# Exploring Social Inclusion as a Factor for the Academic Achievement of Students Presenting with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Schools: A Literature Review

**This article presents a review of current research in social inclusion and how social inclusion may be a factor for the academic achievement of pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Attention is given to the placement of students with SEN in mainstream schools as an assumed social inclusive paradigm. Findings suggest that barriers to social inclusion exist in schools. Recommendations in terms of overcoming these barriers are presented.**

**Keywords:** *inclusion, social inclusion, special educational needs, academic achievement, barriers to social inclusion*

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## INTRODUCTION

The complexity of social inclusion is signalled in literature as a multi-layered and fundamentally subjective supposition (Le Boutillier and Croucher, 2010). In the context of social inclusion and education, this article will explore social inclusion for students presenting with SEN and how it may impact their academic achievement. Academic achievement "is concerned with the progress made by learners over time. Thus, it is possible for students to have achieved well (given their starting point) but not to have reached the standard as pre-specified by the performance criteria" (Florian, Rouse, Black-Hawkins and

Jull, 2004, p. 116). Consequently, academic achievement for students with SEN is not measured in terms of standardised testing or outcomes, but in terms of how the student makes progress over time thus providing a fairer and more meaningful indication as students with SEN "starting points are often lower than those of other pupils" (Florian et al., 2004, p. 116). For this paper, the definition of SEN is taken from The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Government of Ireland, 2004), stating that SEN is

> … a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition... )

This review aims to:

1. outline definitions of social inclusion

2. demonstrate the importance of social inclusion for academic achievement

3. present the barriers to social inclusion and how these may be overcome

**METHODOLOGY**

The research question 'Is social inclusion a factor for academic achievement?' was addressed through reviewing literature on the topic. Documentary research of articles, journals and books was employed as the methodology. The sources were evaluated as relevant by adhering to four criteria: authenticity (genuine sources), representativeness (typical of its type), meaning (unambiguous) and credibility (free from bias) (Platt, 1981; Scott, 1990). The researchers adhered to advice by Denscombe (2010) to establish credibility, acknowledging, among other aspects, the length of time documents existed, national titles, professionalism of publishing association and expertise of authors and editors in the field.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature presents definitions of social inclusion, executes perceptions of social inclusion and mainstream schools, and depicts how social inclusion is a factor for academic achievement.

### Defining Social Inclusion

Florian (2014, p. 289) has responded to the continuing challenge of defining inclusive education by describing it as an approach that supports teachers to "respond to individual differences between learners but avoids the marginalisation that can occur when some students are treated differently". Using "the inclusive pedagogical approach in action (IPAA) framework", Florian (2014) identifies how this may be achieved, including but not contained by, creating an environment for learning, differentiation, rejection of ability grouping as the sole organisation of working groups, starting from a strengths baseline, active learning, providing choice and collaboration. Within the Irish context, inclusion in education has been described as the enabling of learners to gain full advantage of their time in school by participation in learning, cultures and communities (Winter and O'Raw, 2010). The proposal of a holistic approach encompassing academic and social participation and development for students with SEN is in line with literature pertinent to the term 'social inclusion'.

The phrase 'social inclusion' has been derided as a pleonasm as it is suggested that 'Inclusion' must include a social dimension (Koster, Timmerman, Nakken, Piil and Van Houten, 2009). Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) have, in the absence of an operational definition of inclusion, suggested a matrix to be used by teachers and students to assess the condition of inclusion of students. Within this they have accounted for the physical and

social inclusion of the students but have added what they term 'the psychological level', that inclusion should be assessed in terms of a sense of school belonging for the student.

Elsewhere the social aspect of inclusion has been described as 'social integration', 'social inclusion' and 'social participation'. These terms are used interchangeably in the literature and encompass four key themes: (1) the presence of positive social contact/interaction between children with SEN and their classmates; (2) acceptance of children with SEN by their classmates; (3) social relationships/friendships between children with SEN and their classmates and (4) the students with SEN's perception of being accepted by their classmates (Koster et al., 2009, cited in Bossaert, Colpin, Piil and Petry, 2011). Research has found, however, that social inclusion does not automatically follow the placement of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms (Nota, Ginerva and Soresi, 2018).

