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EXAMINING PEER FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS OF MENTALLY DISABLED INDIVIDUALS IN REFERENCE TO THE TEACHERS' VIEWS

(Research article)

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify the teachers' views on the peer factor in the development of social skills of mentally disabled individuals. The research was conducted via phenomenology research design, a qualitative method. The participants of the research were composed of 30 teachers from the province of Bingöl and its district Genc. They were selected using convenience sampling of purposive sampling method. The data were collected using a semi structured interview developed by the researchers based on the views of experts. The data were analyzed using content analysis and descriptive statistics. The results revealed that majority of the participating teachers were of the opinion that mentally disabled individuals were positively affected by the peer factor when they started and sustained a relationship, expressed their feelings, dealt with the aggression and stress, solving problems and planning whereas a small group was not affected by the peer factor at all.

Keywords: Mentally disabled individuals, peer effect, social skills, teachers' views

1. Introduction

There are various definitions of mental disability today. American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), founded in 1920s, has had great contributions to come to an agreement on a common definition of it. In order to put an end to the contradictions in defining the mental disability and in order to be able to construct a new definition of it, AAIDD founded a committee in 1959. The committee accepted the definition introduced by Grossman (1973). Grossman defines mental retardation as significantly subnormal in general mental functions within the development period and also he considers it as inability in adaptive behaviors (Özokçu, 2013). Mental retardation, in detail, emerges before the age of 18, can be characterized with at least two of the skills, namely, communication, selfcare, life at home, social and communal adaptation, self-monitoring, health and safety, functional academic and work, as well as the sub-mental functioning within the mentality.

Intellectual functions and the variety in them is generally based on the assessments of Full Scale Intelligence Quotient (FSIQ) and similarly, mental retardation which can be related to several malfunctioning is represented by 70 or less intelligence points. The basis of the intelligence points in the most common employed classification is stated in two categories,

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namely, mild mental retardation between 50 and 70 points and severe mental retardation for less than 50 points (Chelly et al., 2006: 701). According to English Mentally Retarded Common Commute, the term “mentally retarded child”, in a broad sense, is used as a term which covers all the education process on any ground of a child who is slower than the others with the same chronological age. Peer support can be considered as a significant factor for children with mental retardation.

Peer education is defined differently in literature review. Peer effect is defined as a process aiming that educated and controlled students help other students with suggesting supportive relationships on the personal and academic issues, settling the thoughts and feelings of other students, discovering the options and alternatives and self-understanding. The pedagogy of peer education is a student-based approach which leads students to read the course materials with planned conceptual questions before attending the class and keep them busy with group discussions (Deshpande & Ahmed, 2019: 2). Peer education is a simultaneous activity resulting from a constant initiative for forming and sustaining an understanding of solving a common problem (Fawcett & Garton, 2005: 158). Peer effect is also defined as a way to find out how students, not only in their childhood but also in their adolescence, learn to behave in accordance with the social and cultural values (Sherman et al., 2016: 1030). School establishes an environment where peer support can take place most.

Normally developing individuals at school support their mentally retarded peers in their adaptation process with social and cultural values. This adaptation process is also effective in solving many significant problems related to the education policy in primary and secondary school such as personal success, school choices, monitoring the skills among schools, inclusion of the students with special education needs and the effects of racial and economic differences (Burke & Sass, 2008: 51). This situation provides several advantages not only in the solutions of the problems regarding the school policies but also in daily activities at school. It can be stated that cognitive, affective and psycho-motor skills of the individuals with intellectual disability increase significantly with the effect of their peers. It is remarkable that interacting with their normally developing peers, working with them, learning from each other and most importantly enjoying life leaves a positive impression on intellectually disabled individuals to sustain their lives. All these sharings will increase the social inclusion of the intellectually disabled individuals (Selimoğlu & Aydın, 2018: 4). In this sense, the existence of individuals with differences at school will cause an increase in the outcomes.

