

VIRTUAL FRIENDSHIP: CONTRIBUTION OF INTERVENTION TO THE SELF-IMAGE OF MENTALLY DISABLED CHILDREN

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Abstract

This paper presents an empirical study designed to test an e-intervention project based on virtual friendship for children with mental disability (MD). Using qualitative and quantitative methods, the study explores the correlation between friendly relations that are created and developed via Information Communication Technology (ICT) and self-image of children with MD, and examines the correlation of these relations with the social involvement of student-teachers. Findings show that along with the human factor, ICT can serve as a tool of intervention in the social and emotional fields among people with intellectual disability. Positive implications of the intervention has been found; on the one hand, it contributes to the self-image of the MD child and on the other hand it promotes the social commitments of the students-teaches to MD children. ICT has been identified as an important aspect of a wider strategy for social inclusion of children with MD.

Introduction

Mental disability is a kind of handicap that takes place among children before they are 18 years old. It is characterized by a considerable disability in both the mental function and the adjustment behavior of the handicapped (AAMR, 2002). Social labeling of MD children is one of the fundamental factors that affect their self-image on the one hand, and on their social adjustment and rehabilitation on the other. This reality is a product of the child's disability and a society that suffers from stigmatic attitudes, absence of appreciation, neglect of human rights, and discrimination based on physical or mental disability. Chubon (1992) stated that negative societal attitudes toward people with disabilities could be viewed as "invisible barriers" to successful rehabilitation.

Ries and Benson (1984) found out that a large percentage of MD children experience negative social relations in their life as a result of social or individual stigmatic attitudes. They are victimized because of their handicap and the society attributes their condition to them unjustifiably. The feeling of denial that is shown to them by others creates a low self-image, lack of emotional stability, lack of

reaction, and negative attitude towards the general public. However, positive self-image is created on the basis of empathic behavior of acceptance and encouragement (Shnitzer, 2001). The feeling of acceptance by others reduces the feeling of aggression, improves one's self-perception, and contributes to the stability and the crystallization of more positive attitudes about the world (Shnitzer, 2001).

Studies by Seo and Cohen (2009), Riter (2004), Ziv (2001), and Cohen (1995) show that the ordinary present system and the family do not cope with the academic, social, and emotional needs of youngsters with special needs. Besides, the peers of these children reject them because of their failures. All these conditions cause the MD children to formulate a low self-image, and develop social aggression, regression and personal depression. In view of all this, there is a significant importance for a support-group that can defend these children against negative attitudes, and save them from being vulnerability that can strongly destroy their self-esteem (Gorni, 1993).

In the recent years, there has been a prevalent concept based on the humanistic approach that argues that it is necessary to deal with handicapped people as human beings who have normal and positive characteristics in addition to their disabilities. The concept distinguishes between physical disability and mental disability which requires treatment, and between the human beings and their personality which should be cared for, developed and assisted (Riter, 2004). In addition, positive self-image in itself does not yet create integration of the handicapped within an ordinary society. Therefore, it is necessary for the MD children to behave in a specific way that can enable them to be accepted and integrated in the general social environment.

ICT tools provide MD children the opportunity to express themselves, their natural aptitudes and abilities in a virtual community, by giving them the opportunity to create social connections on equal standards, when judgment is not on how they look but on what and how they perform things. This helps them to avoid the obstacle of stigmas, abuse and social demoralization. ICT also enables them to create special connections and be equal friends in a virtual community without revealing their shortcomings, and to participate in experiences of able and disabled people (Shpigelman et al., 2008).

Assistive Technology covers a variety of software that assists pupils to read, to write and organize information (Ashton, 2005). Several researchers have pointed out that the use of assistive technology reinforces the independence of the individual, and enhances the structuring of self-esteem, contributes to the improvement of functioning, and raises the motivation of MD children (Ashton, 2005; Edyburn, 2004; Okolo, Cavalier, Ferretti, & MacArthur, 2000).

The relevant studies on this issue show that pupils with MD who used technological systems improved their functioning (Raskiind & Higgins, 2003).

Shpigelman et al. (2008) found out that e-mentoring supports the creation of the feeling of belonging, autonomy, satisfaction, and social connections. The created connections through e-mentoring assist children with special needs in coping with negative stereotyping regarding social and physical differences.

Virtual Friendship is a project that aims to contribute to the expansion of the social circle of MD children. This project opens new channels of communication between MD children who learn at a school of special education and students of the college through exploitation of ICT. We believe that offering a suitable support through a continued period of time will significantly improve the performance and self-image of MD children. Within this project, student-teachers from the field of 'Special Education' create friendship with pupils with MD via ICT by joining the forum that has been developed especially for this purpose. The environment uses visual characteristics to help children identify their friends easily. Children and students correspond at least once a week while the correspondence is monitored by the project moderators at school and college. At the end of the school year, two face-to-face meetings are held at the college and school and the participants identify each other on the basis of their communication in the forum. Student-teachers participate in this project voluntarily out of personal commitment to MD children.

