

Break-time Inclusion: A Case Study of the Effects of Adult Organised Play on Children with Special Educational Needs

Using a case study of two pupils with special educational needs in a mainstream school, the author describes the nature and levels of their participation in break-time play. He examines how adult facilitation and organisation of play affected their participation and enjoyment, both during and following the intervention period.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a noticeable trend among some children with special educational needs (SEN) to take very little part in communal playground activities (Wing, 1996). Questions arise as to whether or not they enjoy the break-time experience, and as to the reasons for their lack of participation. These questions are timely given the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools. The research undertaken in this study is relevant to break-time policy and practice as they exist in the context of Irish primary schools. It focuses on the playground activities of two eight-year-old boys, Alan¹, a boy with Asperger's syndrome and David, a boy with dyspraxia. The study proposed to answer three questions in relation to the two boys.

- What was the reality of their break-time experiences?
- In what way would this reality be modified by their inclusion in an adult organised playgroup over a four-week period?
- On the cessation of the organised playgroup, would there be any ongoing consequences for the boys' break-time experiences?

The setting for this research was a rural Irish primary school with approximately 120 pupils.

Alan had difficulty in forming conventional social attachments, as is typical for a child with difficulties on the autistic spectrum (Schopler and Mesibov, 1992; McKernan, 1996). David, a boy with dyspraxia, had some co-ordination difficulties and often tended to observe at playtime rather than participate. This research, based on a case study and using mainly qualitative methods, had, as its rationale, the intention of making break-time more participative and enjoyable for both of the boys, if that proved possible.

PEER RELATIONS AND PLAY

Research literature throws light on the importance of peer relationships in the playground, on the intrinsic value of play for children and on the needs of children with Asperger's syndrome and with dyspraxia. Blatchford (1998) claims that in Britain, little recognition is to be found of the social and educational value of informal

¹ Student names used in this article have been changed.

and undirected activities in school. Anderson, Moore, Godfrey and Fletcher-Flinn (2004) found a similar situation in New Zealand. Their study demonstrated that school playgrounds “are not instructional settings and playground activities are not part of the school curriculum” (p. 382).

There is widespread agreement among researchers that break-time serves to improve peer relations, bringing advantages for participants (Blatchford, 1998). Sluckin (1981) refers to the learning opportunities for children provided by peer interaction in the playground, stating, “They learn how to join in a game, how to choose and avoid rules, how to deal with people who cheat or make trouble, and above all else how to manipulate situations to their own advantage” (p. 119). He also claims that “current changes and developments in education are affecting break-time experiences because there is little regard for something considered to be as marginal as break-time” (p. 162). It seems that the increasing push towards academic achievement has led to a lack of interest in the importance of play, an area for which there is a dearth of research pertaining to this country.

Since the focus of the study was on two boys with socialisation difficulties in the playground, it was important to study the background of the needs that they had, how those needs manifested themselves in the playground and the possibility of meeting those needs.

Asperger’s Syndrome

The child with Asperger’s syndrome has innate difficulties with the social aspects of life. Howlin (1998) speaks of abnormalities in reciprocal social interaction for children on the autistic spectrum. She refers to failure to develop peer relationships, and to a “lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests or achievements with other people” (p. 3). All of these attributes point to critical difficulties for children with Asperger’s syndrome in trying to make sense of playground activities. Frith (1989) alludes to the triad of impairments in relation to social, communicative and imaginative activities. It is reasonable to expect that impairments in these key areas of development may result in difficulties in the playground.

Dyspraxia

The difficulties associated with dyspraxia are described by Portwood (2000). Three of these are problems with co-ordination, inability to engage in imaginative play and delayed acquisition of language skills. The finding of Bishop and Curtis (2001) that most break-time activity has a physical component is a relevant one for children with dyspraxia. The inability to play imaginatively leads to problems engaging in many of the games played by boys in the age group relevant to this research.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted mainly using the approach of qualitative research (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Hitchcock, 1995), with the twin strategies of observation and interviews being employed in data collection. Some quantitative methods were employed in the gathering of data by observation. By using observation an opportunity was afforded to ascertain what was taking place *in situ* rather than at

second hand (Patton, 1990). Greater understanding of the context was therefore possible.