Individuals with intellectual disability encounter problems in understanding and adapting themselves to the social rules that the society has formed. They are always exposed to the guidance of their peers or someone else in order to eliminate the problems encountered and increase the level of their adaptation. Intellectually disabled individuals' adaptation level to the norms formed by the society can be related to their level of acceptance by their peers. It is important for the development of those individuals to be able to interact with their peers successfully (Gresham, 1982b: 129). All these supports are necessary for intellectually disabled individuals to improve peer acceptance, sense of responsibility and the meaning ascribed to it.

Individuals with mental disabilities may face risks such as experiencing difficulties in accessing health services, facing barriers in accessing education, being unemployed, being exposed to ill-treatment for various reasons, and being exposed to abuse, including physical and sexual violence (Uromi & Mazagwa, 2014). The fact that individuals are deprived of many opportunities, including health, education, employment, transportation and rehabilitation, negatively affects their social lives in many ways (Sedeto & Dar, 2019).

Failure to rehabilitate and educate these children has many negative consequences. Services should be planned and carried out taking into account the needs of the child and family. It is important to ensure that they benefit from health, education and social services in social life (Allington-Smith, 2006).

In addition to the intrinsic motivation to develop themselves, these children need social support when necessary, especially in an environment that provides opportunities for work, access to friends or leisure activities (Bronikowski & Bronikowska, 2009). Mental disability is an important public health problem worldwide. Studies have shown that physical activity can provide physiological and psychological benefits in individuals with intellectual disabilities. It can also be said that this method has few side effects and is relatively cost-effective (Liu et al., 2015). Social behaviors acquired in early childhood play a critical role in the acquisition of social and language skills in the future. In addition, it is associated with other areas of development such as social communication development, motor development and cognitive development in the preschool years. Acquiring new motor skills in the first years of life provides children with opportunities to interact with objects and people (Dadgar et al., 2017).

For some reasons, normally developing individuals have bad attitudes towards their mentally disabled peers. Especially a set of feelings evoked by the word “retarded” causes these individuals to be labeled by their peers, decreases the level of social acceptance and affects their relationships negatively (Selimoğlu & Aydın, 2019: 640). When the preschool period, the first step of formal education, is considered, being disabled is generally described negatively. The peers of these disabled children hesitate to play with them assuming they are ill and consequently, the peer relationship weakens (Ünsal & Şahan, 2015: 415). Apart from the negative attitudes by their peers at school, the cultural attitude towards the intellectually disabled children by the society that made up the social environment outside school affects their social acceptance level. The most significant point is the cultural attitude imposing pity, exclusion and disability rather than the physical meaning ascribed to the term. This kind of attitude both decreases the social acceptance of the individual with intellectual disability in society and does harm to their peer relationships (Burcu, 2011: 51). In addition to the natural challenges that mentally disabled individuals encounter, the negative attitudes towards them, both at school and in the social environment, make life more difficult for them.

As members of school and society, all children and adults need to deal with daily activities such as going to school or work. Social skills play an important role in conducting these kinds of activities. Normally developing individuals are able to demonstrate the necessary social skills in order to interact with their peers without hesitation. Intellectually disabled people, on the other hand, encounter more challenges than their peers because of their anxiety and weak social skills.

Social skills help individuals to express their positive or negative feelings and thoughts in a social environment. These skills have a significant effect on children’s socio-emotional development in the long-term, as well as on their cognitive and academic achievements (Özbey & Köyceğiz, 2019: 478). Social skills can be defined as the skills of performing behaviors in a social environment where one individual can be helpful for another individual and others (Kozanoğlu, 2006: 21). These skills include behaviors that can be observed and defined; they are the behaviors which improve the individuals’ social competency that is a part of a wide structure (Warger & Rutherford, 1993: 21). Although there is no common definition of social ability, it is widely accepted that there is a relation between starting and sustaining social relationships, interacting skills and social skills (Garrote, 2017: 2). When

the literature is reviewed, it can be observed that social skills are subjected to various classifications. Akkok (1996: 2-3), classified social skills in 6 groups:

