

# Promoting social interaction among pupils with and without intellectual disabilities: Teachers approaches

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore the approaches teachers use to promote social interaction among pupils with and without intellectual disabilities at Adukrom Methodist Basic School in Ghana. The case study design was employed for the study. The sample size was 21, which comprised of teachers and pupils with and without intellectual disabilities. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample size. Interviews and an observation guide were used to collect data. Data from interviews was analyzed thematically while observation data was analyzed through inter-observer agreement among the researchers and the two teachers. Results from the study showed that teachers used sports and games, music and dance and social skills training to promote social interactions among pupils with and without intellectual disabilities. Implications of the findings on teachers was that they will be able to provide more facilities to execute those approaches to help all pupils. For the pupils, they will be able to appreciate each other's abilities and challenges to strengthen their social interaction. It was recommended that the school field and the playing grounds should be put into good shape and also the school should make all the necessary equipment for outdoor games available to the pupils to help promote the implementation of inclusive education policy.

**Keywords:** intellectual disabilities, social interaction, stakeholders, international agenda, professionals

## **Promoting social interaction among pupils with and without intellectual disabilities: Teachers approaches**

### **1. Introduction**

Social interaction is central in the life of every human being. For children, social interaction plays a crucial role in their development. To develop and be successful in many contexts, children require both social and academic achievement (Rockson, Acheampong, & Teye, 2017). In order to promote social interaction among people including persons with intellectual disability, social inclusion must be ensured. Social inclusion is having access to physical places and equal opportunity to access and understanding intellectual content (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005). To promote inclusion as well as social inclusion of pupils with intellectual disabilities, activities such as social skills training, sports and cooperative learning cannot be underestimated (Coalter, 2010; Bigby & Wiesel, 2011).

Yekple (2008) stressed that social skills are commonly those specific behavioral strategies that allow an individual to initiate and maintain positive social interactions with others, develop friendships and social support networks, and to cope effectively with the social environment. However, children are not born instinctively knowing how to interact effectively with others. Students barely demonstrate these skills and often they need to be taught those social behaviors that are required when they are interacting with others. Especially with younger children, teachers will need to teach these behaviors in accurate ways so that young children understand not only how to use them but also the effect these behaviors are likely to have on others. It is viewed as a must for pupils with disabilities to be taught these skills and be motivated to use them. (Yekple, 2008)

Umadevi and Sukumaran (2012) conducted a study on functional social skills of 100 adults with intellectual disabilities, who were randomly selected from various special schools that provided vocational training in Kottayam district of Kerala state, in South India. Data on social skills of these individuals were collected through a standardized Functional Social Skills Assessment Scale developed by the authors. The data were analyzed through arithmetic mean standard deviation, independent t-test and one-way analysis of variance. The results indicated that only 48% of the adults with intellectual disabilities in the study possessed functional social skills.

Another study in Australia on young people with physical disabilities revealed that having both friends and an accessible territory in which to hang out together at school, was important in building both social and spatial connections (De Vet, Waitt, & Gorman-Murray, 2012). In order for learners with intellectual disabilities to interact socially, it is important to develop their communication skills. For this to happen, they should be able to understand concepts and relationships before applying them. Given its non-threatening nature, music is able to facilitate both verbal and non-verbal communication (Surujlal, 2013). He further stressed that music and dance also bring out creativity in learners with intellectual disabilities, which contributes to enhanced self-awareness, self-expression and self-esteem that promote social interaction. Staum (2013) found that planned activities such as passing a ball back and forth, playing musical chairs or playing sticks encourage interaction, helps children develop eye contact with each other and focuses attention.

Hallam (2002) asserted that music has been used with success to facilitate interaction and communication amongst children with severe intellectual disabilities. According to Hallam (2002) music promotes stimulation and arousal, and creates the basis for learning. Music enables children with intellectual disabilities to develop socially and emotionally, and promote cognitive development, which involves recognizing, processing, organising and using information appropriately (Allen & Marotz, 2003). The cognitive process encourages activities such as discovery, interpreting, sorting, classifying and remembering so that those with intellectual disabilities understand themselves as well as their environment. Sooful, Surujlal and Dhurup (2010) posited that dance and music encourage personal effort, provide the opportunity to overcome the limitations imposed by their

disabilities and facilitate a greater sense of achievement.

A study was conducted by Surujlal (2013) on music and dance as learning interventions for children with intellectual disabilities. Following a qualitative approach, three focus group interviews were conducted using purposive samples of educators. Interpretative phenomenological analysis procedures were used to analyze the data. The results of the study revealed that music and dance are useful interventions, which contribute to improved learning amongst learners with intellectual disabilities. Participation of people with intellectual disabilities in sports seems to create opportunity to promote social inclusion and this has received increased attention in mainstream sports studies for other disadvantaged populations such as disaffected youth and immigrants (Coalter, 2010). It could be inferred from Coalter (2010) that the need to promote social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities led to the development of specialized sports organizations of which Special Olympics is the foremost example organized internationally for persons with intellectual disabilities.

