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IMPROVING THE SOCIAL DISABILITIES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was conducted on the practices of improving the social disabilities of students at three primary schools in Gulele sub City of Addis Ababa: Dilbetigile primary school, Eyerusalem primary school, and Tsehay Chora primary school. The participants of the study were primary school teachers selected using purposive/snow ball sampling, which was helpful in selecting informed or information rich participants for the study. In an effort to address the purpose of the study, guiding or basic questions were raised around the issues related to the commonly identified cases as social disabilities, the means by which teachers identify students with social disabilities, the possible causes for those social disabilities identified, and the specific strategies that have been used by teachers in improving those social disabilities. Following the collection of data using focus group discussion and interview, an attempt was also made to organize it in to major themes, on which discussion and interpretation was based. Consequently, the major findings of the study included the following ones. The commonly identified cases as social disabilities were: difficulty of smooth and active interaction; loneliness; aggressiveness; depression; excessive fear and shyness; excessive worry; excessive inferiority feeling or in appropriate self perception; and lack of willingness and in ability to share their ideas. The means by which teachers identify students with social disabilities were observation, teacher nomination, parents' nomination, and peer nomination. The common causes for those social disabilities identified were: overloaded responsibilities of children; family adjustment problems like conflict between parents; parents' hatred towards their child; parents' frequent cruel punishment and neglect; physical handicappedness; economic problems related to feeding, clothing, and worry for other resources required for schooling; family health related problems like having HIV positive parent/s; having single parents; having alcoholic addicted parents; and mistreatment by foster mothers especially for orphans. The specific strategies that had been used by teachers in improving social skills of those identified students were: advising and initiating them to frequently play with their peers at school; dealing with their parents on the problems and mechanisms for improvement; forcing them to join and participate in social clubs at schools; inviting them to observe the activities of socially active students in especially arranged programs; deliberately and frequently asking questions, and giving special responsibility in the classroom; arranging group activities and making them group representatives; arranging their seats with socially active peers; and providing extra tutorial sessions, for most of the socially disabled children encounter learning difficulties. In conclusion, there seem to exist significant numbers of students in our primary schools who are seeking help in promoting their social skills; despite this, however, schools seem to lack the necessary attention for the issue under study, except a few teachers who are personally committed in supporting students with social skill problems. Hence, for positive social interaction and the establishment of friendship to occur among children with social disabilities, they need to be provided with the opportunity that would enable them to promote their social skills, the opportunity should be provided on continuous basis, and special support shall also be offered so as to enable them cope up with their peers/students in the inclusive school setting.

KEYWORDS

Improving social skills, social disability, primary school students, special needs education, child rights, social skills, social work, inclusive education, education policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The convention on the Rights of the child, being adopted by the general assembly in 1989, guarantees the child's human rights. The convention has been ratified by more countries than any other human rights treaty. In addition to guaranteeing children protection from harm and abuse, and making special provision for their survival and welfare through, for example, health care, education and family life, it accords them the right to participate in society and in decision making that concerns them. Besides, the convention on the Rights of the child is concerned with the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all actions regarding children, relative to the best interests of the others in the society and balancing the child's autonomy rights with his or her need for protection. That is, Article 3 specifically emphasizes the rights of children to express their views in all matters related to their lives, in accordance with age and maturity, and it also encourages appropriate participation of children in making decisions. Article 12 also calls for the views and voice of children to be heard and respected. Closely linked to the best interests of the child, it acknowledges that children's opinions are important and their views and voices must be taken in to account concerning the realization of their rights; and this article further stressed that children should participate in decision-making processes that are likely to affect them, in ways that are appropriate for their age (Betcherman, 2004).

Similar to this international focus on the children's development, the Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia also states that;

The Education and Training policy envisages bringing-up citizens, endowed with human outlook, country-wide responsibility, and democratic values, having developed the necessary predictive, creative and appreciative capacity in order to participate fruitfully in development and the utilization of resources and the environment at large" (TGE, 1994).

To realize such strong assumptions and commitments, the policy document encompassed five general objectives, fifteen specific objectives and over-all strategies of implementation from pre-primary to higher education. For the sake of setting the scene for latter discussion on the issue of improving children's social skills, the presentation of the general objectives of the Education and Training Policy seems essential. Accordingly, as indicated in Article 2 (Sub-article 2.1) of the Policy document, the "new" Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia has the following general objectives: develop the physical and mental potential and the problem-solving capacity of individuals by expanding education and in particular by providing basic education for all; bring up citizens who can take care of and utilize resources wisely, who are trained in various skills, by raising the private and social benefits of education; bring up citizens who respect human rights, stand for the well-being of people, as well as for equality, justice and peace, endowed with democratic culture and discipline; bring up citizens who differentiate harmful practices from useful ones, who seek and stand for truth, appreciate aesthetics and show positive attitude towards the development and dissemination of science and technology in society; and cultivate the cognitive, creative, productive and appreciative potential of citizens by appropriately relating education to environment and societal needs.