The two boys were observed at break-time over a two-week period to ascertain their rates of participation and communication. For the following four school weeks they were observed while each boy was given the opportunity to take part in playtime games in a group with three other children. These groups' play was facilitated by a special needs assistant (SNA) and the games played were Queenie-I-O and Corners (during outdoor play) and Snakes-and-Ladders and Beggar-My-Neighbour (during indoor play). When the intervention had ended, the boys were again observed over a further two-week period to establish if their break-time practices had been modified by the intervention.

Interviews were employed to acquire perceptions of break-time reality from the perspectives of the two boys at the centre of the study and from the perspectives of their parents (Crotty, 1998). The use of this method enabled the lived experiences of the individuals concerned to be described (Creswell, 1998).

PRE-INTERVENTION OBSERVATION

In the two-week pre-intervention period, each boy was observed at play on four separate occasions for a total of sixty minutes.

Alan

Alan spent seventy-three per cent of the observed pre-intervention time alone. Thirteen per cent of his time was spent in the company of one other pupil, while fourteen per cent was spent as one of a group of three or more. Only seven per cent of his total time was spent in verbal communication with another. Apart from the day that his class teacher was on playground duty, at no stage was he involved in participative activity with another pupil, but he did seem to be engrossed in his own thoughts. This conclusion was reached because of the fact that he was plainly speaking to himself. He was not geographically isolated from the rest of the playground, but he did not seek to be included in any activity in which the other children nearby were engaged.

David

Thirty-two per cent of David's time in the playground was spent alone, twenty-seven per cent was spent in the company of one other pupil and forty-one per cent was spent as one of a group of three or more pupils. An interesting factor within these statistics is that on one particular day, which coincided with the absence from school of his friend Seán, he spent eighty-seven per cent of his time alone. His class teacher attributed his solitude to Seán's absence from the playground. On that day, he walked around alone and seemed unwilling to initiate contact with any other child. It is clear that Seán's absence from school had a meaningful impact on David's social behaviour at break-time. Indeed, all of the time that he spent in company was in the presence of one, two or three of the same friends and he never socialised with any other pupil from outside that group of three. His play appeared fulfilling and the only time he gave an appearance of not being happy was in the aforementioned absence of his

friend Seán. His participation rate was fifty-seven per cent, a figure that is admittedly skewed by Seán's absence. The games played by David and his friends involved following an imaginary enemy. David was engaged in verbal communication for thirty-two per cent of the time.

OBSERVATION DURING INTERVENTION

Alan

Participation

Alan was one of a group of three or more other pupils for the duration of the time devoted to the intervention, an increase of eighty-six per cent over the pre-intervention period. He actively participated in the games for ninety-three per cent of the time, with the seven per cent non-participation rate being the combined result of an external distraction and being knocked out of a game prior to its conclusion. His participation was, on occasion, aided by the encouragement of the SNA, and it is worth noting that her encouragement was never rejected.

Communication

The figures for verbal communication show a marked difference from those of the pre-intervention period. During organised play Alan's verbal communication rate, based on the length of time he spent in communication with others, was forty-three per cent, an increase of thirty-six per cent. Negativity was not a feature of any of his verbal utterances, a significant point when judged in the light of his mother's comments at interview.

Board Games

Alan's mother had advised that he might have difficulty with board games if they were part of the intervention. Unwillingness to take turns and failure to win could, in her opinion, prove to be problematic. Nonetheless, it was decided to try Snakes-and-Ladders as one of the intervention activities. He participated fully in each of the two sessions and indeed halfway through the first game he stated, "I like this." On the second occasion, on the game being produced he enthused, "I love this game." During the course of the game he complimented his SNA by saying, "You're so much fun, you think of the most wonderful games." Alan was at all times willing to take part in the games. He never demurred when it was his group's turn to have organised play and, as is shown by interview with his mother, this can be taken as a vote of confidence by him in the procedure.

