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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the peer acceptance of integrated students with disabilities as a function of severity of disability and amount of overall student variance in the class. The study involved 14 classrooms and 285 students. Of the 44 students with disabilities, 30 had been classified as mildly disabled and 14 as severely disabled. A sociometric nomination procedure was used to measure peer acceptance. Classroom composition variance was calculated by taking the classroom mean of (1) the classroom percentage of ethnic minority students, (2) the proportion of students identified for special education, and (3) the proportion of students with a low reading performance. Results indicated that significant severity of disability by classroom composition created variance interaction effects regarding social desirability and peer acceptance in a play context, and peer nominations of frequent playmates. Although generally there was low acceptance of students with severe disabilities, the most severely disabled students were generally the most accepted. The paper suggests that the students who were more definitively severely disabled were more likely to attain protected deviant status and differentiated expectations. (Contains 12 references.) (DB)

Peer Acceptance of Integrated Students with Disabilities as a Function of Severity of Disability and Classroom Composition: A Preliminary Report

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RUNNING HEAD: PEER ACCEPTANCE

Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, March, 28, 1997

Abstract

The present investigation examines the peer acceptance of integrated students with disabilities, an outcome increasingly emphasized in recent inclusion policies. It is predicted that the peer acceptance of students with severe disabilities is a function of being recognized as significantly different from modal classmates. Students with severe disabilities are therefore predicted to be better accepted in classes with low student variance -- environments in which they may be expected to "stand out." Alternatively, it is posited that improved peer acceptance of students with mild disabilities is associated with placements in high variance classrooms in which they are more likely to "fit in." Thus, a severity of disability by classroom composition variance interaction is predicted regarding measures of peer acceptance. Results indicated significant severity of disability by classroom composition variance interaction effects regarding social desirability in a play context and peer nominations of frequent playmates. Results are discussed regarding their implications for practice and theory.

The focus of the investigation is the relation of peer acceptance of integrated students with disabilities as it relates to severity of disability and classroom composition variance. Peer acceptance is a primary outcome of schooling with important consequences for the quality of life of students with disabilities (Haring, 1991). Mainstreaming proponents traditionally assumed that increased contact between non-disabled students and students with mild disabilities automatically resulted in increased acceptance of the latter, in virtue of their similarities (Dunn, 1968; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1988). Alternatively, it was traditionally assumed that integration does not improve the peer acceptance of students with severe disabilities due to noticeable and overwhelming differences between themselves and non-disabled peers (York & Tundidor, 1995).

In contrast to traditional assumptions, research findings indicated that students with mild disabilities are not accepted in integrated classrooms (see Semmel, Gottlieb, Robinson, 1979; Swanson & Malone, 1992). Yet recent literature suggests that many integrated students with severe disabilities are well accepted (Evans, Salisbury, Palombaro, Berryman, & Hollowood, 1992; Haring, Breen, Pitts-Conway, Lee, & Gaylord-Ross, 1987).

Competing Theoretical Orientations

Dentler and Erikson (1959) posited that, "groups tend to induce, sustain, and permit deviant behavior" (p. 98). In fact, other group members frequently protect individuals who appear "consistently helpless and consistently anomalous" by performing their tasks and duties for them (Dentler & Erikson, p. 105). This suggests that students with severe disabilities may expect some degree of acceptance and protection *because* peers readily recognize qualitative discrepancies

from modal characteristics. Alternatively, peers may hold students with mild disabilities --who often lack obvious indications that they are disabled -- to standard, and potentially unattainable, expectations. When students with mild disabilities exhibit atypical and potentially threatening behavior, it is not readily excused or disregarded by classmates, and may frequently lead to rejection. Thus, students with mild disabilities may not be generally accepted in integrated environments because they do not exhibit obvious and qualitative differences.