- **Initiating and sustaining relationships skills:** listening, starting a conversation, sustaining the conversation, thanking, introducing oneself, complementing, asking for help, apologizing, giving instructions, persuading.
- **Conducting a group work skills:** understanding the view of others, taking responsibility, delivering a compliment
- **Skills for feelings:** understanding your own feelings, expressing feelings, understanding the feelings of others, dealing with the anger of the other, expressing positive feelings, dealing with fear.
- **Skills for dealing with aggressive behaviors:** asking for permission, sharing, asking for help from others, expressing yourself properly to aggression or controlling it.
- **Skills for dealing with stress:** dealing with failure, dealing with group pressure, dealing with being left alone
- **Skills for solving problems and planning:** collecting information, setting a goal, focusing on work.

There are lots of factors reinforcing the social skills of children in a learning environment. That the social skills of mentally retarded individuals are improved will increase the quality of their lives and contribute to their happiness in life. One of the most significant factors affecting the level of these individuals' social skills is peer factor, as it was mentioned above. When the literature reviewed, it can be observed that most studies are conducted on families which have an individual with mental retardation (Yarımdağ & Erciyes, 2021; Aksoy & Demirli, 2020; Hassamancıoğlu et al., 2020; Kağan & Başgöze, 2020; Balcı et al., 2019; Arıcıoğlu & Gültekin, 2017; Cin et al., 2017; Keskin et al., 2010) and on inclusion of mentally retarded individuals (Şahan et al., 2021; Yener & Dayı, 2021; Özcan, 2020; Atlan, 2019; Ünsal, 2019; Karasu & Şimşek, 2018). In literature review, there is a limited number of studies focusing on the effects of the peer factor on the development of social skills in mentally retarded individuals. Thus, the research question is "What are teachers' views of peer factor in the development of social skills of mentally retarded individuals?" The results of the study are considered to be guiding for researchers and teachers.

The study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- What are teachers' views about peer factor in mentally disabled individuals' skills for;
 - a. initiating and sustaining relationships and conducting group work skills?
 - b. dealing with aggressive behaviors and stress?
 - c. problem solving and planning?

2. Method

In this study, phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research methods, was utilized. In phenomenology, what kind of meanings the participants attribute to activities, events and facts is studied. Within this approach, the questions "why" and "how" are attempted to be answered. The phenomenology design is based on the facts that we are aware of but we do not have a detailed understanding of them. The facts can be encountered in various ways such as events, experiences, perceptions, tendencies, notions and situations in the world that we are living in (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018: 69). The phenomenological approach tries to describe the experience of the experiencer from his own point of view. Phenomenology assumes that individuals seek meaning from their experiences and that their

narratives convey this meaning (Gill, 2020). In this direction, the researchers examined the teachers' opinions about the support of the students to the students. This study aims to examine the peer factor in detail through the experience of teachers and point out how it affects the mentally retarded individuals through teachers' perceptions, phenomenology design was applied.

2.1. Study Group

In this study, convenience sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, was employed. In this sampling, also known as incidental or opportunity sampling, the aim was to avoid wasting time, money and workforce. In this type of sampling, the researcher attempts to study on a case which is reachable and provides maximum savings (Cohen & Mannion, 1989, Ravid, 1994, as cited in Büyüköztürk et al., 2017).

The study group was chosen from four public primary schools of the Ministry of Education, and from a special education practice school accessible in the center of Bingöl province and its district, Genc. From these schools, 15 special education teachers and 15 classroom teachers with their inclusive students participated in the study on voluntary basis.

The demographic information about the teachers taking part in the interview is as follows: 15 of the participants are women while the other 15 are men. As for the age distribution, there are 11 teachers aged between 20-25, 12 teachers aged between 26-30, 4 teachers between 31-35, 2 teachers between 36-40 and only 1 teacher aged above 41. While 15 teachers graduated from classroom teaching and 15 teachers graduated from special education, all participant teachers have their bachelors degree. As for the working years, there are 22 teachers working between 1-5 years, 4 teachers between 6-10 years, 2 teachers working between 11-15 years, 1 teacher working between 16-20 years and 1 teacher working for more than 20 years.