David

Participation

David spent ninety-nine per cent of the two hours intervention time as one of a group of three or more pupils, with only one per cent of time being spent alone. This showed a significant drop of thirty-one per cent when compared with time spent alone in the pre-intervention period. The one per cent non-participation occurred when he seemed to lose interest for a short time but took on the role of observer. However, with minimal encouragement from the SNA he returned to full participation in the game. For the rest of the time he was fully committed to the play and took part with enthusiasm, deriving much fun from the aspect of trying to outwit the person who had

to guess the location of a ball. While he was not very skilled in catching or following the ball, he still persisted with the game and did not give up.

David expressed satisfaction with the games and at no stage did he object to his group being separated from the rest of the pupils in the playground. Indeed, on a number of occasions he asked if it was his group's turn yet, showing an interest in, and an enjoyment of, the organised activities.

POST-INTERVENTION OBSERVATION

The observation time in the post-intervention phase was the same as that for the pre-intervention stage, a total of sixty minutes spread over a two-week period. All comparisons in this section were made between data collated during the pre-intervention and the post-intervention periods of observation.

Alan

Participation

The figure of thirteen per cent of Alan's time spent in the company of one other pupil was precisely the same for both pre- and post-intervention periods. He spent fifty-five per cent of his time alone, a decrease of eighteen per cent, while this decrease was exactly matched by an increase in the time spent as one of a group of three or more.

Communication

The increase in participation with other pupils was not matched by a commensurate increase in verbal communication, which rose from seven per cent to just eleven per cent. He seemed quite happy to be in the company of others without actually communicating verbally with any of them.

David

Participation

David continued to play only with the boys who had formed the organised group in which he took part. Post-intervention, he was engaged as one of a group of three or more for sixty-eight per cent of the time, an increase of twenty-seven per cent. The amount of time he spent alone dropped very significantly from thirty-two per cent to three per cent. This figure needs to be treated with caution, however, since his friend Seán was not absent for any of the days on which post-intervention observation took place. It is recognised that this was probably a relevant factor in such a significant decrease, but it also carries a meaning for the reality of playground activity for David on an ongoing basis.

Communication

Verbal communication played a significant role in the games played by David and his group in the post-intervention stage of the research. It occurred for forty-three per cent of his time, an increase of eleven per cent, and was most prevalent when he was participating in wheelbarrow races, perhaps due to the fact that all four of his group were in close proximity to each other, and to the competitive nature of the activity. There was no indication that he was unhappy in the playground at any stage.

POST-INTERVENTION INTERVIEWS

Alan's and David's Opinions

Both boys were of the view that they really enjoyed the games played during the intervention. Coincidentally, Beggar-My-Neighbour was the first game mentioned by both when they were asked to nominate their favourite activities. Alan also enthused about Snakes-and-Ladders, saying, "Oh it was brilliant. I got a Snakes-and-Ladders game because of that." Both boys were asked to choose between playing alone and playing as one of a group. David was quite adamant when he said that he would prefer to play outside with Seán and anyone else who joined in with them. Alan, on the other hand, was indecisive and contradictory in his response. Initially he opted for an organised group for the reason that it would be more fun. "If I had my choice I would play in an organised group," he said. On foot of further probing, however, about a preference for being with other people or being alone, he replied, "I'd just walk on my own. I like that." Later in the interview he reverted to a wish that adult organised group play could be continued.

Parents' Opinions

While Alan told his mother that he enjoyed the games, he did not mention them in specific connection with school activity. This should be interpreted in a positive way, however, because he would most certainly have let his feelings be known if he had not enjoyed the experience. She knew he had got pleasure from Snakes-and-Ladders because on seeing it in a shop he had asked her to buy it, and had been engaged regularly in the game with other family members since then. She ascribed this interest to the fact that he had played the game as part of the intervention.

David's mother said that he got great pleasure out of the intervention and that, "He was chuffed to be included in the playgroup." He described some of the games at home without being questioned about them, and spoke about the other children in his group. He expressed disappointment at home when the intervention came to an end, and found it all to be a positive experience. She felt that he may be participating more at playtime since the playgroup was formed.