Besides, special needs education (SNE) has also been taken as a focus area in the targets of the Education and Training Policy. For example, Articles 3.2.9, 3.4.11, and 3.7.6. respectively states that "special education and training will be provided for people with special needs; teacher training for special education will be provided in regular teacher training programmes; and special attention will be given in the preparation and utilization of support input for special needs education". Moreover, recognizing the exclusion and barriers to active learning and participation and in order to produce the required changes in the education system, the MOE has also developed a special needs education strategy (2005) that provides an overview of the current situation of special needs education; defines national objectives, strategic priorities and division of responsibilities; identifies resources and possibilities for cooperation; proposes key elements for inclusive education system development, and analyzes favorable factors, constraints, risks and possible solutions (MOE, 2006).

In general, the discussions made on the international treaties on the rights of children, and the national policy provisions on the well-being and cultivation of children as responsive citizens for the political, social, economic, and cultural demands clearly indicate that schools take the greatest share in creating a conducive climate for the all rounded development of children, by responding to their specific and respective demands. Perhaps, one of the issues that schools need to work in promoting students' education is improving social skills, especially for students with social disabilities. That is, if schools are to produce citizens

who are able to defend against and for their rights, and respect the rights of others, healthy development of students' social interaction skills at schools are very crucial.

Broadly speaking, social skills are those components of behavior that are important for persons to initiate, and then maintain positive interactions with others. Our ability to interact and develop relationships with those around us is not fully realized until we are able to listen and communicate effectively. Similarly, if a child has any type of social communication problems, the ability to connect with others will be affected. That is, social skills are the foundation for getting along with others. A lack of social skills can lead to behavioral difficulties in school, delinquency, inattentiveness, peer rejection, emotional difficulties, difficulty in making friends, aggressiveness, problems in interpersonal relationships, poor self-concept, academic failures, concentration difficulties, isolation from peers, and depression (Slavin, 2000). Hence, appropriate social skills are important if students are to develop sustainable academic competence and sound personality characteristics.

As research evidences show students with social disabilities face multidimensional difficulties in coping up with the schools' general expectations. That is, in inclusive schools where students with social adjustment problems are prevalent, not only estimation of the exact degree of individuals' physical incapacity is essential, but also a detailed study of his/her vocational learning, personality traits, and reaction to wards his/her disability and capacity for readjustment must be studied. Taking this concern, sociologists as well as educators agree that the chief function of the school is to develop in young people modes of behavior commensurate with the ideals and objectives of a democratic social order (Fisher, 1965; Finlayson, 1941; Moffat, 1939; Reznikoff and Glass, 1965; Thrasher, 1965; Winston, 1965).

In short, in the process of schooling, students' interaction seems to take the greatest share in the efforts they shoulder to share the desired knowledge, skills and values. Especially in the information age in which we are living, schools are highly expected to produce citizens who are able to express their thoughts and emotions, share ideas, defend their rights, argue for and against issues of their concern etc... Inclusive educational settings create a situation where children with disabilities can increase their social competence. It is important to note, however, that such an increase in social competence certainly does not always occur automatically.

The results of most studies of integration and inclusion do not support the belief that merely placing a child with a disability in the mainstream spontaneously improves the social status of that child (Slavin, 2000). There is actually a danger that the child will be marginalized, ignored or openly rejected by the peer group. This situation must not be allowed to occur since it is evident that poor peer relationships in early school life can have a lasting detrimental impact on social and personal competence in later years (Thousand and Villa, 1998). It is for this reason that establishing good social relationships with other children has been described as one of the most important goals of education (Cooper and McEvoy, 1996). Despite these pressing global and local concerns, no local researches seem to indicate the situation in our schools.

Hence, this study is aimed at exploring the situation of three primary schools in improving social skills of socially disabled children. These schools were found in Gulele Sub City of Addis Ababa. To achieve its objective, the study basically addresses the following basic questions:

1. What common cases or problems are being identified as social disabilities in primary schools?
2. How are students with social disabilities identified?
3. What are the basic causes of students' social disabilities?
4. What specific strategies have been used for improving those social disabilities identified?

2. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

As it is already indicated in the introduction section, the major objective of this article is to undertake a qualitative study on improving the social skills of socially disabled primary school children. The study employed a qualitative design, which in fact helped for the in depth description of the situations of schools under study.