2.2. Data Collection Tool

The data were collected via a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. The form consisted of two sections; one was on demographic information (gender, age, years of teaching experience), the other comprised three open ended questions regarding the teachers' views about peer factor in mentally retarded individuals. While constructing the form, a draft was formed by reviewing the literature. The items in the draft form were examined by four teachers (two class teachers who have inclusive students and two special education teachers) and a pilot study was conducted. After the pilot study, in order to assess the validity of the questions, the aim was evaluated in terms of meaning and content by three special education teachers and three lecturers (one from preschool teaching, one from classroom teaching and another one from special education). After these steps, the interview form was completed as the data collection tool.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

After explaining the content of the interview form and informing the teachers that it was a scientific study, the interviews (approximately 15-20 minutes with each teacher) were carried out. In the study, the participants were informed about the purpose, content and confidentiality of the data. During the interview, all necessary information regarding the research was given. The data collected qualitatively was analysed by content and descriptive analysis. Content analysis is a method which is based on the deductive analysis of written and visual data mostly (Özdemir, 2010). Choosing a method suitable for research purposes, obtaining the findings in accordance with the method and interpreting the data reliably express the validity of qualitative research. In addition, the validation of the data obtained from the answers of the co-researchers, the collaboration of the researchers and the analysis of the data with the help of the other researcher are the factors that support the validity of the

research (Merriam, 2002). The data written in the forms were transferred to the digital media and categorised by the researcher meticulously. The accuracy of the data obtained during the interview was confirmed by the participants after the interview texts were transferred to the digital environment. Participants confirmed the accuracy of the thoughts they expressed during the interview. While processing the data, the personal information of the teachers in the study group was kept confidential and, within the analysis, each teacher taking part in the interview were given a code (T1, T2, T3 etc). The data collected were also coded. The themes were identified by two of the researchers who analysed the similarities and differences in the responses given. Codes and themes were edited and transferred into tables. The frequency and percentage values were indicated. The statements of the participant teachers were directly stated.

3. Results

Below, the findings obtained are presented depending on the subgoal of the research and supported by the statements of the participant teachers. In Table 1 below, the teachers' views of the peer factor in initiating and sustaining relationships skills and conducting group work skills of mentally disabled individuals are stated.

Table 1. The teachers' views of the peer factor in initiating and sustaining relationships skills and conducting group work skills of mentally disabled individuals

Categories		Frequency	Percentage
Positive opinions	Contribution to socialization	23	29.4
	Improving language and communication skills	14	17.9
	Improving cooperation	10	12.8
	Decreasing adaptation problems	9	11.5
	Being a role model	8	10.2
	Being encouraging and supportive	7	8.9
	Increasing self-confidence	2	2.5
	Being motivational	1	1.2
	Being facilitating	1	1.2
Negative opinions	Ineffective	3	3.8
Total		78	100

When Table 1 is examined, it is observed that most teachers who participated in the interview emphasize the positive effects of peer factor in initiating and sustaining relationships skills and conducting group work skills of mentally disabled individuals while a small number of them indicate that peer factor does not have any effects. Most of the teachers who believes in the peer factor to have positive effects on initiating and sustaining relationships skills and conducting group work skills of mentally disabled individuals stated that peers will contribute to socialisation while a small number of them puts emphasis on being a role model and the others indicates being facilitating to be an important factor. Some sample statements by the teachers who pinpoint the positive effects of peer factor in initiating and sustaining relationships skills and conducting group work skills of mentally disabled individuals are as follows:

Most participant teachers used expressions emphasizing peer support to be significant in initiating and sustaining relationships skills and conducting group work skills. For example, T12 says, "*Mentally disabled children will be willing to sustain the relationship like a normal child as they are accepted within the group and become happy in their relationships with their peers*". T28, on the other hand, states that "*The fact that students can sustain a*

relationship with their peers affects their attitudes and behaviors for themselves positively. If the peer has a negative attitude towards the student, it causes that student to be introverted and remain in the background in sustaining the relationship.” Moreover, T11 used these expressions indicating peer support to have several effects on the mentally disabled individual in group works: “The common interest, attention and permission to speak in group works with peers improve the students’ social interaction skills such as listening, asking questions and sustaining conversation.”

Although some participants put emphasis on peer factor in initiating and sustaining relationships and conducting group work, some others indicated that cooperation is an important factor to increase self-confidence, avoid adaptation problems and even to be encouraging and supportive for some tasks. For example, T18 says that “Group works must take place very often. The students can achieve a task that they are incapable of with the help of their peers. This will provide self-confidence and improve their cooperation skills.” T22, emphasizing cooperation, stated that “One of the circumstances that peer effect can be observed most is group work. It helps to take further positive steps towards raising awareness for cooperation by guiding mentally disabled children.” The statement of T21 can be interpreted in terms of the decrease in the most challenging situation, namely, the adaptation problem of mentally disabled students. T21 emphasized that “It will have positive effects when peers embrace the mentally disabled individuals and guide them properly in group works. Moreover, the mentally disabled individuals will act in positive behaviors according to their own observations.”

Some participant teachers, on the other hand, claimed peer factor to be encouraging and motivating for mentally disabled individuals to initiate relationships. Accordingly, T14 stated that “Peers are effective in terms of encouraging and motivating the students to initiate relationships.” Similarly, T20 claimed that “although the disabled students are not enthusiastic about it, the relationship between the peers and the disabled starts as the peers ask for something and ask about their conditions. This shows how important the peer factor is.” Only one teacher believed in the peer factor to be facilitating and stated that “it makes cooperation easier with a group where the disabled are embraced with understanding and not excluded.”

In Table 2 below, the teachers’ views of the peer factor in mentally disabled individuals’ skills for dealing with aggressive behaviors, expressing feelings and dealing with stress are stated.

Table 2. The teachers’ views of the peer factor in mentally disabled individuals’ skills for dealing with aggressive behaviors, expressing feelings and dealing with stress

Categories		Frequency	Percentage
Positive opinions	Being a role model	19	23.4
	Being facilitating	16	19.7
	Motivating to express feelings	10	12.3
	Being encouraging and supportive	9	11.1
	Being reinforcing	2	2.4
	Increasing self-confidence	2	2.4
	Increase in peer acceptance	2	2.4
	Being helpful in anger management	1	1.2
	Contribution to socialization	1	1.2
	Negative opinions	Ineffective	19
Total		81	100

When Table 2 is examined, most of the participant teachers made explanations regarding peer factor to be a role model, facilitator, motivator, encouraging and supportive in mentally disabled individuals' skills for dealing with aggressive behaviors, expressing feelings and dealing with stress while just a small number of teachers believed that it contributes to socialization. Some of the statements by the teachers who believe peer factors to have effects are as follows:

Most participant teachers used expressions emphasizing peer factor to be considered as a role model in the improvement of the social skills. For example, T26 stated that *"If the peers of the mentally disabled individuals are the ones who do not cause any trouble with any aggressive behaviors, these students can be shown as an example and rewarded properly so that it can take attention of the individuals with aggressive behaviors and encourage them to stop acting in that way."* T12, on the other hand, said that *"The children who are not accepted by their peers because of their aggressive behaviors can suppress these acts. These problematic behaviors can decrease when the children realise that their peers who do not act aggressively are rewarded."* Moreover, T15 mentioned the facilitating effect of the peer factor and pointed out that *"The rules set by an authority are forbidden for the children, but when these rules are set by their peers, they can be considered as strict rules. What the peers think about aggression and how they behave can be more effective on their friends."* T1 expressed how encouraging and motivating the peer factor can be stating that *"If the peers help the disabled students deal with stress, they can affect them positively by decreasing the stress level of the disabled to the minimum."*

