The Use of Structured Activities to Promote Interaction between Students with Severe and Profound Learning Disabilities and their Mainstream Peers.

This article gives an overview of the development of a structured programme of activities which was part of a project linking a special school for students with severe and profound learning disabilities and a local second level school. The programme of activities was designed to promote interaction between a group of students from the special school and a group of transition year students from the second level school. The author gives reasons for the choice of the activities and assesses their impact from the point of view of both the students with severe and profound learning disabilities and their transition year peers.

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INTRODUCTION

The gradual mainstreaming of students with mild and moderate learning disabilities in Ireland since the publication of the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Ireland, 1993) has enabled many more children and young people to come into contact with peers who have special educational needs (SEN). The complex care and communication needs of students with severe and profound learning disabilities are still seen as barriers that separate this group of students from other students with less significant special needs (Evans and Lunt, 2002). An opportunity for contact between mainstream students and students with severe and profound learning disabilities sometimes occurs during transition year (TY) in second level schools. Regular contact with peers with disabilities can enable the TY students to overcome feelings of social discomfort and inadequacy and result in greater positive long-term attitudes towards disability (Shevlin, 2003). However, contact between mainstream students and students with learning disabilities will not ensure that positive attitudes are automatically developed, and unstructured contact can often be counter-productive (Beveridge, 1996; Shevlin and O'Moore, 1999).

In a study of the inclusion of a pupil with a moderate learning disability in a four teacher primary school in Ireland, Ring and Travers (2005) observed a lack of familiar reciprocal interactions between the student and his mainstream peers and concluded that, although he was not being teased or bullied, he was not fully included socially. Beveridge (1996) and McDougall, De Wit, King, Miller and Killip (2004) comment on the importance of providing structured social interactions that encourage the development of supportive relationships between students with disabilities and their mainstream peers both inside and outside the classroom, so that opportunities are created for equal interactions to take place between the two groups of students.

METHODOLOGY

In the present project, a programme of activities was developed that facilitated interaction between students with severe and profound learning disabilities in a special school and TY students who attended a local second level school. Fifteen students aged between thirteen and eighteen years at the special school participated in the programme and an equal number of TY students took part. There was one and a half hours of contact time between the two groups of students and this took place on one afternoon a week at the special school. Structured settings and activities were established in order to enable the two groups of students to respond and interact with each other in a comfortable and meaningful way. Two teachers at the special school assisted with the implementation of the project.

At the end of the project, group interviews with the TY students were carried out in order to ascertain their views on the project. The interviews with the TY students were then analysed and main themes were identified.

As the students at the special school were equally involved in the project, the researcher felt it was essential to include their 'voice'. This was achieved through observing and recording the reactions of the students at the special school both towards the activities and towards their TY partners. Students with severe and profound learning disabilities share a range of communication needs that limit conventional means of understanding their views. The most effective methods of assessing communication with individuals with severe and profound learning disabilities are dependent on the understanding and experience of those most familiar with the individual, who make use of both context and inference (Ware, 2003; Foreman, Arthur-Kelly, Pascoe, and Smyth-King, 2004; Ware, 2004). The observations were recorded by special needs assistants who were very familiar

with the students at the special school. They were then analysed and sorted into categories (Table 1). The definitions for these categories were taken from the behaviour states and communication indicators used in research in Australia by Foreman et al. which had been adapted for use from the Neonatal Behavioural Assessment Scale (Brazelton, 1973).

Table 1: Behaviour states and communication indicators for use with students with profound and multiple disabilities

BEHAVIOUR STATES	COMMUNICATION INDICATORS
Asleep – Inactive	Communicative Interaction
Asleep – Active	Student Communication Cue
Drowsy	Partner Communication Cue
Daze	No Communication
Awake – Inactive – Alert	
Awake – Active – Alert	
Awake – Active – Self Stimulatory	
Crying	

From Foreman et al. (2004).

Analysis of the recordings indicated that the observations could be sorted into one of five categories from the above table.

- **Awake – Inactive – Alert**
- **Awake – Active – Alert**
- **Communicative Interaction**
- **Student Communication Cue**
- **Partner Communication Cue**

The remaining categories were not observed during the project.

Design of the Programme of Activities
To prepare the TY students for contact with the students at the special school, the researcher visited the TY students at their school and gave an introductory presentation the week before their first visit to the special school. Aspects of disability were discussed and the TY students were given information about the types and levels of disabilities that they would encounter at the special school. In addition, information about communication through non-verbal means was

provided, and the TY students were encouraged to ask questions about any aspect of the presentation.