Chien (2006) investigated the relationship between the type and availability of recreational sports facilities and student lifestyle and social interaction in some universities in the United States. The study gathered data using interview and analyzed responses from participants according to accepted qualitative methodology and thematic pattern searching. The results of this study suggest that recreational sports facilities do foster high social interaction among students and contribute to an active, integrated, and positive campus lifestyle and culture. Unified Sports initiative may be conceived as an attempt to promote the social inclusion of young people with intellectual disabilities with their peers in local communities (Dowling, Menke, McConkey, & Hassan, 2012). This program combines players with intellectual disabilities of higher sporting abilities (referred to as athletes) with non-disabled partners of average or lower ability level, in the same sports teams for training and competition. Thus, teams are formed by athletes and partners of similar level of sports skills, which generally means the more-able athletes, are taking their place alongside nondisabled partners whose sports skills are weaker than those of their peers

Tarman and Tarman (2011) study on teachers' involvement in children's play and social interaction using qualitative inquiry sought to obtain more in-depth understanding of when and how preschool teachers were involved in students' play and demonstrated or showed personal practices involving effective participation. The findings of this study showed that teachers should be a model and a demonstrator instead of intervening in the play by direct instruction. Another study by Celeste (2007) focused on the play behaviours of students who were blind. The past research on the topic of social development had shown that students who are blind tended to have little peer interaction during play or otherwise. The majority of students have stronger relationships with adults they are working with or engage in play alone. In order for these students to find meaning in play, there must be some structure of facilitation provided by the teacher or student. Celeste (2007) found effective intervention practices to encourage peer interaction and inclusive play for students with visual impairments.

Javakshishvili (2012) conducted a study on the ways teachers help to promote social inclusion in Georgian schools. The researcher conducted interviews with teachers using two semi-structured interviews instruments and two observations in the same classes. The interpretational approach that was based on hermeneutics was used for the analysis of gained results. The data revealed that teachers' knowledge in inclusive education was not very clear and based more on subjective impressions and judgments. Moreover, the practice teachers provided for helping interaction between students revealed an equal approach to all students and not specifically arranged activities for influencing the participation and interaction of students with special needs.

In summary, the main idea from the literature review were, functional social skill training for children, music and dance as learning interventions for children with intellectual disabilities, participation in sports and games and recreational sports facilities and student lifestyle promote social interaction. The foregoing discussions awakens the interest of the researchers to examine:

- the approaches teachers employ in promoting social interaction among pupils with and without intellectual disability at Adukrom Methodist Basic School in Ghana.

## 2. Methods

This qualitative study employed case study research design to investigate the approaches of teachers in promoting social interaction of pupils with and without intellectual disabilities at Adukrom Methodist Basic School in the Eastern region of Ghana. The population of the study included all the 284 pupils and teachers at the primary level of the school. They comprised 185 males and 99 females. The researchers purposefully selected 21 participants for the study. This consisted of 5 teachers (3 males and 2 females), 16 pupils (8 pupils with intellectual disabilities and 8 without intellectual disabilities). Out of the pupils without intellectual disabilities, 4 were girls and 4 were boys; while that of pupils' intellectual disabilities, 2 were girls and 6 were boys. The 8 out of 12 pupils with intellectual disabilities at the basic level were chosen because of their ability to speak and their regular school attendance.

Semi structured interview and structured observation were employed to elicit data from the participants for the study. O'Leary (2005), indicated that semi-structured interviews are neither fully fixed nor fully free and are perhaps best seen as flexible in gathering qualitative data. The researchers used semi-structured interview approach because it offers interviewee the opportunity to express their views, feelings and experiences freely and the interviewer the freedom to divert the questions in the schedule to seek clarifications (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). A structured observation according to Bryman (2005), entails the direct observation of individuals in field settings and the recording and encoding of observations according to a previously formulated schedule. The researchers developed an observation checklist as a guide in recording relevant facts, actions and behaviors of participants concerning the research problem. The researchers were assisted by two teachers in the school in gathering an interpreting observation data.

Analysis of the semi-structured interview data was guided by key themes that emerged from the data collected. The process started with transcribing all interview data and highlighting words, sentences, and thoughts that served as units for more detailed coding. The analysis primarily involved an interactive process of reading, reflecting, and coding the transcripts, and then drawing out major themes and patterns of views from it. With the observation component, the researchers met with other two observers who were teachers in the school to analyze the data. An inter-observer agreement was determined by calculating the percentage of agreement between the researchers' observation and that of other observers. The researchers asked the other observers to react to the observation data by indicating whether the observation instrument used generated an accurate picture of level of social inclusion of pupils with intellectual disabilities or not.

## 3. Findings and Discussions

The analysis of the data revealed themes that emerged from the interview with the teachers on approaches used to promote social interaction among pupils. From the analysis, some of the approaches that emerged were the use of sports and games, music and dance and social skills training. The teachers' approach to foster and promote social interaction through sports and games is worth mentioning. It was revealed that teachers in the school used sports and games such as athletics and football to promote social interaction among students with and without intellectual disabilities. The following comments by some of the participants attest to the fact that teachers who teach pupils with intellectual disabilities made conscious effort at promoting social interaction among students in the school through games and sports.