Role of Group Composition

Sociological theorists suggest that deviance is relative, dependent upon the context and characteristics of the group (Dentler & Erikson, 1959). We posit that increased variance regarding a defining group characteristic relates to heightened group tolerance along that dimension. It is hypothesized that the acceptance of students with severe disabilities is a function of group recognition of qualitative differences and the subsequent differentiation of classmates' expectations. A classroom environment of low variance accentuates recognition of differences and is posited to facilitate the acceptance of integrated students with severe disabilities. Alternatively, the acceptance of students with mild disabilities -- for whom peers are not likely to adjust their expectations -- is hypothesized to be a function of being perceived as modal. Increased classroom student variance may extend group tolerance regarding the range of permissible behaviors and facilitate the acceptance of students with mild disabilities. Therefore a classroom composition variance by severity of disability interaction is predicted.

Methods

The investigation was conducted in two suburban school districts located north-east of Los Angeles. A total of six schools, three from each district, were

invited to participate in the investigation. The total number of participating classrooms was 14, indicating one refusal to participate (93.33% acceptance rate). All students in participating classrooms (n = 381) were invited to participate. All 285 students who returned parent permission slips participated in the study (return rate = 72.89%). Of a total of 48 students with disabilities in the participating classrooms, 44 students returned parental permission slips (91.66% return rate). California uses a dichotomous labeling system for students in special education. The label *Learning Handicapped* (LH) denotes a wide array of mild disabilities, while the label *Severely Handicapped* (SH) denotes an array of more severe disabilities. Thirty participating students were labeled as LH (M = 2.14 per classroom, SD = 1.79; range zero to six per classroom), 14 as SH (M =1.00 per classroom, SD = 0.78; range zero to three per classroom).

Instrumentation

A sociometric nomination procedure was used to measure social desirability. Two separate scales were administered, measuring social desirability in a work (*Work With* nominations) and a play (*Play With* nominations) context. Positive sociometric nomination scores of students with disabilities do not necessarily observations or student reports of actual social interactions and play activity (see Evans et al., 1992). To provide an alternative perspective regarding peer acceptance, participating students were asked to select with whom they played almost everyday from a list of randomly ordered participating classmates. The Basic Academic Skills Sample (BASS; Espin, Deno, Maruyama, & Cohen, 1989) was used to measure reading performance. Reading performance was compared to grade level norms provided by Espin et al. to determine percentage of below grade level readers in a classroom, part of the equation for classroom variance (see below).

Participating teachers were asked to indicate the total number of students in their classroom, the approximate ethnic composition of their classroom, and the official disability classification of each student identified for special education (LH or SH).

Classroom composition variance was calculated by taking the classroom mean of three measures: classroom percentage of ethnic minority students, proportion of participating students identified for special education, and proportion of participating students whose reading performance score was more than one standard deviation under grade level norms. These measures of classroom variance were drawn from previously cited literature indicating their relation to improved acceptance of integrated students with mild disabilities.

Results

Student grouping had a significant affect on a multivariate combination of acceptance measures (*Play With*, *Work With*, and *Everyday Playmate* nomination scores) [multivariate $F(2, 282) = 12.88$, $p < .0001$; all multivariate F's were computed using Wilks' lambda]. Univariate ANOVAs estimated that significant differences existed between student groupings for *Play With* [$F(2, 282) = 6.65$, $p = .001$],*Work With* [$F(2, 282) = 12.25$, $p < .0001$], and *Everyday Playmate* nomination scores [$F(2, 282) = 11.17$, $p < .0001$]. Scheffe post-hoc analyses revealed that students labeled as LH and SH received significantly lower peer nominations than non-disabled classmates on *Play With* ($p = .04$, $p = .01$, respectively),*Work With* ($p = .001$ on both comparisons), and *Everyday Playmate* nomination scores ($p = .03$, $p = .0002$, respectively). See Figure 1 for a graphical representation of these results.

The classroom variance by disability category interaction effect significantly affected the multivariate combination of *Work With*, *Play With*, and *Everyday*

Playmate nomination scores [$F(1, 40) = 8.85$, $p = .004$]. Univariate ANOVAs indicated that the classroom composition variance by disability category interaction had a statistically significant affect on *Play With* nomination scores [$F(1, 40) = 6.52$, $p = .01$; see Figure 2]. The severity of disability by classroom composition variance interaction did not have a statistically significant affect on *Work With* nomination scores [$F(1, 40) = 3.02$, $p = .08$]. However, the main effect of classroom composition variance did have a statistically significant affect on *Work With* nomination scores [$F(1, 40) = 8.03$, $p = .007$; see Figure 3]. The interaction of classroom composition variance and disability category also had a significant affect on *Everyday Playmate* nomination scores [$F(1, 40) = 10.57$, $p = .002$; see Figure 4].

