
Elementary school children and SEN children's opinions about learning

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Keywords

Elementary school children, Special educational needs, Learning characteristics, Children's opinions

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

Providing quality services for children with special educational needs (SEN) represents a significant task in educational policy. The level of services influences the success of the educa-

tion system. According to the Hungarian public education act (2011. 2. 4. §. 25.), the concept of SEN can be defined as "a child with special educational needs, who is struggling with motor, sensory, intellectual or speech disabilities, multiple disabilities, co-occurrence of multiple disabilities, autism spectrum disorders or other psychological developmental disorders (massive learning, attention or behaviour control disorder) based on the opinion of a panel of experts."

To provide a national overview, I present statistical data on Hungarian SEN children. According to Hungary's Central Statistical Office, the number of SEN children in Hungary decreased by 400 children in 2013, however, the number is still high at 51,000 children. This is 6.9% of primary school children. Most SEN children are from the southern part of the country, the Southern Great Plain region (11%). As regards gender differences, there is a gender gap. There are more boys with SEN (8.8%) in the education system than girls (5%). By 2013, more children were integrated into common school classes than before. This number represents 34,000 children (Central Statistical Office, 2013).

Special educational needs teachers have to participate in the learning process because of the large number of SEN children (Westwood, 2008). I wish to differentiate among the following categories of learning problems teachers may face: (1) Learning difficulties influence learning adversely; they hinder learning in certain areas and in certain periods. Possible reasons for this may be family-related, social, cultural and language problems and lack of motivation. Learning difficulties can

be corrected with coaching, tutoring and developmental tasks. (2) The next problem is whether there are any difficulties in the functioning of skills. For example, this includes neurogenic learning disorders, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dysphasia, and attention, concentration and memory dysfunction. Psychogenic learning disorders have also been diagnosed, which may be brought about by environmental damage, for example, anxiety and fear of failure. This type can be handled using small group or individual methods; however, special development may also be required. Post-traumatic learning disorder may develop because of childhood brain damage, which can lead to learning disabilities. (3) Children with learning disabilities have severe, long-term learning difficulties, which arise in the cognitive, motor, emotional and social domains. These schoolchildren are often taught by special educational needs teachers and require special treatment.

The aim of the present research was to ascertain elementary school children's views on learning. My research questions are the following: (1) What is learning? (2–3) What kind of methods do children use in maths and reading learning? (4) What do they prefer in school? Validity was ensured with a triangulation of methods that involved two types of questionnaires and interviews with teachers. Documentation and transparency represented a significant principle in the link between the collection and interpretation of data. Reflectivity was stressed in the researcher's perspective of applying a critical attitude to the research process. Comprehensive data processing was used in interpreting the data.

Methods

My sample consisted of SEN children (n=22) and typically developing children (n=25) in Years 3 and 4. An open-ended questionnaire was used, and the data collection was based on face-to-face data collection. A Likert-scale questionnaire was also employed with data likewise collected face-to-face; however, in the present paper, I focus on the open-ended questions.

I proceeded from the hypothesis that children connect the notion of learning to learning in school. I also assumed that SEN children apply learning strategies in maths and reading more often, since they are aware of their learning disabilities and they make an effort to compensate for their learning difficulties. Further, I assumed that the other children prefer school learning and other learning activities more than SEN children do.

Results

The results showed that children mentioned the notion of “knowing more” as being most important with regard to learning. They will be cleverer and acquire more knowledge as well as perform ever newer tasks in school. Some children talk about the usefulness of lifelong learning and the application of knowledge in adulthood.

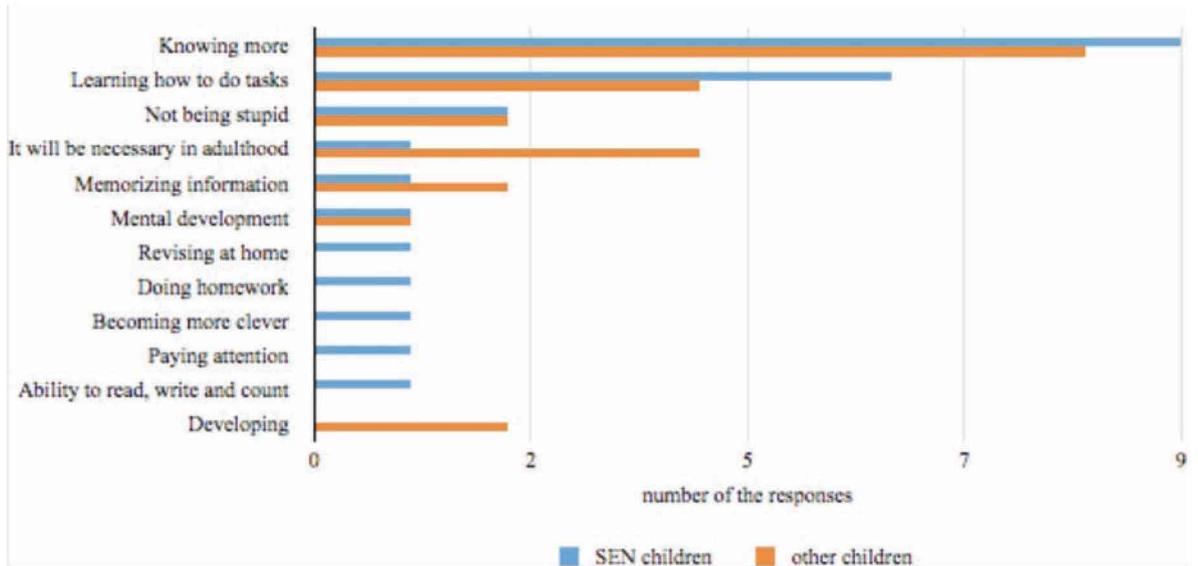


Figure 1. What is learning? Children’s opinions about learning

On the whole, SEN children provided more differentiated answers. My first hypothesis was not confirmed; children not only connect the notion of learning to school but also to other issues, e.g. lifelong learning or not being stupid.

