

Secondary School Children's Attitudes to Disability: A Comparison in Integrated and Non-Integrated Schools

In recent years in many countries there has been a move towards integrating pupils with disabilities into mainstream schools. Studies of pupils' attitudes have been helpful in supporting and encouraging this trend.

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BACKGROUND

A study was carried out which looked at the attitudes of secondary school children toward disability. The attitudes of 104 pupils from a non-integrated school and 90 pupils from an integrated school with facilities for children with physical disabilities, were measured using the 'Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Scale' (ATDP). The attitudes of the children from the integrated school were significantly more positive, and the most positive attitudes were found among students with the most contact with disabled people. The conclusion that can be drawn is that the integration of children with disabilities into ordinary schools helps promote more accepting attitudes toward people with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996), "Appropriate education for all children with disabilities should be provided for in mainstream schools, except where it is clear that the child involved will not benefit through being placed in a mainstream environment, or that other children would be unduly and unfairly disadvantaged" (p.173). Recent educational policy and demands from parents, mean that increasing numbers of disabled children are now being educated in mainstream settings. With this recent trend towards educational integration, research often focuses on the challenges that mainstreaming presents to groups like parents, teachers, and disabled children themselves but another important aspect of integration which is less often investigated is social acceptance by non-disabled peers. The attitudes of

this group can be crucial in determining the success or failure of integration programmes.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

For many years, studies have reported that children with disabilities tend to be perceived somewhat negatively by their non-disabled classmates (Horne, 1985; Centers & Centers, 1963). However a recent Irish study found that children in special classes were not socially isolated or viewed in a negative way although they were seen as different (Feerick, 1996). Students' attitudes are likely to be influenced by many factors, both personal and situational. Their own experience with disability, the types of disabilities they encounter and the environment in which they encounter them, may all influence their attitudes.

Many researchers have shown integration to have positive effects on the attitudes of non-disabled children (Townsend, Wilton & Vakilirad, 1993; Rapier, 1972; Gillies & Shackley, 1988). This could merely be due to an increase in contact, a factor that has been found to produce positive attitudes (McConkey, McCormack & Naughton, 1983; Gash & Coffey, 1995). Johnson, Johnson & Maruyama (1983) however, stated that "physical proximity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the reduction of prejudice." It is more likely then, that positive attitudes increase because of the opportunity integration provides for shared activities.

INTEGRATION AND SOCIAL CONCERN

Gash and Coffey (1995) studied the attitudes of children from integrated and non-integrated Irish primary schools, and found that those in the integrated schools with special classes for pupils with a mild mental handicap, showed significantly more social concern for those with a mental handicap. Gillies and Shackley (1988), in a study using structured interviews to assess attitudes to disability, found that pupils in an integrated school thought that physically handicapped people were more approachable, capable and clever than did pupils in a non-integrated school. One study by Rapier (1972), looked at the effect of functional integration on the attitudes of primary school children. One year after the placement of 25 physically disabled children into their school, the able bodied children were less likely to think that physically disabled people needed lots of help.

The present study compares the attitudes of secondary school pupils in integrated and non-integrated settings and examines some of the factors that influence them.

The attitudes being measured in this study are those towards disability in the general sense. Prior to this most studies carried out in Ireland have been on attitudes toward intellectual disability or have been carried out on primary school children.

DETAILS OF STUDY

Third year students from two Irish secondary schools participated in the study. The first school was chosen because it had operated a policy of integration for 22 years. At the time of the study, 22 children with physical disabilities were enrolled in the school, four of whom were in third year. These students participated in the regular classes, but in addition they had some special facilities. On the day the study was conducted 98 pupils were present, 2 of whom had a disability, and 6 of whom did not complete their questionnaires. This left a sample of 90 students, (33 girls/57 boys).

The non-integrated school was of similar size, catered for a similar age range and catchment area, and was a similar type of school. In this school 109 pupils were present on the day and there were 5 incomplete questionnaires, leaving a sample of 104 students (53 girls/51 boys).

MATERIALS

The measure used was the ATDP-O (Yuker, Block & Campbell, 1960), which consists of 20 statements about disability with which the respondents either agree or disagree along a 6 point scale. Participants were also administered a demographic questionnaire which recorded their age, gender, school, class, and whether or not they had regular contact with someone with a disability.

