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Article abstract

Learning disabilities are common among students in grades K-12. When I was a student teacher, I noticed that students with learning disabilities were struggling socially both in and outside of the classroom. As such, I decided to explore this aspect, but through a teacher's point of view where I interviewed four individuals who are professionals in the field of education. Findings suggest that teachers felt that the social competence of students with learning disabilities is dependent on whether they acknowledge their learning disability. Moreover, teachers believed they (as teachers) played a role in helping students with learning disabilities to overcome their social challenges; however, teachers did not feel prepared to help students overcome such challenges.

TEACHERS' NOTICING OF THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT. Learning disabilities are common among students in grades K-12. When I was a student teacher, I noticed that students with learning disabilities were struggling socially both in and outside of the classroom. As such, I decided to explore this aspect, but through a teacher's point of view where I interviewed four individuals who are professionals in the field of education. Findings suggest that teachers felt that the social competence of students with learning disabilities is dependent on whether they acknowledge their learning disability. Moreover, teachers believed they (as teachers) played a role in helping students with learning disabilities to overcome their social challenges; however, teachers did not feel prepared to help students overcome such challenges.

LES ENSEIGNANTS REMARQUENT LE DÉVELOPPEMENT SOCIAL DES ÉLÈVES AYANT DES BESOINS PARTICULIERS

RÉSUMÉ. Les troubles d'apprentissage sont courants chez les élèves de la maternelle au secondaire. En tant qu'enseignante stagiaire, j'ai constaté que ces élèves éprouvaient des difficultés sur le plan social, autant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur de la classe. J'ai donc décidé d'approfondir ce sujet sous l'angle d'un enseignant. Pour ce faire, j'ai mené quatre entretiens avec des professionnels en éducation. Les résultats montrent que les enseignants croient que la capacité sociale des élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage dépend de leur prise de conscience de leur trouble. De plus, ils pensent pouvoir contribuer à l'aide apportée aux élèves afin qu'ils puissent relever les défis sociaux qui s'offrent à eux. Cependant, ils ne se sentent pas assez préparés à leur venir en aide.

The special education system focuses on the learning of students who require additional supports to meet their needs. Oftentimes, students with learning disabilities are placed in special education. Society tends to view these students through deficit ideologies: as less capable of accomplishing everyday tasks and achieving complex goals (Stage & Milne, 1996). These negative views may cause such students to question their place in society. According to Statistics Canada (2018), one in every 10 students has one or more learning disabilities, and of those students many are also confronted with social challenges in their everyday lives (Lane et al., 2006). Prior research has suggested that students with learning disabilities: tend to have difficulty forming relationships; may struggle with connecting on an emotional level with their peers leading to unstable friendships (Estell et al., 2009; Hutchinson et al., 2004); may be isolated by their peers and have a higher risk of being bullied (Luciano & Savage, 2007); and may have difficulty communicating effectively and expressing themselves in social settings (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004). As such, they may seem less responsive and engaged when speaking with others and be likely to respond 'inappropriately' (Hughes et al., 2012). Especially because students with learning disabilities are often labelled and marginalized in educational settings, I argue that it is all the more important that we as educators support and uplift them to ensure that they feel as though they belong to *all* aspects of school life.

Teachers play a crucial role in supporting the social development of students with learning disabilities. Since teachers connect with their students daily, I wanted to learn more about their thinking with respect to the social development of students with learning disabilities, which became the focus of my master's research project. In this Note from the Field, I share the perspectives of the secondary school teachers I interviewed. Specifically, I discuss what teachers noticed about their students' social interactions, what they did not notice, their concerns about their role in students' social development, and the ways that they support students socially. I use quotes directly from the teachers to highlight their voices. Finally, I discuss the different social intervention programs that teachers are using, or intending to adopt, in their classes. I begin by describing my research project.

Supporting students with learning disabilities with social challenges in the classroom

The idea for my research project came from my experience as a student teacher in a grade seven science and technology classroom during my master's program. While I was prepared to differentiate my lessons to

accommodate the academic needs of diverse learners, I discovered that I was not prepared to help students with learning disabilities with social challenges that they experienced. For instance, I noticed that students with learning disabilities rarely participated in group discussion, disliked group work, and were often alone during recess or lunch time. I began to question whether and how the students' learning disabilities were affecting their social skills. I was also curious to know if other teachers had similar observations and questions. As a focus for my master's research, and after obtaining the requisite ethical approval, I interviewed four teachers. At the time of the interviews, Kelly, Rachel, and Shoshana were recent teacher graduates and Arianne (all names are pseudonyms) had over 15 years of teaching experience, and all taught at different schools. While almost all teachers had direct experience of working with students with special needs, I decided to interview teachers with a range of teaching experience (from early to late career teachers) as they each bring different perspectives, experiences, knowledge, and stories to share. I focused on the context of Quebec education.

