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Social Interaction in Preschool Children with Special Needs:
An Action Research Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to discover if the amount of social interaction happening in an inclusive preschool setting between students with special needs and typically developing peers could be increased by adding simple interventions into daily classroom routines.

Participants included four children, one girl and three boys, being served by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in a regular preschool classroom. Identified needs include communication, behavior, social skills, and academics. After initial data collection, social interaction interventions were implemented during routine daily activities. The results concluded that social interaction between students with special needs and typical peers can be increased by implementing social interaction strategies into the daily routine.

Social Interaction in Preschool Children with Special Needs

Social-emotional competence is a skill that begins developing at birth. The development of these skills lays the foundation for success in the classroom, at home, and in the community. Given the critical role social-emotional competence plays in children's quality of life, it is not surprising that researchers and practitioners have long focused their efforts on the development of social-emotional skills (Eisenberg, 2006; Brown and Conroy, 2011), particularly for young children who are at risk for or who have developmental delays (Brown, Odom, & McConnell, 2008; Guralnick, 2010; Brown and Conroy, 2011). Given the relationship of social-emotional competence to other fundamental areas of development, such as communication and cognition, it is not surprising that many young children who are enrolled in Part C Infant and Toddler and Part B 619 Preschool services have accompanying social-emotional delays and needs. In addition, many young children without identified developmental delays who attend early childhood education programs have significant problems in the area of social-emotional development (Campbell, 2002; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004; Brown and Conroy, 2011). For decades, researchers have studied the social interaction of students with special needs and have implemented social skills instruction to these students in the special education classroom.

In recent years the prevalence of inclusion has grown, especially in the early childhood setting. These inclusionary practices should facilitate the growth and development of social interaction skills and peer relationships. Through integration we are providing opportunities for typically developing peers to model and teach social interaction techniques through naturally occurring activities, or at least that's what we hope is happening. Is social interaction between students with special needs and typically developing peers occurring in the preschool classroom?

If not, can interventions be provided that will promote and increase social interactions? The purpose of this research is to determine the amount of social interaction happening between students with special needs and typically developing peers while determining if that interaction can be increased by changing daily instruction to encourage social interaction.

In this action research project, social skills intervention was implemented to determine if the number of interactions between students with special needs and typical students could be increased. The following research questions were examined:

- i. How often do children with special needs initiate social interaction with typical peers?
with peers with special needs?
- ii. Will providing social skills interventions increase the occurrence of child-initiated social interaction?

Method

Rationale

Social interaction with peers is one of the main arguments in favor of inclusion because many students with special needs lack this skill. Unfortunately, many educators believe that teaching the students in an inclusive environment is enough. The term social interaction encompasses a wide range of skills and activities. As a whole social interaction is much too broad to cover in a single research project. The purpose of this research was to simply show how often students with special needs were interacting with peers, either self-initiated or initiated by a peer. Quantitative data was used to show the number of interactions before and after interventions were provided.

Participants

Four preschool students who have been identified as entitled individuals to receive Part B services were selected to participate in the study. The students, ages 3,4, and 5, include three boys and one girl. They are served in an Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) classroom and are integrated into a regular preschool classroom for two hours per day. All four participants function at different academic levels and all have been identified as having significant delays in the area of social skills. Research was conducted in the regular preschool classroom during natural, daily routines. Data collection and observation was completed without any impact to the students as it was done during their natural interactions with peers.

Data Collection

Quantitative data collection was used to determine the number of social interactions between students with special needs and typical peers. More specifically, the data measured which child initiated the interaction and whether that interaction was with a student with special needs or a typically developing student. After initial data was collected social interventions were introduced and implemented during free choice time. Interventions used were peer buddies and social skills instruction on how to join a group. These interventions were taught, used, and practiced for 2 weeks before final data was collected. Methods and instruments used included observation and a tally chart. One observer collected data over a period of five days to ensure reliability and validity.

Procedure

Quantitative data was taken for each student for each student during free choice time for five days over a two-week period both before and after implementing social skills strategies. Each

student was observed for a fifteen-minute time period. The data was totaled for the group both pre- and post-intervention. Pre- and post-intervention data was then compared to determine if the social skills interventions had a positive impact on the number of social interactions between students with special needs and typical peers.

Results

Pre-intervention data indicated that the students with special needs spent most of their time playing alone during center time. Data indicated that students played alone 15 times during the observation periods. Student 1 was selected by a typical peer to play one time and chose to play alone four times. Student 2 self-selected a peer with special needs to play 3 times and played alone five times. Student 2 was observed playing alone, interacting briefly with a peer, and then returning to solitary play during the 15-minute observation period. Student 3 self-selected a typical peer to play one time, self-selected a peer with special needs to play two times, was selected by a typical peer one time, and played alone one time. Student 4 played alone all of the time. The data indicated that very little social interaction was occurring.

Figure 1 shows pre-intervention data for individual students as well as a total for each category.

Figure 1: Pre-Intervention Data

	Self-selects typical peer to play	Self-selects peer with special needs to play	Typical peer Selects student with special needs to play	No interaction - student plays alone
Student 1	0	0	1	4
Student 2	0	3	0	5
Student 3	1	2	1	1
Student 4	0	0	0	5
Total	1	5	2	15

Social interaction strategies were taught and implemented for two weeks in small and large group settings. Post-intervention was then collected. Post-intervention data indicated a significant increase in the amount of social interaction occurring between students with special needs and typical students. Student 1 self-selected a typical peer to play three times, was selected by a typical peer two times, and played alone one time. Student 2 self-selected a peer with special needs to play two times, was selected to play by a typical peer four times, and played alone two times. Student 3 self-selected a typical peer three times and was selected by a typical peer four times. Student 4 self-selected a peer with special needs two times, was selected by a typical peer three times, and played alone one time.