A play therapist was consulted when designing the programme of activities. The purpose of the activities was to create opportunities for the TY students to form positive relationships with the students at the special school in a relaxed, non-threatening way, using techniques with which the students at the special school were familiar. The gradation of the activities was specifically planned to move from the general greeting and gentle physical contact to creating situations where there were plenty of opportunities for eye contact to develop between the students at the special school and their TY partner, thus facilitating more complex communication opportunities. Each TY student was randomly allocated a partner from the special school at the beginning of the project and they worked with that partner for the duration of the project. This was to encourage the development of a close relationship between the partners.

The programme of activities was divided into two parts. Part one took place in the school hall and consisted of six different activities that were carried out to music. The activities were: a circle dance, a greeting activity, a line dance, a song, a sensory activity, and a relaxation activity. These activities were repeated each week, and were designed to gradually build up the confidence and comfort levels of the TY students as they became more familiar with their partner's communication needs.

The researcher and collaborating teachers provided support to the TY students during the activities and provided information and reassurance about the best ways to communicate with their partners. Where necessary, the collaborating teachers also 'modelled' some parts of the activity that involved communicating or making physical contact with the students at the special school.

Part two of the programme of activities took place in the special school classrooms and consisted of small scale art activities, where the TY students worked with their partners in making items such as Christmas decorations or paper flowers. The emphasis was on creating an informal atmosphere, with the school staff 'stepping back' and creating space for the TY students to build on the skills they had acquired during part one of the programme. The art activities created situations where the TY students had close physical involvement with their partners as much of the art work involved providing 'hand over hand' assistance to their partners, e.g. sponge printing, squeezing plastic bags containing paint and holding glue sticks. They also presented an opportunity for the TY

students to chat to their partners and between themselves, thus enabling the students with severe and profound learning disabilities to experience spontaneous teenage conversations.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to the structure of the TY programme in the secondary school, two different groups of TY students were involved in the programme. The first group of TY students had contact with the special school students for ten weeks during the piloting of the project from September to December. The second group of TY students had nine weeks contact with the special school students from January to March during the period of time that the research was being carried out. The researcher and the collaborating teachers all felt that they would have preferred to have only one group of TY students from September to March as it would have allowed a longer period of time in which the students at the special school could establish and develop good communicative relationships and interactions with their TY partners.

The number of students involved in the project was also a limiting factor as it involved only fifteen students with severe and profound learning disabilities and fifteen TY students. However, although the research was only carried out on a small scale, the findings indicate that both groups of students reacted very positively to the social opportunities provided by the structure and routine of regular contact.

FINDINGS

Interviews with the TY Students
When asked their initial feelings at the start of the project, all the TY students referred to strong feelings of nervousness, especially when first coming into contact with students with severe and profound learning disabilities. Some of the TY students indicated that these feelings were because the situation was totally new to them, "Something we weren't used to". Another student commented, "You rarely see people like that around and once you got there, [the special school] it was completely a strange experience, and you never knew anything like it". Other TY students referred to these initial feelings whilst at the same time commenting on how their feelings soon changed as illustrated in the following comments;

> — *at the beginning it was kind of uncomfortable but then it became more comfortable*

> *— well, it was really nerve racking for us, on that first time, after that you can't wait to go next week.*

All the TY students were very keen to emphasise that their feelings of nervousness and uncertainty changed once they became more familiar with the students at the special school, both as a group and with their partners;

> *— it was daunting at first, but when you got to know your partner, when you got to know a bit more of a connection with them, you looked forward to seeing them.*

The programme had been designed so that there were equal numbers of TY students and students at the special school, ensuring that each TY student had a partner from the special school with whom they worked throughout the project. This meant that these one-to-one relationships were able to develop as the TY student became more familiar with the communication styles and personality of their partner. Comments from the TY students indicated that becoming more familiar with their partner through the activities was an important factor in the process of feeling more comfortable and confident;

> *— and we got to know the children more through the reactions after the activities*
> *— Mary[1], I could see straight away, the second time, you could see exactly how she reacted to certain things, she was so much better to understand.*

The TY students' change of feeling and their growing confidence as the project progressed reflects research carried out by Shevlin and O'Moore (1999). The support of the special school staff also contributed to helping the TY students feel more comfortable and confident. A number of TY students acknowledged that the input from the staff at the special school was invaluable, "You knew that if anything happened that they'd be there".

Whenever possible, the teachers had given reasons for their advice and support, enabling the TY students to build up knowledge of their partners' communication style and their likes, dislikes and interests. When appropriate, the teachers also provided clear and concise information about the disabilities of the students at the special school in order for the TY students to gain a wider understanding of their

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[1] Student names used in this article have been changed.

partners' personality. Shevlin and O'Moore (2000) commented that the students involved in their research had expressed an interest in acquiring strategies to enable effective interaction with people with disabilities and had requested additional information about the causes of intellectual disabilities.