WHAT TEACHERS NOTICED

The teachers that I interviewed provided insightful ideas based on their perspectives and experiences from working with students with learning disabilities. Below, I present the teachers' perspectives on what they noticed which, after data analysis, falls under three themes: (1) teachers' observations of students with learning disabilities during social interactions, (2) teachers' concerns about their role in the social development of students with learning disabilities ('concerns' here refers to teachers' unpreparedness and lack of resources to support students' social development), and (3) what teachers noticed about what their role should be in the social development of students with learning disabilities.

Teachers' observations of students with learning disabilities' social interactions

The teachers shared what they had noticed about their students with learning disabilities' social interactions with their fellow peers both in and outside of the classroom (i.e., the hallways, cafeteria, and school yard). For example, Arianne (who taught in a special education class with students from grade 9-11) said, "Their [(students with learning disabilities)] perception is slower, and sometimes in severe cases, they don't pick up on certain jokes or if someone makes fun of them" (Di Placido, 2019 p. 11). Arianne also had occasion to observe students while she was on supervision during recess or lunch time. She noticed that some of her students with learning disabilities would approach their peers to speak

with them. Based on some of the conversations that she overheard, the other students would disengage from the conversations and usually walk away. While observing these situations, Arianne noticed that the students with learning disabilities would "clam up and be in their own world because they can sense the isolation" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 11). Arianne's perceptions are echoed in literature highlighting the challenges in students with learning disabilities' social behaviour (Thompson & Kronenberger, 1990) and social relationships (Geisthardt & Munsch, 1996). Although Arianne suggested that students with learning disabilities mostly have negative interactions with their peers, for her part and conversely, Rachel (who taught grade 1-3) noticed that her students with learning disabilities felt confident about their interactions. For instance, Rachel recounted, "they [(students with learning disabilities)] interact in any way they want to and if they are introverts then they don't care" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 12).

Teachers' concerns about their role in the social development of students with learning disabilities

All the teachers felt that they had a duty to support the social development of their students with learning disabilities. While they were actively implementing strategies to support their students, they also raised concerns based on what they noticed about their students' social development. For Kelly (who taught grade 3 and 4) and Shoshana (who taught grade 10 and 11), they felt as though they were not sufficiently prepared to support their students' social development in their teacher education programs. Kelly shared, "We don't have classes and are not given workshops or resources in university that provide us with skills and strategies to help students who struggle socially" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 14). Similarly, Shoshana explained, "We are never taught how to help a student that is having trouble socializing. We are only taught how to help them with their academics" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 15). Other teachers shared their experiences with the resources they received, revealing that they did not feel as though the support offered in schools met the pedagogical needs of *all* teachers. Arianne explained that while she felt sufficiently supported, other teachers did not: "The support in my class with my full-time assistant is great, but there is more support needed for teachers working with students with diverse needs outside a contained [special education] classroom" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 15). Rachel provided an example of a teacher who teaches students with diverse needs who are included in regular education classes. She explained how she only received support from schools where the majority of students had learning disabilities. However, when she taught in schools where the majority of students did not have learning disabilities, she did not feel confident in

helping her students overcome social challenges. She believed that "a teacher should have the skills and strategies to help these students succeed socially and bring [these skills] to any school or classroom" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 15).

Teachers' beliefs about their role in supporting students with learning disabilities' social development

Teachers believed that their role was to support students with learning disabilities in developing socially. Kelly believed that it was necessary for teachers to understand their students' learning disabilities in depth to be able to recognize their social challenges and find strategies to help them improve. She shared: "If the teacher understands the disability, then they can attend to it" (Di Placido, 2019, p.13). Similarly, Arianne felt that it was important to gain a deep understanding of students' social abilities but specified that this knowledge needed to extend to both inside and outside of the classroom, saying: "We need to get to know our students well because they might face social challenges outside the classroom that they don't face in the classroom" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 13). To get to know her students and recognize how she could help them develop socially, Arianne believed that forming a trusting relationship with her students was essential. She noticed that when students felt validated and listened to, their social success improved. Arianne shared, "I built a relationship and bond with the student. They trusted me and [were] therefore more involved in class and group activities" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 13).

