

Peer Acceptance of Children with Special Needs in Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract:

This journal explores the dynamics of peer acceptance among children with special needs in inclusive classrooms. It investigates various factors influencing peer acceptance, including the role of educators, the impact of social skills interventions, and the attitudes of typically developing peers. The journal also discusses the importance of fostering an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and accepted, regardless of their differences.

Introduction:

Inclusive education has become increasingly prevalent in schools worldwide, aiming to provide equal opportunities for all students, including those with special needs. However, achieving genuine inclusion goes beyond physical presence in the classroom; it involves fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance among all students. Peer acceptance plays a crucial role in the social and emotional development of children with special needs, impacting their overall well-being and academic success. This journal delves into the complexities of peer acceptance in inclusive classrooms and explores strategies to promote a supportive and inclusive environment for all students.

Factors Influencing Peer Acceptance:

Several factors contribute to the peer acceptance of children with special needs in inclusive classrooms. Educator attitudes and behaviors play a significant role in shaping the classroom climate. Teachers who demonstrate acceptance, empathy, and inclusivity set the tone for positive interactions among students. Additionally, social skills interventions tailored to the needs of children with special needs can enhance their ability to navigate social interactions and build meaningful relationships with their peers. Moreover, the attitudes and perceptions of typically developing peers toward their classmates with special needs significantly impact peer acceptance. Encouraging empathy, understanding, and appreciation for diversity can foster a culture of acceptance and inclusion within the classroom.

Challenges and Strategies:

Despite the benefits of inclusive education, challenges may arise in promoting peer acceptance among children with special needs. These challenges include stigma, stereotypes, and misconceptions about disabilities, which can lead to social exclusion and marginalization. Educators must address these challenges proactively by promoting awareness, challenging stereotypes, and facilitating open discussions about diversity and inclusion. Implementing peer buddy programs, collaborative learning activities, and cooperative group projects can provide opportunities for positive peer interactions and foster friendships across diverse abilities.

Promoting Inclusive Environments:

Creating an inclusive environment requires a collective effort from educators, students, families, and the broader school community. Schools can implement policies and practices that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion, ensuring that every student feels valued and respected. Providing ongoing professional development for teachers on inclusive practices and disability awareness can enhance their ability to support students with special needs effectively. Moreover, involving families in the education process and fostering partnerships between home and school can reinforce positive attitudes toward inclusion and strengthen support networks for children with special needs.

Methods

Participants

Research was conducted with 110 students. Following the removal of five sets of damaged respondent data, data collected from 105 respondents were analyzed. All data were obtained with informed parental consent. Respondents consisted of 52 male students and 53 female students, ranging in age from 60 to 72 months (Mean=67.72 and SD=4.925). The mean was used to describe the age of respondents to obtain detailed information related to respondents' age range.

All respondents were students without special needs who attend Inclusive Kindergarten. A student without special needs is characterized as someone who is able to interact, understand, and follow instructions. Respondent selection was conducted using the accidental sampling method, where the researchers recruited participants based on the ease of attaining the sample. Respondents were selected based on their availability and desire to participate (Gravetter & Forzano, 2016). In the recruitment process, students became respondents following several stages of consent. Informed consent was first obtained from each child's parent or guardian. Those students who were granted consent were registered by the researchers and the teacher and jointly approached by both. The researchers, then, explained to the student the tasks he/she would do with the researcher as part of the research. Following this explanation, the researchers asked if the student was willing to help. Students who expressed unwillingness or looked uncomfortable were offered the opportunity to participate in the company of the teacher or not participate at all.

Measures

The questionnaire instrument given to respondents contained a scale of peer acceptance in early childhood, the Revised Acceptance Scale for Kindergarten (ASK-R) (Favazza & Odom, 1996; Favazza, Philipsen, & Kumar, 2000). ASK-R has been revised and adapted from a previous measuring instrument—ASK—that was devised specifically for kindergarten children by Paddy C. Favazza and Samuel L. Odom. The revised version, ASK-R, contains improvements on administrative implementation procedures, including barriers on questions related to disability to respondents, avoiding too many respondents in one administration, and taking note of non-conducive conditions. ASK-R adds an explanation of disability for respondents, requires the questionnaire to be administered to smaller groups of respondents, and requires the research to be conducted in a separate room in order to minimize distraction during the data collection process (Favazza, Philipsen, & Kumar, 2000).

ASK-R consists of 18 questions that measure attitudes in preschool children, reflected in their affections and behaviors (Yu, Ostrosky, & Fowler, 2012). It has three response scales to describe the level of acceptance in early childhood. For example, the question "Will you play with children who cannot walk?" could be answered by selecting from a response scale of symbols representing emotional expression: YES (Smile), NO (Sad), and DON'T KNOW (Thinking).

Data Analysis

The quantitative data resulting from the questionnaire survey were processed using the statistical analysis method of independent t-test analysis, followed by the interpretation of the total score of each response item. Independent t-test analysis is used in data analysis by comparing two different pieces of data (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013). In this research, independent t-test analysis was used to determine whether gendered differences exist in the level of acceptance of children with special needs. This technique was intended to compare levels of acceptance amongst male and female respondents. The interpretation of the total score was based on the overall result of the number of scores in each response given by respondents in order to determine the level of acceptance of children with special needs.