One teacher remarked that:

*I could remember that one of the Fridays we organized special games for all the pupils. They took part in sack race, football and volleyball even though they didn't compete with their peers, they participate alongside with them (A verbatim response from Teacher C).*

One pupil with ID also indicated that:

*Games like football, athletics and netball. Morning assembly and worship too, the teachers allowed us to have it together. During the games, some of the teachers do come there but others don't when they came, they teach us how to play together. (A verbatim response from pupil without ID '1')*

This finding is consistent with McConkey, Dowling, Hassan, and Menke. (2012) who confirmed that unified sports resulted in greater social interaction of athletes with intellectual disabilities. The findings also corroborate that of Chien (2006) which concluded that recreational sports activities do foster high social interaction among students and contribute to an active, integrated, and positive campus lifestyle and culture.

Again, the findings of the study also showed that, the teachers used music and dance as an approach to promote interactions among the pupils. Three of the teachers and all the pupils confirmed this when they were interviewed. Some of the teachers revealed that they made provision on their time table for music and dance to enhance socialization and the learning of social skills among the students with intellectual disabilities. Pupils who participated in the study also indicated that school worship period on Wednesday mornings which had music and dance sections gave them greater opportunity to interact with their class mates with and without intellectually disabilities and learn some social skills. Two participants remarked:

*Although there is a period on the general time table for extracurricular activities, I have ensured that I have music and dance on the time table I use for teaching students with intellectual disabilities could learn social skills and take up roles during singing and dancing. (A verbatim response from teacher 'A').*

*.....we also go to assembly and worship together during Wednesdays to sing and dance with the guidance of our teachers and we learn a lot there. (A verbatim response from pupils without ID).*

These findings are in agreement with the finding of a study by Surujlal (2013) which revealed music and dance as learning interventions for children with intellectual disabilities and an activity that promotes social interaction among students with and without intellectual disability. In line with these findings, Sooful Surujlal and Dhurup (2010) posited that dance and music encourage personal effort, provide the opportunity to overcome the limitations imposed by their disabilities and facilitate a greater sense of achievement. Hallam (2002) also mentioned that music has been used with success to facilitate social interaction and communication amongst children with severe intellectual disabilities because music promotes stimulation and arousal, and creates the basis for learning. Furthermore, music enables children with intellectual disabilities to develop socially and emotionally, and promote cognitive development, which involves recognizing, processing, organizing and using information appropriately. This assertion has been embedded in the social constructivist theory that immersion of knowledge is viewed as the best results of contact and socialization made by learners with his surrounding or physical environment experience (Surujlal, 2013).

The teachers also stated that they used social skills training as an approach to promote social interactions among the pupils. According to all the teachers, they teach the pupils social skills that is, how to talk, eat, greet and sweep, which help to facilitate interactions and friendship among pupils. Students with intellectual disabilities who participated in the study consented to the fact that their teachers teach them social skills often which helps them in their interaction with students without intellectual disability. The following comments confirm this finding:

One teacher indicated:

*We teach all students in our class some social skills such as taking turns as and when we get the opportunity but we also make out time every week to provide additional instruction in social skills training to pupils with intellectual disabilities since they learn at a slower pace (A verbatim response from Teacher 'B').*

One pupil had this to say.

*Yes, our teacher usually brings us together sometimes to teach us how to relate and interact with people in our school and communities. (A verbatim response of a pupil with ID)*

It is also important to recognize the need to develop the child's peers' understanding for them to exhibit appropriate social skills and interact positively with other children (Roe, 2008). Based on a social skills deficit perspective, researchers assume that providing social skills training will enhance peer interactions (Fenty, Miller & Lampi, 2008). The findings of the current study are in agreement with Avcioglu (2013) who found the use of social skills training as an effective strategy at improving social skills among students with intellectual disabilities. Avcioglu (2013) concluded that deliberately teaching social skills using video modeling helped students with intellectual disabilities acquire the skill of greeting people and continued to use the skills in different situations and to different people. Moreover, data gathered from observation confirmed the response of the participants revealing that teachers use sports and games, music and dance and social skills training in the classroom to promote interaction among the pupils. Finally, it was revealed that most of the teachers encouraged the non-disabled pupils to make friends with their peers with intellectual disabilities with and vice versa.

Implications of the findings to teachers are that, teachers will be able to find the weakness of their approaches and strengthen of the approaches to promote social interaction among all pupils. Also, they will be able to bring more approaches as well as provide more facilities to execute those approaches to help all pupils. For the pupils, they will be able to appreciate each other's abilities and challenges to strengthen their social interaction.

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendation**

In conclusion, analysis from the findings showed that outdoor games are the most effective and appropriate approaches that teachers used to promote social interactions among pupils with and without intellectual disabilities. Based on the findings, it was recommended that the schools field and the playing grounds should be put into good shape and also the school should make all the necessary equipment for outdoor games available to the pupils to help promote the implementation of inclusive education policy.

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