Insert Figures 1, 2, 3, & 4 about here

Discussion

The most consequential finding of the present study is the significant severity of disability by classroom composition variance interaction effects regarding social desirability in a play context and reports of actual play activity with classmates. The significant interaction effects, as well as the non-significant interaction effect associated with social desirability in a work context, each represent ordinal interactions. If the results regarding classroom composition variance and peer acceptance are replicated in subsequent studies, a direct and proactive technique for improving the acceptance of integrated students with disabilities is suggested. This appears to be one facet of the general principle of

finding the optimal match between individual characteristics and an instructional environment, a defining characteristic of truly special education.

One caveat should be noted regarding the general trend of low acceptance of students with severe disabilities. Many participating students labeled as SH did not exhibit obvious signs of a severe disability, as indicated by teacher ratings (see Cook, 1997). A sample of students who were more definitively severely disabled, and thus more likely to attain protected deviant status and differentiated expectations, may have been more accepted. This conjecture is supported by findings that within the sample of students labeled as SH, the more severely disabled students were generally the most accepted.

Further investigation appears warranted regarding the quality of the acceptance of students with severe disabilities in low variance classrooms. Sociometric measures do not, and are not intended to, reflect the qualitative aspects of relationships. While previous research has reported that students with severe disabilities are often accepted in integrated environments, it has also been frequently noted that students with severe disabilities appeared to be parented and nurtured by classmates (see Cook & Semmel, in preparation) The proposed theoretical rationale for the acceptance of integrated students with severe disabilities -- that peers recognize them as qualitatively different and differentiate their expectations for them -- may imply that "acceptance" is based on sympathy and nurturance rather than equal friendship. Tentative support for this claim can be gleamed from an inspection of Figure 1. Peer nomination scores regarding social desirability in a play context and frequent play activity are similar for non-disabled students and students with mild disabilities. However, the social desirability scores of integrated students with

severe disabilities, while being relatively low, are much higher than peer reports of frequent play activity with them.

Conclusion

Findings support theory based predictions regarding the formation of differential expectations and a severity of disability by classroom composition variance interaction regarding peer acceptance. These findings suggest proactive methods of selecting or designing environments to enhance the rather bleak picture that this and other research generally portrays regarding the outcomes of integrated students with disabilities. The current results are preliminary and replication is required to validate them. Future research may extend and improve upon this initial effort by enlarging sample size (particularly in terms of students with severe disabilities), incorporating longitudinal data collection, and including a measure of social rejection in addition to peer acceptance.