Contact between population with MD and ordinary population arouses interest in its nature, its contribution, and implications on the two populations, but specifically on the MD population. The purpose of this study is to explore the correlation between the friendly relations that are created and developed via the ICT and self-image of MD children who take part in the project; and to examine the correlation of these relations with the social involvement of the student-teachers and their commitment to those children.

Theoretically, the findings are likely to enrich the scientific research that deals with friendly meeting supported by ICT between MD people, and people with normal mental functioning. Practically, the study is likely to constitute a college-model for social involvement, which can serve as a part of the program of professional training and education of student-teachers, regular teachers and other parties who are engaged in education in general.

The study poses four questions:

- What are the attitudes of student-teachers towards pupils with mental disabilities?
- To what extent are the student-teachers ready to take part in volunteering social activities?

- Is there any relationship between the friendly connection with the student-teachers and the self-image of the pupils with MD?
- How do the pupils with MD and student-teachers conceive of the virtual meeting and the actual personal meeting?

Methodology

The present study was carried out in a mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative methodology in order to strengthen the validity of research and enrich the area which it discusses. The qualitative data include interviews and observations in an attempt to understand the relations that are woven among the participants and to give explanations to the perception of the process by the participants (Tsever Ben Yehushua, 1995). The quantitative data include a survey of attitudes toward children with MD, and a survey of attitudes toward various aspects of the project. Examination of the connection between the variables of the research will contribute to the discussion of the processes that are developing via ICT and their effects on the topics of the study, and also to the prediction of future behavior based on observed behavior in the present study (Bernboim, 1993).

Sample

The quantitative sample includes 50 participants: 25 student-teachers and 25 pupils with light and medium mental disability. It should be noted that the study population size is determined by the constraints of reality. The qualitative sample includes 20 participants: 8 educators: 4 from the College and 4 from the school; 6 teacher-students; and 6 pupils with light and medium mental disability.

Instrument

The data collection technique consists of qualitative and quantitative instruments. The qualitative data has been collected by structured interviews with MD children, student-teachers and educators who have participated in the project; by observations in face-to-face meetings; and follow-up of the activities in the forum. Quantitative data has been collected by the use of three questionnaires: (1) attitudes towards MD children; (2) students' attitudes toward the project; and (3) pupils' attitudes toward the project. The attitudes questionnaire toward the project included closed questions relating to various aspects of the project goals (e.g., the project helped me to find a friend; participating the project increased my commitment towards people with special needs (student); my participation in the project has given me good feeling (pupil); I am proud of my new friend from the college (pupil); I think the project was successful); and open-ended questions where respondents were asked to freely express their opinions about the project and its contribution to them. The closed questioner contained 30 items. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale with 1 = completely disagree and 5 = completely agree.

Procedure

The first stage consists of examination of the field and search for a school of special education that agrees to provide the researchers with conditions to conduct the project. The second stage consists of examination of the attitudes of the student-teachers towards children with MD. In parallel, a computerized forum with password was developed. The forum underwent some improvements and continuous updating in order to meet the needs of the participants. Throughout the application of the project, meetings were held with the participants from the two sides in order to examine the degree of satisfaction from the progress of the connections and the activity in the forum. The third stage constitutes the process of collecting, processing and analyzing the relevant data.

Data Processing

Quantitative data were processed and analyzed by quantitative research methods using descriptive statistics. The empirical material gathered from the interviews was processed into texts and each text was analyzed into content units. The content units were categorized and sub-categorized of joint topics and went through a quantitative process (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). After the categorical structure was solidified, the findings were surveyed, analyzed and discussed.

Primary Findings and Discussion

Attitudes of Student-teachers towards MD Children

The findings show that 84% of the students who come from the field of special education have positive attitudes towards MD children, and 10% show conservative attitudes, while 6% only show negatives attitudes. Rao (2002) reported a significant effect of the Faculty on the student attitudes towards disabled people. In this context, Williamson (2000) reported that the Faculty of Education had a more positive attitude than the faculty from sciences.

Through investigation of the existing attitudes, there is consideration to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components (Greenberger, 1990). Student-teachers who have shown positive attitudes towards MD children showed responsibility, a sense of satisfaction, acceptance, and empathy towards those children. As a result of their theoretical knowledge and understanding of the meaning of 'disability,' the student-teachers demonstrated self-confidence in their professional skills and expressed readiness and willingness to teach MD children. They showed also positive attitudes towards friendly connections with the same children.

