Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are increasingly being educated within mainstream schools (Shaffer & Kipp, 2007) but few studies have investigated whether inclusion leads to typically developing (TD) peers accepting their peers with intellectual disabilities (ID). Hobb and Thompson (1968 as cited in Hogg & Vaughan, 2008) suggest evidence that people have an inherent fear of the unfamiliar which could initiate the formation of negative attitudes towards anyone they consider different. Although it appears that attitudes are fixed, Visser and Krosnick (1998) found they are not fixed for life and can be remoulded or even reversed from negative to positive attitudes. Gender has been shown to effect attitudes towards others with Townsend, Wilton and Yavkinrad (1993) found that girls were more positive towards children with ID than their boys were.

Attitudes can also be affected by age for example, Hudson-Allez and Barrett (1995) found that older children had more negative attitudes towards people with ID than younger children did.

Guralnick (2006) stated peer relationships are important for all children, and with peer relationships comes contact and interaction. It may seem obvious that people experiencing good peer relationships will want to spend time in contact with each other, but some studies have shown how contact can actually increase the level of peer acceptance, termed the contact hypothesis (Brewer & Smith, 1989) and contact can actually increase the level of peer acceptance, to 0 showing low peer acceptance. 1. Would you feel like helping this child if they were hurt at school? 2. Would you feel like sharing a secret with this child? 3. Would you like to play with this child? 4. Would you say “hello” to this child? 5. Would you work with this child in class?

Twelve A4 photographs of children were shown to the participants in the order of female with ID, male TD, female TD, male with ID. For the participants to answer the PAS clearly a posting box was used with ☑ (yes), ☐ (maybe) & ☐ (no) by different slots.

Hypotheses

This study predicts three main outcomes:

1. That all children will be significantly more accepting of their ID peers than TD peers with ID.
2. That older children will be significantly more accepting of their peers with ID than younger children will be.
3. That there will be a relationship between the contact a child has with children with ID and their acceptance of children with ID.

Since gender has previously been shown to have an influence on peer acceptance this study also explored it as a factor related to peer acceptance.

Introduction

Participants

Participants were 18 children aged 67-125 months (12 male) attending four primary schools in Gwynedd, North Wales. Participants were grouped according to academic year group; ten in year 1, five in year 3, and three in year 5, with no other exclusions.

Materials

Information packs were sent to parents and teachers, with interested parents being sent a demographic questionnaire including items about their child including age, gender and previous contact with someone with ID.

The Peer Acceptance Scale (PAS; Piercy et al., 2002) consists of five items measuring peer acceptance. Each item is scored 2=yes, 1=maybe, and 0=no, with total score ranging from 10 showing high peer acceptance, to 0 showing low peer acceptance.

Design

This research used a questionnaire based design, verbally administered to participants, and a demographic questionnaire for parents to complete at home. The design used was a 2x3 mixed ANOVA testing both between (year group) and within (photographs shown) group differences.

Procedure

After completing the demographic questionnaire at home, the participants answered the PAS questions during the school day with the researchers. They were rewarded a sticker for participating.

Method

Results

Although there was a difference in mean acceptance score between the (see Figure 1) the main effect for year groups was not found to be significant [F(2,15)=0.80, p=.47].

The combined acceptance score for ID photographs (M=45.11, SD=8.83) and TD photographs (M=45.80, SD=8.70) show there was little difference between the ID and TD photographs.

There was no significant difference in the acceptance scores given to the different photographs [F(1,15)=0.59, p=.46], and the interaction effect (photograph x year group) did not reach statistical significance [F(2,15)=1.43, p=.27].

Following the ANOVA correlations were run to explore the demographic data. A strong, positive correlation was found between the two variables (female participant and female photograph) [r=.53, n=18, p=.023, two tails] and in particular female participants to TD female photographs [r=.55, n=18, p=.017, two tails].

A strong, positive correlation was also found between present contact with someone with ID and the total acceptance score the ID photographs received [r=.66, n=18, p=.003, two tails].

Past and present contact with someone with ID were both correlated with having a member of immediate family with ID [r=.47, n=18, p=.049, two tails] and [r=.57, n=18, p=.014, two tails] respectively. In total 61% of the participants had experienced some form of contact, past or present, with someone with ID.

A strong, positive correlation was found between having a friend in school with ID and the total score for the ID photographs [r=.581*, n=18, p=.011, two tails].

Conclusion

As the results have shown, children were not found to be significantly more accepting of their typically developing peers. Likewise, older children were not found to be significantly more accepting than younger children. There was however a relationship between contact with children with intellectual disabilities and acceptance of them, and it was found that overall females were more accepting than males.

This study used a small sample size in comparison with previous studies in the area of attitudes of school children. If significance was found in a larger sample the impact on the education system could be great. Not only does it broaden the existing knowledge of attitudes of intellectual disabilities since inclusion it also increases children's awareness of intellectual disabilities.

Future investigations in this area could highlight aspects within the school system where interventions to improve inclusion could be beneficial.

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The photographs used in this study were sourced from an approved database and were free from copyright.

References

Hayley Horton and Lloyd Rees. This research was supervised by Dr Tracey Lloyd.