit together, they talked in loud, animated voices and displayed none of the subdued manners which were so prevalent in the classroom. They appeared more relaxed away from the influence of the teacher, who usually did not participate in the lunch hour in the cafeteria.

Contact between the special education and regular education students was minimal. Most advances by special education students toward a regular education student were met with rejection and sometimes ridicule. On those rare occasions when a regular education student interacted positively in response to a greeting from a special education student, that "new friend" would be routinely sought out each lunch hour and warmly greeted by the special education student. In some instances, the regular education student then became the target of ridicule from his or her own peer group.

Overall, there were very few interactions, and without exception, the students seemed to have no close relationships either in or outside of the classroom. Information obtained from interviews with the students confirmed the pattern which emerged from direct observation. When questioned, the students named teachers, aides, busdrivers, school gardeners and other assorted adults as their "friends"; none of them mentioned a peer as a friend or close associate. A desire to have "friends" among the regular education students permeated many of their responses. That they named a parent as a confidant and friend is not surprising. Close ties to the family were apparent even within the structure of the class, where parents often called during classtime to inquire as to the conduct and well being of their son or daughter.

Discussion

The striking finding was the lack of peer interaction and friendship noted within the special class structure. Since others have observed close relationships between severely handicapped peers (Fox, 1979; MacAndrews & Edgerton, 1966), it was expected that these similarly disabled students would form close associations with each other. Given that these students are together on a daily basis both during classtime and at lunch, it was surprising that such low levels of peer interaction were observed. Why such relationships did not form is unclear since their shared time together as well as similar developmental age would seem to predict such an outcome. Since all appear capable of expressing emotions and forming friendships among each other, what are some plausible explanations for this lack of interaction and friendship? Early socialisation practices by the parents would be one. The first possible explanation, based on Sullivan's (1953) ideas about the functions of friendships, is that as children, these students were overprotected by their parents and actually never learned how to form friendships. In more than 30 interviews with parents of severely learning handicapped children, Mink et al (1983) found that parents tended to overprotect their children in a sincere desire to prevent them from experiencing ridicule and other forms of harshness that life might deal to them.

Another notion, based on observations in the class, is that the teacher's approach to the socialisation of the students inhibited their interactions. During formal classtime, the teacher discouraged not only social interactions but also attempts by students to help their classmates. Student desks were so far apart that any form of interaction was inhibited. Though the teacher showed some restraint in controlling the students during "informal classtime", they were aware of her

presence and continued to act demure. The teacher often expressed the opinion, that "her" students were "noticable", and that she wanted to teach them behaviours that would allow them to "blend" with the regular education students. To achieve this, she insisted that they not stay together as a group during lunch, but rather "mingle", thus further inhibiting the development of friendships among themselves. While the teacher's strategy was meant to further their social interactions with the larger body of students, the inadvertent result was increased social isolation for them.

A third notion, based partly on the interviews and partly on direct observations, is that the students were very much aware of their special status within the general school structure and considered themselves somewhat as "outcasts". Several students expressed the knowledge that they are "retarded" and seemed genuinely concerned about the fact that they were "different". It seems plausible that any hint of rejection by regular education students inhibited further attempts at "mingling" or that "social consciousness" prevented them from associating with their classmates (others like them) in an attempt to distance themselves from the "retards". Thus their isolation may be to some extent self-imposed.

We are left with the question, whether mainstreaming severely learning handicapped students, as it is currently practiced, is of actual benefit to them? MacAndrew and Edgerton (1966) and Fox (1979) noted that helping relationships of an enduring nature do occur among the "disabled" which may clearly be seen as "friendships of a highly human order". Unique to their findings, however, is the fact that the described friendships take place in segregated settings with populations of similar backgrounds, and that these interactions are greatly encouraged by the staff. In contrast, the special students at the high school are a noticable minority in an environment that shows little interest in them. The effects of mainstreaming need to be explored further in their immediate and far reaching outcomes. Is mainstreaming really as effective as it was hoped for this severely handicapped population? What can be done to eliminate some of the stigma that clings to severely learning handicapped students? How can teachers of both special and regular education students be trained more effectively to further interaction among the students? And lastly, what programs need to be implemented to encourage special students to socialise with each other as well as regular education students?

SUMMARY

Severely learning handicapped students (mean age 19.7 years) in a Special Education classroom of a Southern California High School were observed for a three month period by a field researcher. Diagnosis of the students by school authorities included Down's Syndrome, Autism, Schizophrenia and unspecified brain damage. Three distinct patterns of peer interaction emerged which clearly reflected environmental influence on the students' behaviour: (a) interaction during formal classtime (instruction and supervision by teacher and aides); (b) interaction during informal classtime ("free" time within the class structure, but still under supervision of teacher and aides); and (c) free time (time spent outside of the classroom during lunch and in between periods, basically without the supervision of the class teacher). Interaction patterns under the three conditions were markedly different. Overall, there were very few interactions, and it appears that environmental factors play an important role in the social isolation of these students. Suggestions for improvements and further research were provided.

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