A large part of the students expressed desire, emotional ability, and motivation to create connections of friendship with MD children. These feelings were observed in their face-to-face meetings in which all the students showed responsible behavior and affection feelings toward the children. They approached the MD children as equal friends, and being hosts they did every effort to please their

guests. Chan et al. (2002), assume that societal attitudes constitute a significant factor in defining the life experiences, opportunities, and help-seeking behaviors of people with disabilities. Changes and opportunities brought about by technology improve the feasibility and integration of people with disabilities and affect attitudes in positive ways.

It should be noted that in parallel with that, interaction between the two parties created a realistic environment and immediate awareness and recognition of the 'difference' in needs. Close acquaintance led to a more realistic assessment of the objective abilities of MD children.

Attitudes towards the Project and its Performance

The general satisfaction from the project has been investigated by posing open and closed questions. In general, positive attitudes were found: 94% of the student-teachers and 100% of the MD pupils reported positive attitudes and full satisfaction from the project and its performance. All the participants regard the project as 'interesting' and 'challenging.' From the point of view of the student-teachers, this is a new attractive idea that arouses curiosity. Participation in the project does not entail any expenses, and the time that they invest in communication does not affect their other obligations. They find the effort that they invest in the project as slight in comparison with the positive implications and consequences of their friendly connection with the MD children. The educational, professional, moral and technical training that was given to the participants through the project has provided them with effective methods of action, and with strategies that would help them to cope with special conditions that arise in teaching children with MD in their future career. From the point of view of the MD pupils, the project is described as 'interesting,' 'amusing,' and gives the opportunity to spend one's time in an enjoyable way. In addition, it keeps them busy with an unusual productive activity. Training and assistance that they got from the teacher in charge of conducting the project at school, and the verbal communication with the students contributed to the development of their skills in using the computer and their ability in written expression.

All the participants pointed out that this is a unique successful project, and the communication by the forum is easy and friendly. All of them expressed their desire to continue their relationship and expressed willingness to participate in a similar project in the future. Besides, both the pupils and students raised some issues that are mainly related to the feeling of disappointment and frustration they had when their communication did not take place in a constant way and exchange of messages became sporadic, or when it was impossible for them to meet face to face in the arranged meetings.

The Project as an Instrument of Finding a Friend

This aspect was examined by the use of closed questions that express feelings of enjoyment from the correspondence and exchange of messages, the care and the empathy of the virtual friend, and the contribution of ICT to find a friend: 80% of

the students expressed their full agreement that the project is really a good instrument to find a friend, while 14% expressed their reservation regarding this aspect. On the other hand, all the pupils with MD reported that the project is a very good instrument to find a friend — 85% of the pupils reported that during the communicating in the forum a significant interaction was created with the virtual friends, they enjoyed receiving messages from their virtual friends and felt that they care of them. For them, the project is interesting and brought them nice friendship and joy, and broadened their circle of friendship. Unlike the relations that are created in face-to-face meetings, when using ICT there is no significance to geographical space, and the friendship between the communicators is created on the basis of shared-stay at the same virtual space (Dawm, 2007) which encourages people with MD to create social interaction and express themselves freely.

The Strength of Social Connection

About 90% of the students reported that since the beginning of the process they entered the forum nearly once a week out of curiosity and desire to advance the project. However, during the process of exchanging messages, a significant social connection was created between them and the pupils, and they entered the forum in order to “to be with the friend” and read his/her messages. Student teachers reported that despite the constraints and difficulties of MD children, they are able to be friends like any other person — e.g., “They are sensitive and faithful and can enjoy the connection even more than ordinary people.” On the other hand, all the pupils with MD indicated that they are happy because they have new friends: 63% of the pupils who have computers and Internet communication at home entered the forum many times during the day in order to write to their friends from the College and check if they sent a message. The rest entered the forum from the school; a part of them was independent and entered everyday while the others entered at least twice a week during computer-assisted lessons. The pupils’ frequent entrances to the forum and their hope to find new messages from their friends indicate the powerful need to have such connection. This connection has reflection on the children’s self-image.

The Contribution of the Project to the Formation of Self-image of Children with Mental Disability

This aspect was examined using closed questions and conversations with MD pupils. Out of data, it is possible to notice that correspondence with an older person learning at the College is conceived by MD children as something extraordinary happening to them specifically: “I am happy because my friend allowed me to write to her; this is the first time that I have a friend from the College.” For them, this connection is a precious opportunity that not everyone has the chance to get. To get to know a student from the College brings them a lot of happiness, pride and positive feelings of self-esteem. Finally, they have got some special attention; somebody is thinking about them and takes care of their emotional welfare. The emotional and social support that they have received from their friends, the promotion of their writing and verbal ability, the empathy and

the friendly connection of equals, the visit to the College; all these elements have contributed positively to the pupils' self-image.