The participants were selected from three primary schools in Gulele Sub- City, Addis Ababa: Dilbetigle primary school, Tsehay Chora primary school, and Eyerusalem primary school. The participants of the study were 15 primary school teachers, 5 in each school. Their selection was also made with purposive/snowball sampling, which is helpful in selecting informed participants for the issue under study.

In collecting the desired data for the study, focus group discussion and interview were used and it was found to be interesting as was possible to understand from the participants' reflections during the discussion. The focus group discussion helped the researcher to study the real practices of teachers in promoting students' social disabilities. The interview, on its part, also helped the researcher to collect detailed information from those participant teachers who had active roles in the focus group discussion.

Finally, the collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis. This type of analysis is highly inductive in that the themes emerge from the data and are not imposed upon it by the researcher. In most cases, the data collection and analysis seemed to take place simultaneously. Even the background reading formed part of the analysis process for it helped the researcher to explain emerging themes.

Coding technique was also used to analyze the responses to interview items. In analyzing these data, responses to the interview items were grouped by themes, following the guidelines presented by Creswell and Maietta (2002). In the initial coding, the first step of the coding process, the responses to the interview items were compiled and read in order to determine any dominant themes or patterns in the responses. These responses were used as initial codes for the data. The second phase of the coding process involved arranging the responses into categories that emerged from additional reviews of the data after grouping them for the first time (i.e., categorized according to their affinities into general thematic categories). This yielded a final list of codes for the data. Finally, the coded data were grouped by the emerging themes on the basis of which the thematic content analysis was made. In order to assure trustworthiness of the coding process, a senior lecturer of educational planning and management took part. The inter-rater reliability was found to be 0.90 in the main study. On the other hand, in the pilot study, the inter-rater reliability found was 0.84.

3. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In an effort to see how far our schools are shouldering their own responsibilities in improving the social skills of students with social disabilities, an attempt was made to undertake a qualitative study on the practices of three primary schools: Dilbetigle primary school, Eyerusalem primary school, and Tsehay Chora primary school. After the participants were selected, the qualitative data was collected using focus group discussion and interview as per the pre formulated guiding questions. The guiding questions were raised around the issues related to the common cases that teachers identify as social disabilities; the means by which teachers identify students with social disabilities; teachers' perception about the possible causes of those social disabilities identified; and about the strategies mostly used by teachers in improving the social skills of students with social interaction problems. Then, the collected qualitative data was organized and discussed as per the major themes identified as per the guiding questions. Accordingly, the discussions of the results are presented here under.

As was observed in the responses during data collection, there seemed to exist differences among participants even on the awareness they have in the need to think about improving social skills. Some teachers seemed highly committed while others seemed to take the issue as something marginal, not part of their basic responsibility. Unfortunately, these gaps on the awareness of improving students' social skills were also seemed to exist with the school principals as was observed during the preliminary communication I made in order to get their permission. Specially, one principal confirmed as the issues for my study is not their schools' concern. He tried to inform me that I should conduct my study on special schools that are providing education for only disabled students. In fact, I tried to convince him that such issues are also crucial in inclusive schools like his own, and finally, he got convinced with the issue I raised and the data collection process continued. Though there was similar resistances from the principals of the three schools, permissions were sought from each of them after long discussions. Hence, discussions of the data collected are made in the following paragraphs as per the major themes identified.

The first issue raised to the respondents was about the commonly identified cases as social disabilities. Firstly, the very essence of the study was explained to the respondents followed by some orientations about the need for improving students' social skills. Then, they were asked to share their experiences of social disabilities in the process of teaching-learning. That is, an attempt was made to let them remind and share the commonly identified cases as social disabilities.

A teacher from school "A" expressed that:

I feel very happy when supporting socially disabled students. Unfortunately, teachers in my school do not pay attention to social disabilities. What most teachers are doing is teaching their subject matters, giving tests and exams, and reporting results accordingly. Even the school principal does not give any attention to social disability. But as a social studies teacher, I have been trying my best in identifying and supporting students with social problems like loneliness, excessive shyness, aggressiveness, depression, and excessive fear.

Another teacher from school "A" on his part noted that:

I think it is not our responsibility to worry about improving the school skills of students. Even it is not part of the curriculum. As we all know, the number of students in most classrooms are too many. Teachers are very busy in undertaking continuous assessment activities and providing the corresponding feed back to that large number of students. So, on the one hand, we have never made improving social skills as part of our task, and on the other hand, it seems impractical to order teachers to do so. Despite these, however, there are very few teachers who have been supporting socially poor students on voluntary basis or on their personal initiatives.

