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PREVIEW

THE IMPACT OF SPECIAL PLACEMENT ON THE
SOCIO-EMOTIONAL FACTORS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT
AMONG MALE STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACEMENTS

by

Bruce S. Hoffman

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of the Doctor of Psychology in the
Department of Psychology at Pace University

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Abstract

Many children with learning disabilities experience low social status, low self-concept, and have significant difficulties in their behavioral conduct.* These deficits could either be primary or secondary to their problems. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know just how many of these significant problems are a function of the class placement, or are due to other extraneous factors. Utilizing hypotheses adduced from social comparison theory and group reference theory, this study was designed to evaluate the impact of special placement upon the socio-emotional factors of academically handicapped students. The subjects were 36 high school male students, ranging in age from 16 to 18 years of age, who have been referred to the Committee on Special Education (CSE). The CSE is a school based multi-disciplinary team that coordinates evaluations and recommends placements (i.e., self-contained, resource room) and services for children with handicapping conditions. During the first 3 weeks of their initial placement, each student (along with his current teacher) was asked to complete a questionnaire, the Behavior Assessment for Children (BASC). The student and his current teacher were then given a second administration of the questionnaire after the student had been in his placement for 6 months. All students in the special placement were compared to a mainstream comparison group on the (BASC).

Data analysis, utilizing a 3 X 2 repeated measures MANOVA, indicated that a significant interaction effect

(placement x time) was apparent for the 3 placement groups on their academic grades, as well as the Clinical Maladjustment and Externalizing Problems scale of the (BASC). These results indicated that the special placement (i.e., resource room and self-contained) seem to significantly effect the student emotionally, as well as academically.

PREVIEW

Chapter 1

Introduction

Before the passing of the landmark 1975 legislation, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act P.L. 94-142 (Federal Register, 1977), the majority of students with disabilities were either excluded from public schools or, if they were able to access services, they received them in highly segregated and separate facilities. The available programs for the severely impaired, when they existed, were often viewed as custodial rather than educational.

Public Law 94-142, gave impetus to the development of different classroom situations by mandating a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment appropriate to meet the needs of the students with handicapping conditions.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act mandates that all children regardless of their disability are entitled to a free, appropriate public education. For many children with special needs, this opened the doors to the public school system. However, there is still another barrier to remove. Having secured access to an appropriate education in the public schools, we must now focus on the results and consequences of that guaranteed education. We must ask: Is the separate, segregated special education system an efficacious way to educate our special students?

The constitutional right to a free, appropriate education for all children has taken on new dimensions since the enactment of this legislation. The response in school districts across the nation to Public Law 94-142 has been to classify special needs students according to the broad guidelines of the federal law and to assign them programs accordingly. But little research has investigated the efficacy of the secondary level placement (Bender, 1987).

In current practice, licensed special education teachers are asked to address the students' academic, social, physical and management needs to help them achieve goals established by multi-disciplinary evaluation and placement teams. These teams are provided with considerable raw data detailing the students' past academic history, intellectual functioning, and basic academic skill level. The evaluation of the students' social and emotional functioning is less thorough. Often it consists of only a vague reference to psychological traits derived from the analysis of projective tests, findings that have questionable validity (Anastasi, 1976). In conducting reviews of special education placements, some educators have concluded that both academically and socially special placements achieve no more than regular classes. In fact, in some cases they may put the child at a developmental disadvantage (Bruininks, 1978).

On the more positive side, it has been argued that the unique environment of the special education placement facilitates the matching of learners' needs with appropriate educational interventions without disengaging students from the regular school community (Bisgyer, Kahn, & Frazee, 1969). Thus, smaller class groups, specially trained teachers, custom designed and adapted equipment and more sophisticated individualized teaching methods that presumably characterize the special class, are thought to generate improved academics and social progress among students who are learning disabled. However, consistent evidence is lacking that the special class placement does indeed result in marked improvement for many students (Brown, Kiraly & Mckinnon, 1978)

Many children with learning disabilities experience low social status, a low self-concept and have significant difficulties in their behavioral conduct. These deficits could be either primary or secondary to their academic problems (Gresham & Elliot, 1989). Unfortunately, it is difficult to know just how much of these significant difficulties are a function of the special class placement or due to other extraneous factors.