The MD children have no actual self-consciousness because they are not conscious of it (Steinberg, 1999). Through their communication with the student-teachers, the MD children succeeded in creating their *Actual Self*. The communication that includes notes, reinforcements, understanding, acceptance and the like enables them to express themselves and experience another personality that is free of disability. This affects positively their function and their self-image, and contributes to the feeling of competence and increases their self-confidence in their personal abilities (Dole & McMahan, 2005; Hall, Hughes & Filbert, 2000; Lau et al., 2005).

The Contribution of the Project to the Social Intervention and Commitment of the Student-Teachers

The students specializing in special education demonstrated commitment to the children with mental disability. Their participation in the project created in them social involvement that reinforced their commitment to people with mental disability: 83% reported that their participation in the project increased their commitment to other social areas in general and to children with MD in particular.

Contribution of ICT to the Project

The contribution of technology to the project aims was examined by the use of closed questions that express the significance of the contribution in this context — 81% of the students pointed out that the use of the forum and the availability of e-communication contribute in a significant way to the creation of friendly connections, intensify them, and lead to the success of the project. The rest of the students agree that technology contributes to the project but the contribution of other factors such as the 'human element' and the cultural concepts are more significant to the project.

For the pupils, e-communication made it easier for them to communicate in more openness. They reported that they were frank and open to express themselves freely because they were not in eye-contact with their partners: "I talked with my friend without having to be ashamed; I told her about myself and my family." The findings show that the uses of ICT together with the behaviour of acceptance and encouragement shown by the students have improved indirectly the ability of the MD pupils to communicate and share others in their experiences of success or failure without fear.

However, it is important to point out that the excitement of the two sides in their first meeting face to face, especially that of the pupils, was great. When the pupils met their friends, their faces lighted and their eyes gleamed. The face-to-face meeting confirmed the real existence of the 'virtual friend.' The thinking of children with mental disability is mostly concrete or very low at the abstract level (Anoshi-Moran, 2002). The virtual meeting that takes place between people who

have never met face to face hides inside it higher abstract levels that are not in line with the level of the cognitive conception of MD children. On the other hand, the face-to-face meeting is a meeting that can be felt and experienced in an actual way. The friend is conceived as a real truth and sure fact. In view of this, the children's enthusiasm rose up and the degree of happiness increased after they experienced the meeting in reality.

Summary

This study aims to explore the contribution of ICT to MD children by conducting virtual friendship intervention. It examines the correlation between the friendly relations that are created and developed via the ICT and self-image of MD children, and the correlation of these relations with the social commitment of the student-teachers in general and towards MD children in particular. The study focuses on a social activity in which the connection between MD children and students constitutes a relationship between equals.

The findings show that mostly student-teachers from the field of Special Education demonstrate positive attitudes towards MD children. Their will, desire, emotional capability, and motivation to create friendly connections with MD children contributed to the project in a significant way.

The project is conceived by the participants as a good instrument for finding a friend and creating interaction that is free of restrictions of place and time. The friendly connection that has been created between the participants through the project made the pupils with MD feel happy and increased the involvement of the students in the social activity under discussion. The findings show that a change has taken place in the concept of the 'virtual friend with MD' among the students, and their social involvement and commitment towards people with MD in general has increased.

ICT constitutes one of the central layers of the project, and its contribution to the achievement of the goals of the project is considerable. Along with the human factor intervention, ICT has a potential for making significant improvements in the inclusion, development and education of children with MD. The employment of ICT enabled the participants, mainly the MD children, to break through the borders of disability, and to express themselves by interacting without hesitation or fear and without having to be ashamed. Moreover, the integration between the virtual environment and reality contributed to the success of the project.

The satisfaction of the participants from the project indicates the general feeling that they are contributing and are being rewarded during the project. The project contributes to the expansion of the circle of social relations of MD children, cultivates their social abilities, improves their skills in computer usage, and their ability to express their ideas and feelings in writing. The findings show that the

participation of the MD pupils in the project contributes positively to their self-image and to creating realistic self-awareness, assist them in building actual self, and awakens in them motivation and desire to continue. Regarding the students, beyond the challenging relationship that is created with the MD children, the project contributes to the development of understanding and commitment towards people with MD.

In view of the findings, the project is highly recommended to be applied by colleges and schools but that should be done through observation, supervision and guidance of well specialists in the field.

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