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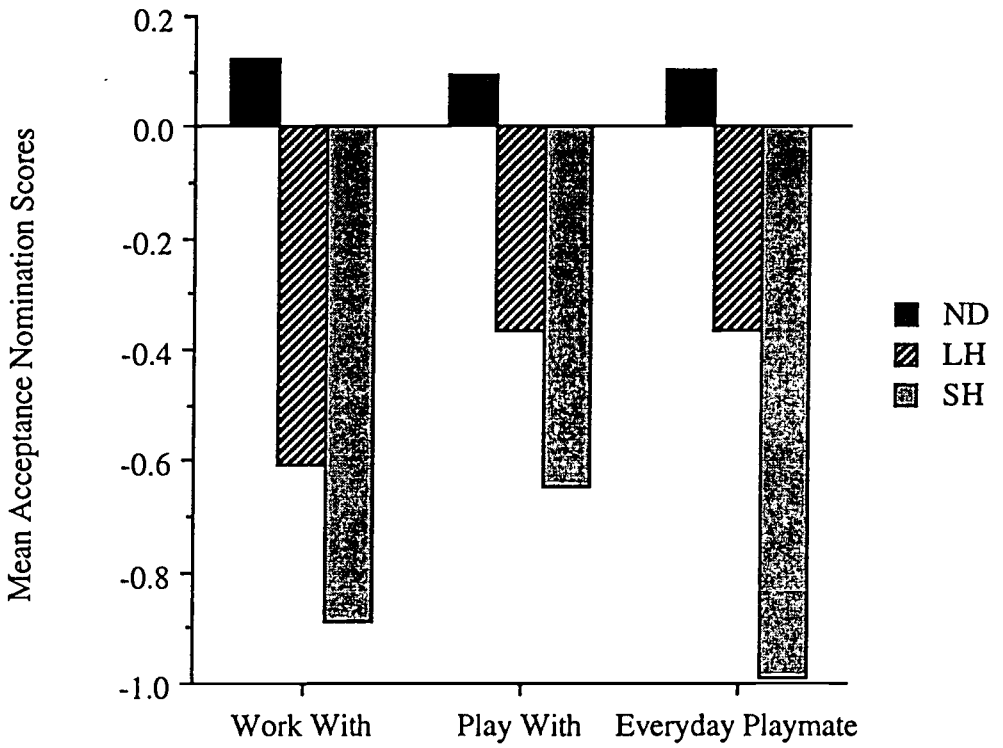
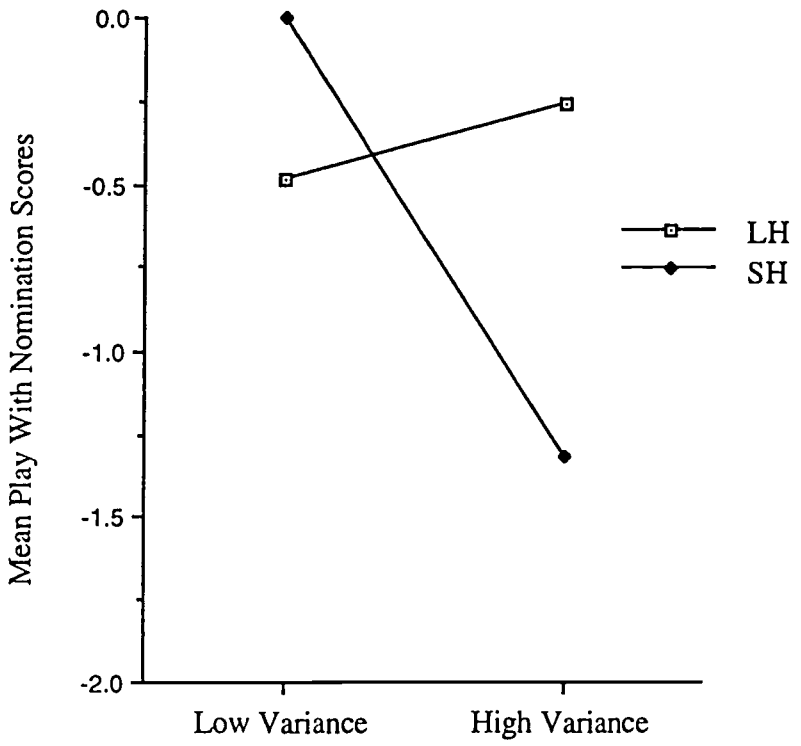
Figure 1. Peer acceptance nomination scores, by student group