Special educators usually recognize that various school environmental options can have both favorable and unfavorable implications for the student with special needs. Anderson and Walberg (1974) concluded that the relationship between environmental factors and learning is not merely one between

a physical setting and an individuals performance. On the contrary, the students' perceptions of the environment can markedly influence the students' performance.

Many educators believe that placement together of students who manifest similar disturbing behaviors would reinforce and increase the probability of these behaviors occurring (Bandura, 1972). In addition in such placements, some believe there is a greater probability for not meeting the achievement needs of these students (Bursuck, 1989). On the other hand, there are also many education professionals who believe that the special education classes are essential in order to "protect" the student with a learning disability and try to assure that a prescribed placement based upon intellectual and emotional readiness is offered (Bisgyer, Kahn and Frazee, 1969). The problem is that many of these programs tend to dramatically overemphasize the intellectual aspect at the expense of the students' emotional well-being.

In discussion of the classroom placements for the learning disabled, many researchers ask questions pertaining to the interaction of personal, psychological, and environmental variables. There has been subjective speculation and inconsistent findings about two different classroom settings the resource room and the self-contained. Some subjective opinions of the resource room setting have ranged from the belief that it causes learning disabled students to isolate themselves from their peers, to those on the other side of the continuum

who believe that being in a classroom with non-disabled students enhances their self-esteem. The research that has been carried out has had contradictory and inconsistent results - - some reported that the resource room student was more emotionally stable and self-confident, while others suggested it was the self-contained student who experienced less emotional upset (Moore & Kluwin, 1986; Ribner, 1978)

The inconsistency of the research findings may stem from a failure of the researchers to consider that many children with learning disabilities experience low social status, low self-concept and have significant difficulties in their behavioral conduct prior to their being placed in a special education setting. Although the majority of students referred to be evaluated for special services are identified by such common school related behaviors as low grades, suspensions, truancy and absenteeism, researchers have experienced difficulty in their efforts to define, or locate specific personality and behavioral characteristics unique to these students (Morse, 1985). Many relate this difficulty to the vague criteria and definitions utilized in the formulating of P.L. 94-142, claiming it results in the "overidentification" of students as learning disabled, when instead their educational needs can appropriately be met in a regular classroom (Epps, Ysseldyke, & McQue, 1984).

Since the enactment of P.L. 94-142, the number of students with special needs receiving special education services has increased from 797,213 in 1977, to more than 1,914,000 in 1987 (U.S. Department of Education, 1988). Therefore, some researchers feel that any attempt at finding specific or unique personality behavioral variables in such a large and heterogeneous population will surely result in failure (Morse, 1985). Baldwin & Baldwin (1974), have reviewed the extensive literature relevant to the assumption that specific types of learning and behavioral difficulties are more associated with, or produce certain behavioral and personality characteristics. They concluded that there is no evidence that particular personality characteristics were associated with any specific learning or emotional disability. To these researchers, the learning disabled and emotionally disturbed students were much more different from each other than they were similar. Thomas & Yamamoto (1972) noted similar results as they studied the feelings and attitudes of four groups of special middle school and high-school students. The four groups consisted of 175 LD students, 175 educable mentally deficient students, 200 emotionally disturbed students, 200 blind students, and 200 deaf students. Comparisons were made with a group of 400 regular education students. Data concerning the attitudes and feelings were obtained via semantic differential scales. Semantic differential scores were obtained for four people related concepts (i.e., classmates, parents, teachers, myself).