In the schools where the study was conducted, there were only very few teachers who were trying to deal with the social disabilities of students. Similar cases seem to have been observed in the three schools as was drawn from the focus group discussion. Consequently, the following were found to be the common ones: difficulty of smooth and active interaction; loneliness; aggressiveness; depression; excessive fear and shyness; excessive worry; and excessive inferiority feeling or in appropriate self perception, especially for orphans. These identified cases were more or less similar to the ones raised by Slavin (2000) as problems associated with social interaction. Perhaps, what seems to have been missed in the schools under study is the necessary focus to be given for at least minimizing the problems.

The second guiding question raised was about the means by which teachers commonly identify students with social disabilities. In here, the respondents did not take time in responding to the issue raised for it was vividly practiced in their schools knowingly or unknowingly. A teacher of school "C" specifically noted that:

I do not have a problem with identifying students with social disabilities. I most of the time observe them deviated from their peers. Sometimes, I also use parents', teachers' and students' nomination. For I am a social studies teacher, my friends assume that I deal with students' adjustment problems. My closer attachment with students and parents also helped me in identifying those students with sever social disabilities.

Similarly, the responses of the focus group discussion also confirmed that the common means was observation, inside and/or outside the class room. That is, students with social disabilities were easily identified by observation for they seemingly demonstrate interaction difficulties both inside and outside the classroom. Additional means of identification used by teachers were also teacher nomination, parents' nomination and peer nomination. In fact, the latter three had been used for children with vivid social disabilities.

Though teachers in the three schools were able to identify students with social disabilities using the mechanisms described above, there also seem to exist some gaps in using other informative mechanisms for identifying children with social disabilities. For example, as indicated by Serna (1993), Johnson and Johnson (2001), and Greshman, (1998) respectively methods like sociometric-survey, mapping friendship patterns, and peer ratings are very helpful in identifying children with social deficits. Actually, these gaps could be attributed to the teachers' lack of supportive trainings, lack of leadership support from schools, and lack of adequate focus for the issue itself, as was possible to understand from the focus group discussion conducted and from the interview results.

The third issue raised to the respondents was about the causes of those social disabilities identified. In here, there seemed to exist some differences across the schools. For example, a teacher from school "B" expressed that:

In my school, students are getting depressed and worried because of economic problems. In some cases, I get students who are not allowed to eat their breakfast. Surprisingly, I also get students who eat only once a day. On the other hand, I get students getting worried with parental adjustment problems. May be because of the living condition of the nearby locality, conflict with parents seems a daily agenda for the husbands usually drink 'Tela', 'Araki' and 'Tej'. When I ask those depressed students, they tell me that they did not sleep the whole night because of parental problems. In some cases, I see these students crying because of the father's cruel action on the mother.

A teacher from school "C" on her part also noted that:

There is a Kechenie Child Rearing Center near to our school. Significant number of students of this center gets enrolled in our school each year. Most of the students of this center have similar characters that they complain about the mistreatment of foster mothers, and they have also identity confusion. Some of them also worry about their future fates. An insult by foster mother which is called 'wof-zerash' seems a common occasion which disappoints the orphans.

Generally, the respondents in their focus group discussion expressed that in school "B", economic and parental adjustment problems seemed to be the prevalent cause; and in school "C", the problems related to orphans like mistreatment by foster mothers, identity confusion, worry for future fate were the prevalent causes. An attempt was also made to investigate the reasons attributed to these two schools. Consequently, for school "B", the problems related to feeding, clothing, and lack of other instructional resources were attributed to socioeconomic status of the population; where as in the case of school "C", it was found out that a significant number of orphan children drew from Kechene Children's Rearing Institution. That is, as the results of the study showed, most of the children who drew from this institution complain about the problems of foster mothers, and this in fact contributed to the behavioral problems of students.

A teacher from School "A" in particular further indicated the causes in that:

The common causes for the social disabilities identified in my school include: overloaded responsibilities of children; age difference with their class mates, for some students who came from rural areas in Oromia region; family adjustment problems like conflict between parents, parents' hatred towards their child, parents' frequent cruel punishment and neglect; age related biological factors, especially for girls at the time of early menstrual periods; physical handicapped ness; economic problems related to feeding, clothing, and worry for other resources required for schooling; family health related problems like having HIV positive parent/s; having single parents; having alcoholic addicted parents; environmental related factors like growing in a locked compound having no friends or growing being over protected; mistreatment by foster mothers especially for orphans.