As regards preferred habits and strategies in maths learning, some responses were common and others diverged. Common strategies are scanning the task, paying attention to the task, applying a head count, self-control, memorizing and asking for help if needed. SEN children mentioned using fingers when counting, writing the task, calculating on the board, using thinking skills and practising at home. The other children endeavour to complete tasks independently and learn upcoming tasks in advance. Checking their work or having others check their work is also important; moreover, they attempt to consider the usefulness of the task in everyday life. As regards reading strategies, here too some learning strategies were shared between the groups, while others diverged.

Common strategies are, for example, repeated reading, practising and memorizing texts. SEN children follow the text with their fingers, while other children learn through hearing, reading books and asking for help. My previous assumption was partly confirmed: SEN children more often apply reading strategies that are characteristic of beginning readers.

I was also interested in the question of what children prefer in school.

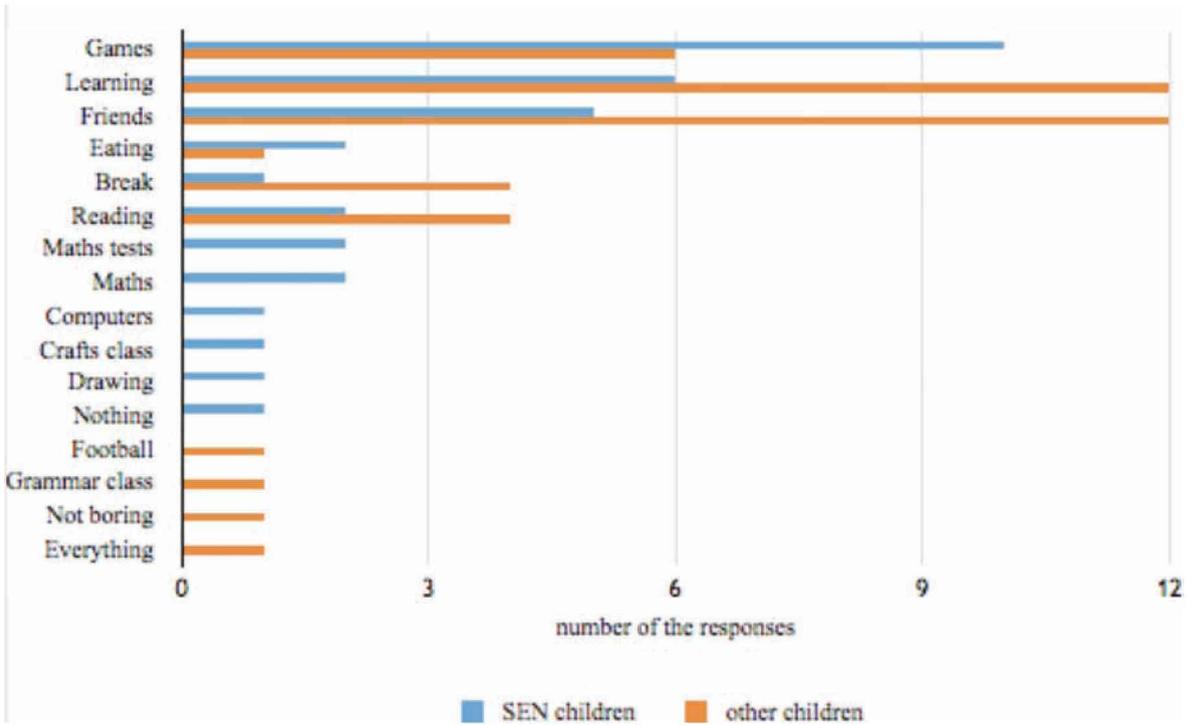


Figure 2. What do you like in school? Children’s opinions about school

SEN children prefer games and learning the most in school. This is encouraging for teachers, since game-based learning activities are often used by SEN teachers. It is also favourable that SEN children have friends. It is promising that ‘average’ children also prefer learning and seeing friends in school. They like games that can be built into learning. As regards

school subjects, they prefer reading the most; however, the role of the break becomes increasingly popular for this age group. The hypothesis is thus partly confirmed. Most SEN children prefer games, although learning and other school subjects are also mentioned, such as maths and crafts. On the whole, it is positive that responses were obtained from every child and that they shared their thoughts about learning and what they prefer in school.

The next step could be an analysis of schoolchildren in Years 5 and 6, since Years 3–4 and 5–6 form a transition between the lower and upper elementary levels. Children have more school subjects, more learning material and more homework during this period. Children with learning difficulties require more attention in the next school phase as well.

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