PROCEDURE

The students were administered the questionnaires in their class groups during a routine class period. They were asked to make sure to respond to every item honestly, and told not to spend too much time on any one statement. The questionnaires were scored according to the instructions in the manual, and the data analysed using the statistical package SPSS.

RESULTS OF STUDY

A comparison of the participating pupils from the two schools (See Table 1) shows that the mean age of the participants from each school was the same (14.9 yrs.).

There was a male majority in the integrated school (63%) while in the non-integrated school the ratio of males to females was almost equal (49%:51%). More pupils in the integrated school reported having regular contact with someone with a disability (78%), than in the non-integrated school (17%).

TABLE 1: A COMPARISON OF PUPILS FROM THE INTEGRATED AND NON-INTEGRATED SCHOOLS		
School	Integrated	Non-integrated
No. of participants	90	104
Mean age	14.9	14.9
% Male : Female	63:37	49:51
% that had regular contact with disabled people	78% (70/90)	17% (18/104)

The mean ATDP-O score of the pupils in the integrated school was found to be significantly greater than the mean of the non-integrated school indicating a more positive attitude towards people with disabilities (See Table 2).

TABLE 2: DIFFERENCES IN MEAN ATDP-O SCORE BETWEEN SCHOOLS			
School	n	Mean	S.D.
Integrated	90	76.28	17.74
Non-integrated	104	67.37	16.58

Mean difference = 8.91, $p \leq .001$ (2 tailed)

GENDER FACTORS

On comparing the mean scores of males and females, females were found to be significantly more positive towards disability than males (See Table 3).

TABLE 3: DIFFERENCES IN MEAN ATDP-O SCORES BETWEEN MALES AND FEMALES

Gender	n	Mean score	S.D.
Male	108	66.78	17.04
Female	86	77.43	16.68

Mean difference = 10.65, $p \leq .001$ (2 tailed)

CONTACT WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Of the 194 participants, 88 (45%) claimed to have regular contact with someone with a disability and 70 of these were in the integrated school. Mean ATDP-O scores were found to be significantly more positive in the group of pupils that said they had regular contact (See Table 4). When the means were compared in each school individually (See Table 5) the results showed that the 'regular contact' group had a higher mean than the 'no regular contact' group in the integrated school (77.56/71.80). However, in the non-integrated school those with regular contact actually had less positive attitudes than those without such contact (63.06/68.27) although neither result was significant. A result that was significant however was the finding that the 'regular contact' group from the integrated school had significantly more positive attitudes than the 'regular contact' group from the non-integrated school (77.56/63.06), mean difference = 14.50, $p \leq .003$ (2 tailed) (See Table 6).

TABLE 4: DIFFERENCES IN MEAN ATDP-O SCORES BETWEEN 'REGULAR CONTACT' AND 'NO REGULAR CONTACT' GROUPS

Contact	N	Mean score	S.D.
Regular	88	74.60	18.77
No regular	106	68.93	16.32

Mean difference = 5.66, $p \leq .026$ (2 tailed)

TABLE 5: DIFFERENCES IN MEAN ATDP-O SCORE BETWEEN 'REGULAR CONTACT' AND 'NO REGULAR CONTACT' GROUPS FOR BOTH SCHOOLS

School	Contact	N	Mean score	S.D.	Mean difference
Integrated	Regular	70	77.56	18.32	5.76, not sig.
	No Regular	20	71.80	15.10	
Non-integrated	Regular	18	63.06	16.21	5.21, not sig.
	No Regular	86	68.27	16.60	

TABLE 6: DIFFERENCES IN MEAN ATDP-O SCORE BETWEEN 'REGULAR CONTACT' GROUPS IN BOTH SCHOOLS

School	n	Mean score	S.D.
Integrated	70	77.56	18.32
Non-integrated	18	63.06	16.21

Mean difference = 14.50, $p \leq .003$ (2 tailed)

In the integrated school, 53 of the 90 participating third year students actually shared classes with a disabled student, while the remaining 37 did not actually share classes although there were disabled students in their year group. Those who were in class with someone with a disability had more positive attitudes than those pupils who were not (80.06/70.86), $p \leq .015$ (2 tailed) (See Table 7).