The teachers also believed that they had the responsibility of explicitly teaching their students social skills as they are essential for every aspect of the students' lives. For example, Rachel shared, "You as an educator see that the child is isolated and not communicating properly, then you play a role in helping the student gain these skills because when they go out in the real world, they need them" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 13). Arianne spoke about the social skills that she believed were most valuable to teach: "organization, responsibility, attentive listening and ability to initiate and maintain conversations" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 13). Their responses were consistent with the literature, which emphasizes teachers' critical responsibility in supporting students' social development (Johns et al., 2005; Samanci, 2010). Kelly went further, feeling that certain social skills should be taught to all students *regardless* of their abilities and said, "We should be teaching students with learning disabilities, and all students for that matter, how to form relationships and how to communicate with their classmates" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 14).

The teachers also shared their perspectives on establishing supportive learning environments. They agreed that teachers should establish an environment where students with learning disabilities feel accepted by their fellow peers. Kelly thought that this could be done by "having a discussion with the class as a whole and explain to them what social challenges are and how others might not socialize in the same way as everyone else" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 14). Arianne had a similar perspective and said, "We have to educate the other children to accept the children with learning difficulties and once these children are accepted, they don't feel different or feel awkward about being different" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 14). The teachers felt as though they should create a positive classroom atmosphere where students with learning disabilities are integrated and feel part of a community. As best shared by Kelly, teachers should provide "nourishment and encouragement and not push them to the side" (Di Placido, 2019, p. 14).

WHAT TEACHERS COULD NOTICE MORE

Although there were many moments that teachers noticed in supporting students with learning disabilities' social development, there are several aspects that teachers could notice more. For instance, teachers did not recognize the students' development to be holistic in nature; meaning, that they did not notice how aspects of students with learning disabilities' social, academic, and emotional lives are connected and impact each other. It is important to consider the student as a whole and all factors that influence their development as learners and people (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Berger et al, 2011). Moreover, teachers could have noticed more how the educational environment impacts the social development of students with learning disabilities. Teachers need to be mindful of the standards and expectations that schools have for students and how these impact their social and overall well-being (Dudley-Marling, 2004; 2007). If teachers could focus on students as whole people, they could begin to re-structure educational settings, developing new strategies to support students with learning disabilities in their classrooms.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS

The literature highlights several social intervention programs that teachers could use to support the social development of their students with special needs. For instance, Vemon et al. (2006) developed The SCORE Skills which was an approach used by Arianne in her classroom. The SCORE Skills are a set of skills deemed essential for collaboration and forming relationships which include S – *sharing ideas*, C – *compliment others*, O –

offer help, R – *recommend changes*, and E – *exercise self-control*. The teacher first explains the skill and its importance, then provides examples of when the skill should be used, and finally models the skill. The students practice the skill through role playing. This approach is beneficial to students' social development as they receive concrete demonstrations of the skill and practice it with the teachers' guidance. However, The SCORE Skills approach does require teachers to find time to implement it in their class, which can be challenging with content and assessment heavy curricula. Another example of a social intervention program is TAI, which stands for Team Assisted Individualization (Slavin et al., 1984). TAI is a type of cooperative learning where students with mixed abilities work together on activities, projects, and assignments. As such, TAI allows students with learning disabilities to collaborate with students without learning disabilities in an environment facilitated by the teacher. TAI provides students with benefits, such as learning from peers and supporting one another as well as improving students' teamwork and collaborative skills. Challenges may arise when using this approach; for instance, students may have differing perspectives and struggle with getting along. A final example of a social intervention program is called The STAR Project, a computer-based program to help adolescents develop social problem-solving skills (Goldsworthy et al., 2000). While none of the teachers in my study used this program, Kelly mentioned that she hopes to use technology in the future to support her students' social development. The STAR Project consists of real-life scenarios that adolescents encounter on a daily basis. Using the STAR pneumonic, the participants first *stop* if they are faced with a problem; they then *think* about the problem and try to devise a solution; they then *act* on the problem and implement their solution; and lastly, they *reflect* on whether or not the solution was effective. The participants use STAR when solving text and video-based problems on the computer program. STAR is interactive and engaging; however, teachers require resources such as computers and certain software to use this program. The teachers I interviewed were clearly motivated and determined to support the social development of their students with learning disabilities. Since teachers were already supporting the social development of their students with learning disabilities through various programs, it would be beneficial for them to receive further resources, tools, and strategies both during their university teacher education and through professional development in schools.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Students with learning disabilities experience challenges in social settings. As such, teachers play a critical role in supporting their social skill development. Based on my interviews with secondary school teachers, they noticed that students struggled socially both within and outside of the classroom; they also believed that, as educators, they play an important part in supporting students' social development. Many of these teachers were already implementing social intervention programs yet wished to do more. However, they expressed feeling unprepared and lacked support. Based on my findings, I would encourage all teachers to voice their concerns to their administration and ask for more professional development on students with special needs. Ultimately, in order to support students, teachers must be supported first.

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