Participant teachers dramatically pointed out that the peer factor is significant for mentally disabled children in terms of expressing feelings. For example, T29 said that *"It can be exemplified with the comfort, as well as mutual comfort, provided by their peers with expressions such as 'don't cry' and 'don't be sad' in case of a failure."* T25 stated that *"The disabled children are affected by their peers and they often talk about the events they experienced."* T5 pointed out that *"If one of the peers cries, the disabled individual also feels sad. If the peer laughs, the disabled individual also laughs. These kinds of situations always happen."* T12 also pointed out the positive effects of peer factor in expressing feelings and stated that *"Children try to understand their peers' feelings. They may want to imitate these feelings according to the reactions given to them. They can also react similarly by observing what kind of emotional reactions are given to what kind of situations."*

T2 is the only participant who claimed that *"When the peers distract the mentally disabled children when they are under stress, it will help them start a new game and thus, contribute to the mentally disabled individuals' socialization skills."*

While most participants mention the positive effects of the peer factor on the development of these skills, a considerable number of teachers remark on its negative effects. T30 pointed out that normally developing children do not want to make friends with someone who has aggressive behaviors and thus, peer factor will affect them negatively: *"Peer effect is out of the question in dealing with aggressive behaviour since the peers do not want friends with aggressive behaviors."* T1, supporting this idea, stated that *"I think the peer factor will have negative effects if the peers counter attack these aggressive behaviors which can end up provoking more aggression."* Another participant, T6, also said that *"The negative and nonconstructive attitudes of the peers increase the effects and the frequency of occurrence of the problematic behaviour."* T22, on the other hand, points out the negative effects of peer factor and stated that *"The peer effect in dealing with aggressive behaviors is almost non-existent."*

In Table 3, the findings regarding the teachers' views of the peer factor in mentally disabled individuals' problem solving and planning skills are stated.

Table 3. The teachers' views of the peer factor in mentally disabled individuals' problem solving and planning skills

Categories		Frequency	Percentage
Positive opinions	Being facilitating	17	31.4
	Being a role model	14	25.9
	Cooperation development	10	18.5
	Being encouraging and supportive	5	9.2
	Encouraging the sense of belonging	2	3.7
	Increasing self-confidence	1	1.8
Negative opinions	Inactive	5	9.2
Total		54	100

When Table 3 is examined, it is observed that most teachers who participated in the interview emphasized the positive effects of peer factor in problem solving and planning skills of mentally disabled individuals while a small number of them explained that it is not effective at all. Most teachers believing in the positive effects of peer factor made explanations about it being facilitating, being a role model, developing cooperation while others less in numbers considered it as encouraging the feeling of belonging.

T14, pointing out a positive opinion on peer factor, stated about problem solving and planning skills of mentally disabled children that *"We observe that when they encounter the same problems, they try to solve them the same way as their friends solve theirs."*

Some of the participant teachers pointed out that peer factor in problem solving and planning skills would be more effective together with cooperation. This is emphasized by T22 as *"For mentally disabled children, problem solving skills is an abstract issue so instead of theoretically, they need to learn by doing and experiencing which will end up with positive effects."* Moreover, one of the participant teachers, T16, strongly supported the idea of cooperation which can lead to success in problem solving skills by stating that *"Problem solving skills will definitely be improved in an environment where there is cooperation."*

T2 is the only participant teacher who believes that peer factor contributes to the development of sense of belonging and regarding the mentally disabled children realizing themselves to be a member of a group, T2 stated that *"Mentally disabled children can show themselves within the boundaries of what their peers plan. The peer effect on planning skills of mentally disabled children can be observed when they achieve to become a member of a group."*

Some participant teachers considered solving problems and planning skills to be higher-order cognitive skills and they emphasised that mentally disabled individuals are incapable of achieving these skills. This opinion is stated by T8 as *"Problem solving and planning skills are challenging. Mentally disabled individuals have difficulties in fulfilling these skills. Peer factor effect is out of the question."*

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Interaction with their peers is really significant for the mentally disabled individuals for their development. The level of acceptance of their peers contributes to their adaptation to the social norms. Peer effect supports the social adaptation process of the mentally disabled individuals also at school. Social skills enable individuals to express themselves in social life.