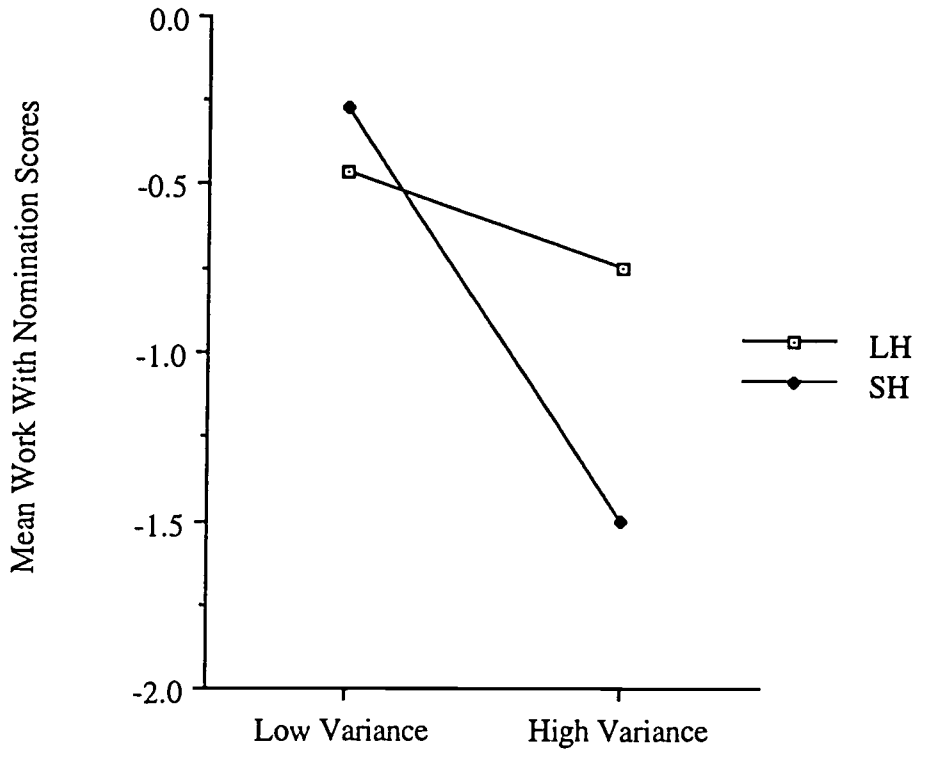
Note: ND = Non-disabled students, LH = Students labeled as Learning Handicapped, SH = Students labeled as Severely Handicapped.

Figure 2. *Play With* nomination scores by disability category by classroom variance



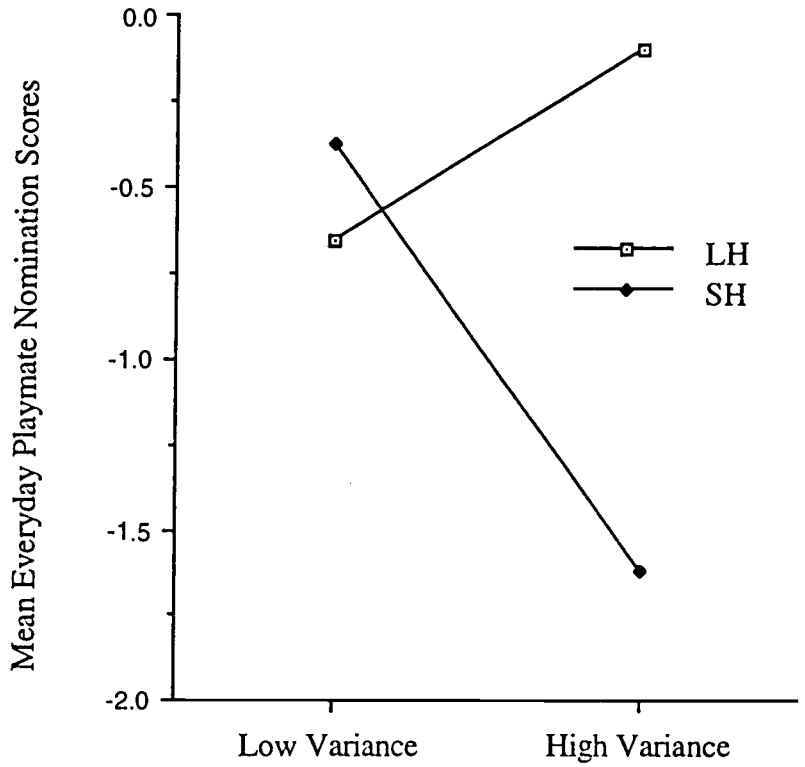
Note: LH = Students labeled as Learning Handicapped, SH = Students labeled as Severely Handicapped.

Figure 3. *Work With* nomination scores by disability category by classroom variance



Note: LH = Students labeled as Learning Handicapped, SH = Students labeled as Severely Handicapped.

Figure 4. *Everyday Playmate* nomination scores by disability category by classroom variance



Note: LH = Students labeled as Learning Handicapped, SH = Students labeled as Severely Handicapped.

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