A negative response (NO) scored 0, a neutral response (DON'T KNOW) scored 1, and a positive response (YES) scored 2. The higher the total score, the higher the level of acceptance, while the lower the total score, the lower the level of acceptance (Favazza & Odom, 1996). The range of total scores in the ASK-R questionnaire is 0–36, classified into three levels of acceptance, where scores in the 0–11 range indicate low acceptance, 12–24 indicate moderate acceptance, and 25–36 indicate high acceptance (Nikolarazi et al. 2005). However, based on the number of questions used in this research, the total score range was 0–28, with scores in the 0–8 range indicating low acceptance, 9–19 indicating moderate acceptance, and 20–28 indicating high acceptance. An independent t-test analysis was also conducted on gender data.

Result

The findings of the research suggest that levels of peer acceptance within the Inclusive Kindergarten are moderate. In this study, three categories were used to classify the level of peer acceptance: low, medium, and high. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed an average score of 16.90 and a standard deviation of 7.518, which places the overall score in the 10–19 range, indicating a medium level of peer acceptance of children with disabilities.

For the ASK-R item about having friends with special needs, 64.8% of participants responded that they do not have friends with special needs. With regard to experiences of playing and interacting with children with special needs, 51.4% respondents claimed no experience of playing with children with special needs, while 56.2% claim no experience interacting with children with special needs. However, children scored far higher in their desire and willingness to interact and play with children with special needs.

The research used independent t-test analysis to measure gender-based differences in level of peer acceptance. The analysis suggests that peer acceptance was higher amongst boys ($M = 17.81$ with $SD = 7.021$) compared to girls ($M = 16.00$ with $SD = 7.940$) (Table 1). However, based on the Sig value of .220 (> 0.05), the difference is not significant, and it can be stated, therefore, that boys and girls exhibit the same level of peer acceptance.

Table I. Mean of Total Score of ASK-R (Boys and Girls)

| Gender | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--------|-------|--------------------|
| Boys | 17.81 | 7.021 |
| Girls | 16.00 | 7.940 |

Discussion

This study aimed to describe the level of peer acceptance in early childhood in inclusive kindergarten education institutions for children with special needs. Based on the results described above, children who attend inclusive kindergartens were found to have moderate or neutral peer acceptance of children with special needs. Levels of acceptance showed no significant gender-based difference. The results of

demographic factor analysis is in line with the most current research related to gender-based peer acceptance. Recent research has found no difference between boys and girls in their acceptance of children with special needs (Nikolarazi et al., 2005; Hong, Kwon, & Jeon, 2014). It should be noted, however, that other research has found that girls are more accepting than boys (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012).

The results of this analysis of early childhood acceptance of children with special needs in inclusive education institutions found that most children are in the medium category or the neutral category. These results differ from previous research findings which indicate that children in inclusive education environments are more accepting of children with special needs (Nikolarazi et al., 2005). Acceptance of children with special needs is expected to be higher in inclusive education settings because children with and without special needs can interact on a daily basis. Other studies have found that greater frequency of interaction has a positive influence on how accepting typically developing children are of their special needs peers (Hong, Kwon, & Jeon, 2014).

Based on the results of the descriptive analysis conducted in the present study, it was found that children in inclusive early childhood education settings do not have sufficient experience interacting and playing with children with special needs. Also, despite being in an inclusive environment, most children do not have friends with special needs. This may be due to the very recent implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education in Indonesia, and children in these settings lack both experience interacting with children with special needs and information about these children. In addition to the experience of interaction, knowledge is an influencing factor in peer acceptance of children with special needs (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012).

Acceptance by early years children in the medium category may arise from their limited cognitive development which means they do not view other children as having special needs and their limited knowledge of the concept of special needs. The research found that most early years children did not understand the words "disability" or "special needs." Instead, children identified differences between themselves and others based on visible physical conditions and the ability of other children to participate in play (Dyson, 2005). This finding is supported by other research that has shown that in early childhood, children prefer to play with peers who do not have disabilities rather than children with special needs. Children's selection and decision-making processes are influenced by several factors, including type of disability, form of activities that will take place, and other factors related to fairness and equity (Diamond & Hong, 2010).

It is important that knowledge and information about children with special needs is provided to typically developing children early in their lives in order to increase their acceptance of children with special needs (Ostrosky, Mouzourou, Dorsey, Favazza, & Leboeuf, 2015). Limited perceptions of children with special needs can interfere with their interactions with them (Nikolarazi et al. 2005). Therefore, an early understanding of children with special needs can foster positive feelings and enable children to make decisions regarding the inclusion or exclusion of children with special needs in play and other activities (Hong, Kwon, & Jeon, 2014).

Conclusion

This research found moderate or neutral acceptance of children with special needs amongst children in an early childhood education setting. No significant differences between the levels of acceptance of boys and girls were observed. This moderate or neutral level of acceptance results from lack of knowledge of and experience with children with special needs, despite the inclusive educational environment.

Limitations to this study should be addressed in future research. The primary limitation was the age range of respondents and the small sample size. Future research can provide an overview of acceptance levels across a wider age range of children in early childhood. It can also expand on this research by observing how early childhood acceptance arises in activities with children with special needs in the school environment.

Knowledge about disability and about special needs groups should be provided in early childhood. This knowledge is essential to provide awareness of the existence of individuals with special needs and to foster positive acceptance of these individuals in early childhood. One way to achieve this is through the use of illustrated storybooks to introduce typically developing children to children with special needs.

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