These skills have a significant effect on social, emotional, cognitive and academic development (Gresham, 1982b: 129; Burke & Sass, 2008: 51). In this study, the aim is to determine the teachers' views on the peer factor in the development of social skills of mentally disabled individuals. The research was conducted with phenomenology design which is one of the qualitative research methods. Regarding the findings obtained, the following results have been found out:

- The views of most participant teachers are based on the opinion that initiating and sustaining relationships skills together with conducting group work skills for mentally disabled individuals are positively affected by peer factor while a small number of them think that it does not affect those skills at all.
- The views of most participant teachers are based on the opinion that mentally disabled individuals' skills for expressing feelings, dealing with aggressive behaviors and stress are positively affected by peer factor while a small number of them think that peer factor does not affect those skills at all. What is surprising about the result here is that negative feedback given for those skills are mentioned more when compared to initiating and sustaining relationships skills together with conducting group work skills, problem solving and planning skills.
- The views of most participant teachers are based on the opinion that peer factor has positive effects on mentally disabled individuals' problem solving and planning skills whereas a small number of them think that peer factor does not affect those skills at all.

When literature is reviewed, some studies similar to this one at hand have been encountered. In the study conducted by Alptekin (2010), it was concluded that mentally disabled children who continue their education with their normally developing peers interact with those peers by considering them as role models and peer acceptance level increases as students obtain social skills. This study at hand is similar to the one mentioned above in terms of the result pointing out that peer factor has a positive effect on the development of social skills (initiating and sustaining relationships skills, conducting a group work skill, skills for feelings, skills for dealing with aggressive behaviors, skills for dealing with stress, skills for solving problems and planning) regarding it being a role model.

In a study conducted by Kucuker, Erdogan and Curuk (2014) in a classroom consists of three mentally disabled and 51 normally developing children, one of the mentally disabled children were accepted by the peers, the other one was rejected and the acceptance of the last one was "controversial" which means the disabled child was both accepted and rejected.

Incapability of social skills and problematic behaviors are considered to be related to peer rejection while the development of social skills of those children is related to peer acceptance. The study at hand is similar in the result stating that the acceptance of mentally disabled children who act aggressively is decreased by their normally developing peers. This is one of the results which takes attention. In the study, teachers mostly stated that peer factor has positive effects on the development of social skills of mentally disabled individuals. Nevertheless, when the skills for dealing with aggressive behaviors are considered, teachers' views focus on the negative effects of peer factor mostly. It can be considered to happen because of many reasons. Teachers might have thought that low natural tolerance of society and environment towards aggressive behaviors might cause the peers to stop supporting their mentally disabled friends with the same behaviors.

In their study, Krebs, MacDaniel and Neeley (2010) aimed to study the peer effects on social development of two students diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder and their normally developing peers. Before the data was collected, in order social skills related to

maintaining intention successfully to be obtained, they identified some certain behaviors and explained them. Within the social behaviors chosen, starting, managing and maintaining a conversation with a peer is included. For this aim, two normally developing children were trained. As a result, with the help of peer education, behaviors chosen specifically for the participants with autistic spectrum disorder were increased and it was observed that even the social behaviors which were not aimed at were developed. The positive results of the study at hand regarding the peer acceptance and the fact that the development of the behaviors aimed in the study mentioned above are consistent with each other. The study conducted by Diamond (2001) is similar to positive results of the study at hand in terms of its results emphasizing that there is a significant positive difference in the measurement of the ability to understand and accept the emotions of the children who interact with the children with disabilities.