The authors concluded that the semantic structures of the groups of the special children were essentially similar with those of the regular education comparison students. These results suggest that the attitudes and experiences of those students exhibiting learning or behavioral difficulties, are just as varied as those found in non-disabled, regular education students.

The notion that the cognitive and linguistic development and functioning of those students who are educationally handicapped are qualitatively similar to those of the non-handicapped, but may be at a slower rate and level of development has been accepted by most, but not all researchers in the field (Morse, 1985). Gardner (1971) believed that most students experiencing academic or behavioral problems had certain specific personality and behavioral characteristics that were not found as often in non-problematic adolescent students. Gardner cited low frustration tolerance, excessive emotional outbursts, limited self-confidence and self-control, hesitancy over becoming involved in new or competitive experiences, and refusal to continue problem-solving effort in the face of difficulty, as the cluster of personality and behavioral characteristics more readily found in problematic students. In general, there seems to be little evidence of consensus among professionals in the field, either in terms of terminology or of methods utilized in defining and identifying academic or emotionally handicapped students.

A second reason that may contribute to the ambiguities of the research findings is that researchers examining the relationships between the special placements and the students' personality variables, seem to assume that this relationship is invariant and is manifest independently of other psychological and developmental factors. Hence, research in this area has paid little attention to other factors such as developmental differences and maturity of the child's perceptions and cognitions.

Students at the secondary level are more cognitively mature than the grade school student. This cognitive maturity enables them to describe and compare themselves on more abstract and varied levels (i.e., interpersonal, social, as well as academically) than the more concrete thinking grade school students (Piaget & Inhelder, 1968). Therefore, social cognitions and perceptions of the students at the secondary and grade school level are likely to result in different evaluations of their special education placement.

Festinger's social comparison theory (1954) along with group reference theory (Hyman & Singer, 1976) may also be utilized to provide insight and assist in our understanding the relationship between the special placement and the students' social and emotional functioning. Festinger (1954) in his theory of social comparison processes, suggested that in the absence of objective standards of comparison, people will employ significant others in their environment as the basis for forming

estimates of their self-worth. Also, given the choice of relatively similar or dissimilar others, similar others are more likely to be selected as a basis for social comparisons. Using Festinger's theory along with group reference theory (Hyman & Singer, 1976), which acknowledges that individuals may use multiple reference groups selectively to enhance their self-regard, the emotional and social consequences of being in a special placement begin to become salient.

Given Festinger's contention that one is likely to use similar rather than dissimilar others for forming estimates of self-worth, it seems likely that students placed in a self-contained placement would use their segregated classmates for comparative and evaluative purposes. The outcome of this process could result in an increase in emotional and social distress. This may be caused by the self-contained students' identification with the highly stigmatizing "special education student" label (Dunn, 1968; Guskin, Bartel & MacMillan, 1975).

The students who are put into a resource room placement and are mainstreamed for a portion of the day, will not be as prone to identify with the stigmatizing label that special education carries with it. This would be so because they have multiple reference groups (i.e., students from mainstream and special education classes) that they can utilize selectively to maintain high self-regard. This would then corroborate findings that suggest students in the resource room placement

suffer less emotional and social strain than those in a self-contained environment (Strang, 1978).

Statement of Purpose

Research has not emphasized the importance of the students' social and emotional perceptions of themselves within the special placement. Instead studies (e.g., Renick & Harter, 1989) have tended to emphasize the scholastic domain, and to indicate that it is mainly the students' negative perceptions of their scholastic competence that is primarily responsible for their poor social and emotional functioning. If during the placement procedure, special educators continue to conceptualize students only as learners, and dissociate them from their social and emotional needs that also define students, society will continue to fail in our attempts to appropriately meet the students' educational needs.

The purpose of this study is to establish the extent that the effect of special placement has upon the students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning. The research questions proposed for this study were as follows:

1. Who are these referred students? How may they be described in terms of their self-perceptions, emotional functioning, academic functioning, and classroom behavior.
2. How are they different on those dimensions prior to placement, and six months after placement?