TABLE 7: DIFFERENCES IN MEAN ATDP-O SCORES BETWEEN THOSE IN THE INTEGRATED SCHOOL WHO SHARE CLASSES WITH A DISABLED STUDENT AND THOSE WHO DO NOT

Group	N	Mean score	S.D.
1	53	80.06	17.72
2	37	70.86	15.53

Mean difference = 9.19, $p \leq .015$ (2 tailed)

Group 1 = Pupils who share classes with someone with a disability

Group 2 = Pupils that do not share any classes with pupils with a disability

ITEM ANALYSIS

A comparison of the responses of the two schools to each item on the questionnaire revealed significant differences on six questionnaire items. Three of these had mean scores in opposite directions. Two of these three statements were the only questionnaire items that referred to children with disabilities. These were, "Parents of disabled children should be less strict than other parents," with which the pupils in integrated schools disagreed, and, "There shouldn't be special schools for disabled children," with which they agreed, both responses indicating a positive attitude. The other item that had mean scores in opposite directions was, "Disabled people should not be expected to meet the same standards as non-disabled people," with which they disagreed.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of children in integrated and non-integrated settings towards disability. In light of previous research the expectation was that those from the integrated school would have more positive attitudes. In this study, children from the integrated school (where children with physical disabilities participated in regular classes), expressed significantly more positive attitudes. This finding was in agreement with those from previous surveys, which have shown educational integration to have positive effects on the attitudes of non-disabled pupils.

The items on which significant differences appeared are noteworthy. Of the six items that had significantly different responses from the two groups, three were in opposite directions. Two of these were the only two statements on the questionnaire that included the word 'children'. This would suggest that statements which refer to "children with disabilities" instead of "people with disabilities" were more meaningful to the pupils, and therefore they showed stronger responses. It is possible then, that if a questionnaire that only had statements about children with disabilities had been used, even greater differences would have appeared.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES?

Previous research has documented the existence of significantly more positive attitudes among girls (Townsend et al., 1993; Voeltz, 1982; Hazzard, 1983), and these findings were supported by this study. Considering the higher percentage of girls in the nonintegrated school (51%) compared to the integrated school (37%), one might have expected attitudes in the former school to be more positive, but this was not the case. It is likely therefore that the magnitude of the differences reported here are underestimated due to the under representation of girls in the integrated school. It is possible that if samples with equal proportions of males and females had been used, the results would have shown even greater differences.

ATTITUDES AND QUALITY OF CONTACT

The finding that those pupils who had regular contact with people with disabilities had more positive attitudes than those without regular contact was in agreement with previous research (McConkey et al, 1983; Gash, 1993). When the 'regular contact' groups in each school were compared, the group from the integrated school showed significantly more positive attitudes than the group from the non-integrated school, and students who shared classes with a disabled student had significantly more positive attitudes than those who did not. That is, attitudes varied not only with the degree of contact but also with the type of contact. This supports the finding of a study by Townsend et al (1993) that it is the integration of children with disabilities into regular classes, not merely their placement in special classes in ordinary schools, that produces the most positive attitudes, and the finding by Stobart (1986) that integration is most successful when the contact situation is highly structured, active and cooperative. Allport (1954) sets forth the criteria for successful majority-minority group interactions as being (a) equal status and social norms favouring equalitarian contact; (b) a co-operative

relationship and interdependence; (c) informal as well as task level contact which allows group members to get to know one another as individuals. Taking this model into account the school environment would appear to be an ideal environment for successful integration and interaction.

Although these results are significant and encouraging, McConkey et al (1983) warn "it is inadvisable to draw conclusions about attitudes on the basis of only one type of questionnaire." It should be recognised that there are limits to the conclusions we can draw from the present study and perhaps future research in this area should use more than one measure of attitude. Given the sample size, and concentration on only two schools in this study, caution should also be exercised when generalising these findings to a larger population.

CONCLUSION

Townsend et al (1993) also remind us that "self reports by children about their attitudes may tell us relatively little about actual patterns of social contact." It may then be more beneficial for future researchers to utilise detailed studies of student interactions between children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, so as to reveal whether or not real acceptance is in place, regardless of what the pupils claim their attitudes to be. The results of the study are nevertheless informative and significant. They resemble many prior findings of research in this area supporting the view that school integration of children with physical disabilities helps promote acceptance of people with disabilities and rejection of old stereotypic conceptions.

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