The results of the study about children with Williams syndrome by Gillooly, Riby, Durkin ve Rhodes (2020) support the results of the study at hand. In that study, the data was collected via survey in order to identify the ways of social functions and peer interactions of 21 children (aged between 7 and 16) with williams syndrome together with their parents and teachers. Parents and teachers stated that children with Williams syndrome showed peer problems, together with the problems in sustaining relationships and increasing social exclusion, which are far more challenging than the social norms. These results do not overlap with the study at hand in terms of the findings related to the positive peer support.

Studies show that the quality of peer relationships helps students with intellectual disabilities acquire social skills. The characteristics of mentally retarded students, the quality of peer relations and the class factor affect the development of these skills (Schoop-Kasteler & Müller, 2020). Many children who fail to develop social skills for various reasons may also have deficiencies in their general competencies. These children may also face the risk of failure in school. In particular, children with disabilities experience higher rates of peer rejection and are much more likely to miss out on effective social experiences with their peers (Kennedy, 2018).

Children with disabilities in learning, attention, perception, memory and language may have more difficulties in establishing social relationships and making friends compared to other children due to peer rejection. These social challenges can reverse the impact of all the experiences children need to develop social skills and socialize. Children's negative self-perception, loneliness and depression may also negatively affect their academic lives. In addition, due to their marginal social status, these children have few opportunities for positive interactions with successful peers, and may tend to engage with peers who accept them but are not supportive or cannot model desired behaviors. Despite the stated negatives, there are numerous studies proving the positive effect of peers. Every day in the classroom, students face social tasks such as initiating and maintaining relationships with peers, forming friendships, achieving common goals, and resolving conflicts. Theoretical models, educational practices and research findings of the last three decades have proven that social interaction is inherent in learning and that social relationships with peers are important for learning disabilities (Pearl & Donahue, 2004).

Individuals with intellectual disabilities may have difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships and making friends. Compared to peer relationships, other social relationships often lack positivity and intimacy. Mentally disabled people are reluctant to interact with others because they feel excluded by the social environment and prefer to play on their own. Encouraging them to participate in a group activity not only increases collaboration with their peers, but also provides training in how to interact with others. Studies have shown that

programs that include leisure time activities and various game activities are effective in improving the social skills of individuals with intellectual disabilities (Khalid & Safraz, 2019).

Social interaction is an important component of development for children with special needs. Studies show that social and emotional development, which is important for children's academic success, is supported by play and peer interaction. Emphasizing the importance of social interaction in the development of the child, Vygotsky determined as a result of his research that children with special needs are positively affected by peer interaction (Neary, 2010). Studies argue that peer interaction may have a significant impact on the socialization of children with disabilities show that cooperative teaching groups will help develop social skills (Carter & Hughes, 2005).

Peers or friendships provide an environment that supports children's autonomy. All individuals have basic social needs such as secure attachment, social acceptance, intimacy and friendship. Meeting these needs greatly supports the social and emotional well-being of individuals. In addition, peers contribute to the development of individuals by supporting their sense of personal worth. Studies show that interaction with peers facilitates cognitive coding and behavior organization. Behavior performed by a peer increases the probability of indirect learning and makes it easier for the behavior to become permanent (Aladağ, 2005).

5. Recommendations

When the findings are taken into consideration, the followings can be recommended:

- Based on the positive evaluation of peer support by teachers in the development of social skills of individuals with intellectual disabilities, it is recommended that both teachers, parents and administrators support the presence of disabled students and normally developing students in the same environment.
- Considering the opinions of participant teachers pointing out that the peer factor is far more negative in coping with aggressive behaviors, it may be recommended to provide counseling primarily to children who exhibit these behaviors in order to improve peer relations and increase peer support in primary school classes.
- Based on the same result, it can be suggested to researchers to examine the effect of being with disabled individuals on the social skill development of normally developing students.

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