When students were taught and given time to practice two social interaction strategies they were able to increase their interactions with peers and decrease their time playing alone. The most significant change in results occurred in the increase in initiation by typical peers and the decrease in the time playing alone.

Figure 2 shows post-intervention data for individual students as well as a total for each category.

Figure 2: Post-Intervention Data

	Self-selects typical peer to play	Self-selects peer with special needs to play	Typical peer selects student with special needs to play	No interaction - student plays alone
Student 1	3	0	2	1
Student 2	0	2	4	2
Student 3	3	0	4	0
Student 4	0	2	3	1
Total	6	4	13	4

Discussion

Prior to the interventions the students with special needs were observed mainly playing alone or interacting with each other in the preschool classroom. The students with special needs played alongside or near peers but did not engage in interaction. Occasionally a typical peer would initiate interaction. That interaction was usually short lived due to a lack of reciprocation from the student with special needs.

During the intervention phase all students in the preschool classroom were taught social interaction skills such as how to join a group. These skills were taught and practiced during free choice time. All students were given verbal reinforcement for properly exhibiting these skills. Peer buddies were also assigned during free choice time. Students were paired with a buddy to play with during free choice time. The only requirement was that the students play together as a

buddy pair for ten-minutes. After ten-minutes they were allowed to continue playing or move to another activity or friend.

When given simple social interaction strategies and practice over a two-week period, students were able to significantly increase their social interactions with peers. Students with special needs were observed using strategies to join groups in play as well as to initiate and invite peers to play. Very little solitary play was observed. Typical students also initiated play with students with special needs more often during free choice. Although data was not collected regarding which students interacted with each other, the students were observed choosing the same peer to play with on more than one occasion. Friendships were being developed as a result of simple social skills instruction.

The importance of peer social interaction is undeniable, especially in the preschool years. Research has shown that there is a direct correlation between reading success in third grade and having a friend in preschool. With the push for academics at a younger and younger age it seems that social skills are being pushed to the side. Often teachers believe that they are teaching social skills in everything they do so they don't have to teach it directly. This research shows that purposeful and direct social skills instruction does make a difference for students with special needs as well as for typically developing students.

Annotated Bibliography

Ashiabi, G. (2007). Play in the Preschool Classroom: Its Socioemotional Significance and the Teacher's Role in Play. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35(2), 199-207.
doi:10.1007/s10643-007-0165-8

This article discusses the importance of socioemotional skills on school performance. In preschool these skills are developed through sociodramatic play with peers. It is important for children to engage in child-initiated and teacher-directed play. This article validates the importance of my peer interaction research project. Increasing the peer interaction skills of children with special needs is important for their social and academic achievement.

Brown, W. H., & Odom, S. L. (1995). Naturalistic peer interventions for promoting preschool children's social interactions. *Preventing School Failure*, 39(4), 38.

This article emphasizes the importance of teaching social interaction skills in a naturalistic way to ensure that these skills are maintained. It offers naturalistic and incidental strategies for teaching social interaction to preschoolers. The friendship activities presented in the article can be used in the intervention phase of my action research project. Simple tweaks to the daily routine and structure of preschool can have an enormous impact on the social interaction of preschool children.

Goldstein, H., English, K., Shafer, K., & Kaczmarek, L. (1997). Interaction among preschoolers with and without disabilities: effects of across-the-day peer intervention. *Journal Of Speech, Language & Hearing Research, 40(1), 33-48.*

This article studies the effects of peer mediated strategies on the social interaction of children with and without disabilities. Children without disabilities are taught social interaction strategies to use with children with disabilities. The results indicated an increase in quantity and quality of social interaction between children with and without disabilities. The peer mediated strategies are valuable to my intervention and research. It would be interesting to see the results if the same strategies were taught to children with disabilities.

Kohler, F. W., Greteman, C., Raschke, D., & Highnam, C. (2007). Using a Buddy Skills Package to Increase the Social Interactions Between a Preschooler With Autism and Her Peers. *Topics In Early Childhood Special Education, 27(3), 155-163.*

The article studies the use of peer-mediated social interaction in an inclusive preschool classroom. The results show that using buddy skills training increases the amount and quality of social interaction between typically developing preschoolers and preschoolers with special needs. This study has relevance to my research because it offers a strategy to help increase peer interaction. It also proves that peer interaction can be increased when peer mediated strategies are added.

Owen-DeSchryver, J., Carr, E. G., Cale, S. I., & Blakeley-Smith, A. (2008). Promoting social interactions between students with autism spectrum disorders and their peers in inclusive school settings. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 23(1), 15-28.*

The study described in this article researches the impact of peer training and social interaction of students with autism spectrum disorders. During initial data collection the authors confirm the lack of social interaction between students with special needs and typically developing peers. By teaching interaction strategies to typically developing students they are able to increase the social interaction of students with special needs. This study is very similar to the action research project that I will be conducting. It offers valid points and effective strategies that can be replicated in my research project.