DISCUSSION

Blatchford and Sharp (1994) cited the most significant aspects of break-time as meeting friends, having fun, social networking, the development of conflict avoidance strategies, freedom to socialise away from the classroom and taking initiative with regard to activities. In David's case, the findings bear out the relevance of their opinions. It appears that, in order for break-time to be a fully functional time for him,

he needs either to become not so reliant on one friend or to show more initiative with regard to activities. If Blatchford and Sharp's assertion that break-time experiences figure large in pupils' overall feelings about school, David needs to have a strategy so that he can enjoy and participate in break-time even if certain friends are absent from school.

In Alan's case, at the pre-intervention stage, he did not use break-time for meeting friends, for forming social networks nor for finding opportunities to socialise away from the classroom. Neither did he use it to develop strategies for avoiding conflict nor for showing initiative with regard to activities. In Blatchford's (1998) scheme of things, then, one would assume that he was a troubled, unhappy child. This, however, does not tie in with his mother's assertion, at both pre-intervention and post-intervention interviews, that he is a happy child. There is a strong possibility here that this research may not have been able to determine the reality of Alan's experiences in terms of enjoyment.

Marked changes from pre-intervention observation were noticed during the intervention. The participation rate of both boys showed significant increases, and neither of them displayed any negativity towards the process. Communication rates, both verbal and non-verbal, improved and there was an increase in their ability to stay focused on the activity to hand. Two main factors seemed to have facilitated these changes: the fact that the games were organised and the constant presence of an adult during the activities. From children's points of view, it may be that interest shown in their play by an adult lends extra significance to the process, making it easier to maintain their concentration.

Both boys and their mothers gave evidence of the intervention having been enjoyable. It is important that children who may experience difficulties in school should have a positive outlook on that part of the day which is specifically set up for them to experience socialisation and enjoyment.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In order for this study to be relevant for the two boys, conclusions need to be drawn and recommendations made regarding future practice. The findings of the study showed that the two boys displayed many of the social characteristics consistent with their particular learning disabilities. It is wise to draw conclusions on a separate basis for each of the two boys.

The most significant finding in respect of Alan was the eighty-six per cent increase in his participation at break-time. Taking part in adult led organised play appeared to be the catalyst that resulted in this increase, and in a meaningful decrease in the amount of time that he spent alone. There was some evidence, albeit without conclusive reasons, that when the intervention ceased his participation rate continued to be higher than it had been before. It could be concluded that the presence of an adult facilitator brought about these changes.

David displayed an increase in participation both during and following the intervention. However, the main finding of the study in respect of David was the contrast between his participation rates on depending on his friend Seán's presence or absence at school. The recommendation emanating from this result is that it would be advisable to implement measures to widen his friend network. This could be reasonably achieved by his inclusion in a group of three or four others as during the intervention.

If adult facilitated play activities are to be incorporated into school break-times, there are implications for the number of resources that would need to be provided by the school authorities. In the interests of fairness, the organisation of the required resources should not become the sole responsibility of the SNA. All teachers who take part in playground supervision are now paid to do so, and an argument can be made that the facilitation of better break-time conditions for the pupils is the responsibility of all supervisory personnel, who could have an input into the programme of games and the organisation of the groups.

Particular attention should be paid to the actual games that are played by the participants. They need to partake in activities that hold their interest. Where turn taking is a feature of the game each child's turn should come around relatively quickly in order for concentration to be maintained. It is also recommended that games be chosen where all the participants are relatively evenly skilled. In this respect games of chance may prove more suitable.

It is not claimed that the findings of this study can be generalised for the entire population of children with SEN and it is acknowledged that the success of an intervention such as that implemented in this study is hugely dependent on the capabilities and willingness of the adult involved. Within the expressed limitations, however, it is claimed that the process was worthwhile for the children concerned and it is further claimed that children who experience difficulty in socialising deserve to have their socialisation difficulties addressed as seriously as the classroom and academic aspects of their disabilities.

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