In addition to the existence of similarities and some differences across the experiences of those schools under study, this issue of foster mothers seems to have been a serious problem as was reported by teachers that foster mothers usually say to orphans that they are "Wef-zerash" and other similar expressions. Besides, it was reported that foster mothers at Kechene Child Rearing Center, for they are not trained, have not been genuinely serving the kids, for example in feeding, clothing, caring and other related services.

Cooper and McEvoy (1996) noted that social disabilities are causing learning disabilities, and it is for this reason that establishing good social relationships with other children has been described as one of the most important goals of education. So, appreciating the consequences that are likely to be observed in the efficiency of the education system, the fourth issue raised to the respondents was about the strategies that have been used in improving social skills of students with those disabilities identified. Some differences were observed among the orientation and commitment of teachers with respect to employing strategies for improving social interaction. The cause for the difference seemed to be attributed to two major reasons: one was the lack of adequate training and orientations on how to support socially disabled students and on how to improve their social skills; the other was the lack of the necessary focus and support from the principal's office for such issues. In general, the following were the major strategies that have been used by the respondents in improving students social skills: advising and initiating them to frequently play with their peers at school; deliberately initiating them to form friends/peers; dealing with their parents on the problems and mechanisms for improvement; forcing them to join and participate in social clubs at schools; inviting them to observe the activities of socially active students in especially arranged programs; forcing them to undertake some short minutes discussion on a certain topic; forcing them to read sentences, paragraphs and passages in front of the class; forcing them to undertake a debate on a certain issue; teaching them to use the appropriate gesture while speaking, especially by language teachers; deliberately and frequently asking questions, and giving special responsibility in the classroom; arranging group activities and making them group representatives; forcing them to undertake a prompt speech on a certain topic; arranging their seats with socially active peers; creating links with donor agencies for support in feeding and stationary materials, especially for those with economic problems; and providing extra tutorial sessions, for most of the socially disabled children encounter learning difficulties.

Though the strategies discussed above are helpful in promoting students' social skills, it seems also important to devise mechanisms for training teachers in a way that could enable them successfully promote students' social skills through influencing attitudes, facilitating social interaction, promoting group work, and social skills trainings as was indicated by Barnes (1998), Canfield and Wells (2001), Punam (1997) and others.

4. CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

From the discussions made and the findings obtained, it seems possible to conclude that there are significant numbers of students in our primary schools who are seeking help in promoting their social skills. Despite this, however, schools seem to lack the necessary attention for the issue under study, except a few teachers who are personally committed in supporting students with social skill problems.

In general, for positive social interaction and the establishment of friendship to occur among children with disabilities, at least the presence of three conditions seem very crucial: opportunity, continuity, and support.

The opportunity that is being with in proximity of other children frequently enough for meaningful contacts to be made, shall be ensured in the process of schooling. That is, when students are given deliberate opportunities to play, discuss, exchange ideas, work etc...with others, they are more likely to develop their social skills, for social skill development requires informed and meaningful practices or exposures.

In promoting continuity, these socially disabled students shall also be involved with the same group of children over a relatively long period of time. In some cases, parents may prohibit children not to play with their peers with the fear that they could be spoiled. However, this may unfortunately, develop some disabilities with children's emotional and social developments, which may also cause learning disabilities. So, in case when such condition happen with students in any school set up, the school and the parents need to work jointly to arrange situations for children with disabilities to be involved in social interaction with their peers both at school and out of school hours on continuous basis so that it would be possible to pave the way for the production of informed, rational, and responsive citizens. Supporting them to make contact with other children in order to work and play with them; and if possible being directly supported in maintaining friendship out of school, for example, by being driven to a friend's home or being allowed to sleep over at a friend's house at weekends is also another important action that needs to be taken. That is, inclusive schooling is likely to provide the opportunity for friendships to develop in terms of proximity and frequency of contact, and in terms of potential continuity. It is also likely to create the best possible chances for children with disabilities to observe and initiate the social interactions and behaviors of others. So, what inclusive classrooms must provide is the necessary support for positive social interaction to occur. This, particularly, seem to be important for students who are low in self-esteem and confidence and who are missing some of the basic social skills.

Besides, schools shall also take the lead in arranging trainings for teachers on improving students' social skills and ensure that the conditions are favorable; special group of teachers shall be organized in the form of guidance and counseling club so that it would be possible for the group to provide continuous support for children with social disabilities. Moreover, strong attempts shall also be made in strengthening parents' awareness on the education of their children so that their responsiveness to teachers' requests for dealing with children's problems is likely to increase.

To sum up, helping your students learn to get along with you and with others can make a huge difference in their future. Learning about the particular challenges faced by these students can cause you to feel rewarded even if they are students who others find unrewarding to work with. Help your students to learn social skills and you will assist them for the rest of their life.

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