The TY students commented that the activities which they enjoyed the most were the activities that created the best interactions with their partners. For example, the sensory activity in part one of the programme was particularly popular. As part of this activity, the TY students carried out short sensory activities with their partner, such as blowing bubbles, fanning their partner or brushing them with a feather duster. The students with severe and profound learning disabilities were very familiar with these types of activities and so the TY students were encouraged to observe their partner's reactions and respond to them, through smiling, laughing or asking their partner if they wanted more of the activity. Comments included;

> — *I think the fanning bit and the blowing bubbles, because it made him laugh and smile*
> — *I liked the hall, the activities like the bubbles and the fan and the feather duster because you get more feedback with those things.*

These comments from the TY students emphasised the importance of creating appropriate situations that facilitated interactions between both groups of students.

The TY students were also very positive when they were asked about how they felt about interacting with people with disabilities, indicating that the confidence they then felt made it much easier for them to relate to people with disabilities, "I've learned that you can tell a huge amount by their eyes, that really helps. If I was to talk to someone with a disability I'd find it a lot easier to communicate with them".

Such positive experiences during the project combined to help the TY students develop their confidence, both in communicating with disabled people and in developing their self-confidence. It also helped them change their perspectives on disability and enabled them to look at people with disabilities in a different light. Thus, by creating an environment where the barriers of fear and lack of knowledge were gradually removed, an important aim of the project was achieved.

Observations of the Students with Severe and Profound Learning Disabilities
When the observations of the students at the special school were analysed, most of the observations were categorised under either **'Awake-Active-Alert'**, **'Student**

Communication Cue' or **'Communicative Interaction'**. The most frequently observed category was 'Awake-Active-Alert'. In this category the students were responding to what was going on around them, mainly by looking, moving their bodies or interacting with objects. Examples of such observations included;

— *students looking around at TY students*
— *watching a baton going down the line…smiles when he gets the baton*
— *looked at the baton and partner…slight vocalisation.*

The second most observed category was 'Student Communication Cue' where the students were initiating communication with their TY partner, mainly by looking at them, moving their hand or arm towards them, or responding to the multi-sensory activities carried out by their TY partner. Examples of observations of this behaviour state were;

— *turned head towards partner…eyes open, hand on partner's arm*
— *very vocal at the breeze from the fan and moved his/her head up.*

The third most observed behaviour state was 'Communicative Interaction' where there was an exchange of meaning between partners. Observations of this behaviour state were;

— *arm appeared to be moving towards partner who looked at her when touched*
— *big smile when partner has fan and talks to Thomas…Thomas smiles…Partner talks to Thomas a lot*
— *partner says, "I like your shirt"…Conor smiles at her.*

The number of these communicative interactions was quite small although the quality of the interactions was good. However, the number of recordings of communicative interactions increased at a steady rate during the project, indicating a growing understanding between the students at the special school and their partners. Successful interactions for students with severe and profound learning disabilities often depend on the partner knowing the student well, and on interactions taking place in quiet settings as a one-to-one activity (Ware, 2003).

The researcher had assumed that by encouraging the students at the special school and their TY partners to form close relationships, interactions would develop, become more frequent and improve in quality. Analysis of the interviews with the

TY students indicated that the TY students felt they had formed close, rewarding relationships with their partners from the special school. However, the relatively low number of recordings of interactions between the students at the special school and their TY partners suggests that such interactions are more complex than they appear and that the TY students had not acquired enough understanding of the communicative skills required to promote and maintain a greater number of interactions. Therefore, the best indicator of the success of the project was the high level of interest shown by the students at the special school in both the activities and their TY partners.

Analysis of the observations of the students of the special school also enabled the researcher to gain a broad impression of how they had reacted to the various activities of the programme. The analysis of the observations indicated that the sensory activity in part one of the programme was particularly successful in promoting communication cues and initiations from the students at the special school. Comments from the TY student interviews indicated that the TY students had also enjoyed this activity very much due to the responses they had received from their partners.

CONCLUSION

By providing the TY students with the skills and understanding required to communicate with their partners at the special school, relationships were able to develop that contributed to high levels of social engagement between the two groups of students. The programme of activities promoted high levels of interest and enjoyment for the students at the special school. Observations show that they were actively attending, responding and initiating, both through the activities and through their relationship with their TY partner. This could be seen as the best indicator of the success of the project for both groups of students.

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