School Social Work Practice with Special Needs Children in Northern Ireland: Activity and Action Accounts

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Abstract

The aim of this manuscript is summary of the implementation of a School Behavioural Engagement program to stop the low-level violence of special education children in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Action research was used in terms of the children’s participation in their identified social activities (e.g., school behavioural engagement program). Some children said, “It was a good program as it stopped them from fighting with each other” and other children said, “It was fun”. There was a reduction in hitting one another and they felt less anger towards each other. They also demonstrated some positive conduct (e.g. some children even brought their own ball from home and shared with the other children).
lunch, to play in the playground. As a children supervisor and as an Independent Social Work Researcher committed to propagate the School Social Work in this specific context (Megahead, 2022), I observed a group of children (n=five males and one female).

This group were displaying signs of physical aggression towards each other, using inappropriate words and displaying of bad intentions towards one another, for example, grabbing each other by their clothes. There were three other boys including an introverted child, a cautious moving child and an observing and non-participating child.

**Basketball and Creative Play**

Underpinned by the childhood studies perspective and sociology of childhood, these children were considered and perceived as social actors. Action research was used in terms of the children participation in their identified social activities (e.g., school behavioural engagement) (Jones, Miller, Luckey, 2013). In addition, children designed and implemented an intervention and assessed the outcome through data analysis (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2015). In the beginning of the school year, I observed that the children were hitting and annoying each other and they did not seem to care about the items that they were provided to play with. I spent time listening and working with them.

These children were able to create certain activities that were the significant key for them. I worked with this group of children to help them identify their perception of their situation. After they identified the key issues in terms of their need for playing and activities, the group identified basketball and some other activities as solutions.

One problem was there was no basketball net available. They children were very creative and made use of a football net, which they adapted to work as a basketball net. Nearly every day during the school year, I brought different toys and items: basketball, ropes for jumping, flying disks etc. and many more items. At the beginning of each session, I gave a playing instrument to each one of them. For example, I gave the introverted child a football and devoted a specific area for him in the patch to play. For the cautious moving child, I gave him the jumping rope. For the other children (n=five boys and one girl), I gave them the basketball. Only one child was observing and non-participating. I asked these five boys to give him a chance to try once every five minutes. I also reminded them in each session, "Once you all have finished playing, please return the items safely back to their place." During each session, I observed and supervised them during their practice of these activities.

**Procedures to Minimize Power Relations**

I used the following procedures to minimise power relations. Firstly, when the children were making a circle in the ground, they asked me to sit beside them in their circle and asked me some questions about kinship of one of them. I responded positively, trying to allow them comfort and a safe space (Robinson & Kellett, 2004). Secondly, I memorized their first names and nicknames. This was one small way I could reduce the power dynamic between children and myself during the playground time. Thirdly, I kept a good conversation going about them, maintaining a good understanding and rapport with the young children.

**The Outcomes**

At the end of each session, I carried out a daily qualitative evaluation, in which I asked each one of them "have you enjoyed the activities?" They would say “Yes”. I would reply with, “I will bring the playing instruments tomorrow”. Some children asked “can you bring two hula hoops tomorrow?” or “can you please bring jump ropes”. I have conducted the specific same daily routine and procedures throughout the same specific school year. When there was rain and the patch was wet, or it was snowing, the activities would be temporarily discontinued. However, it resumed as soon as weather permitted.

At the end of the school year some children said, “It was a good program as it stopped them from hitting each other”. Some other children said, “It was fun, I made a new friend through this game”. An observation was noted that this school behaviour engagement program had decreased the levels of aggression, both physical
and verbal. They stopped pushing each other, they stopped hitting each other and they stopped annoying each other. Some children even brought their own ball from home and shared with the other children who were also playing. The children became more caring and learned how to better take care of school property. They made sure to return the items to play back to me and to the school storeroom.

**Discussion and Implication**

This program has influenced school policy and practice regarding the children’s lunch break. At the beginning of following school year after completion this program, the school supplied one mobile basketball net (as the children only needed one net.) and it was carefully placed in the patch for the children to use. One of the children has even been willing to bring his own basketball for the children to use. The observing and non-participating children also became active members of this group. The introverted child brought his own ball and used it in a specified area. However, for the cautious moving child, his part of the program remains ongoing.

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The real names of children mentioned here have not been used to protect their confidentiality, personal privacy and identity.

**References**


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