**Social Inclusion and Mainstream Schools**

The intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954, cited in Schwab, 2017) proposes that intergroup contact reduces intergroup prejudice and therefore the placement of students with SEN in mainstream schools should mean that their typically developing peers develop a more positive attitude towards them. The contradictory findings in the research suggest that the placement of students with SEN in a regular classroom is not enough in developing more positive attitudes toward those students (Nota et al. 2018).

Even though the number of students with SEN attending regular schools has increased internationally, it has been found that, for many, their social participation continues to be low (Schwab, 2015; Bossaert et al., 2015), although social contact has been identified as the primary motivation of parents in placing their children in a mainstream school (Scheepstra, Nakken and Pijl, 1999, cited in Bossaert et al., 2011; Mamas, 2012).

Literature asserts that students with SEN encounter mistreatment (in terms of bullying) and more loneliness, peer difficulties and have fewer friends (Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Koster et al., 2010; Lindsay and McPherson, 2012; ). Other studies examining the status of students whose first language is not English found that they are more susceptible to social separation and experience discrimination and racism (McGorman and Sugrue, 2007). Conversely, the study by Bossaert et al. (2015, p.52) reminds us that some students with SEN experience successful social inclusion in mainstream classes and advise that "'more in-depth research on these success situations might offer us ideas and tools to improve the social position of other students with SEN"

**Social Inclusion and Academic Achievement**

The sense of engagement with and enjoyment of school for students with SEN is heavily influenced by their social relationships with teachers and peers (Travers, Balfe, Day, Dupont, McDaid, O'Donnell, Butler and Prunty, 2010; McCoy and Banks, 2012). Isolation from peers removes a sense of belonging and negatively impacts their motivation and performance in school (Asher and Coie, 1990, cited in Pijl, Frostad and Flem, 2008). Some researchers note that achievement in school is linked to social inclusion through social acceptance and social adjustment (Wentzel and Asher, 1995). Furthermore, students' progress is associated with positive social inclusion (Frederickson and Cline, 2002).

Students learn during social interactions and "a sense of belonging to, and participation in, the learning community has an important effect on young people's learning in schools" (Nind and Wearmouth, 2006, p.119). Nind and Wearmouth (2006) have asserted, based on evidence from the literature, that peers can support the development and success of students presenting with SEN and social inclusion opportunities can provide valuable learning opportunities for academic achievement (Howe and Mercer, 2008).

This is further supported in research by Mamas (2012, p.1236) who, from a study on pedagogy, social status and inclusion in a Cypriot school, concluded that there is a strong interrelationship between the social and academic aspects of inclusion and "increased academic dimensions of learning lead to increased social dimensions and vice versa". This study highlighted how pedagogical practice at school and classroom level has a key role in enhancing or impeding the social inclusion of students with SEN. Mamas (2012) advises that cognisance be given to this datum as an ongoing process of responding to social inclusive practice and academic achievement.

More recently, McMahon, Keys, Berardi, Crouch and Coker, (2016) found, in surveying the social and academic outcomes for students of 11 schools in the Midwestern United States, that while social inclusion practices such as making extra-curricular activities accessible were the least frequently implemented, they were associated with higher academic achievement and school belonging. However, with social inclusion recognised as a factor for academic achievement, barriers exist.

**FINDINGS**

Findings from the documentary research are presented as barriers to social inclusion.

**Barriers to Social Inclusion:**

Barriers to the social inclusion of students with SEN include poor school policies, restrictive physical environments and lack of accommodations and the role of the school is paramount in addressing these barriers (Alston and Kilham, 2004; Seymour, Reid and Bloom, 2009; Lindsay and McPherson., 2012). An expectation that placement in a mainstream class is enough without actual organisational and pedagogical interventions is also a barrier, as such a placement does not automatically engender positive attitudes towards their peers with SEN thus impacting the social participation of those students (De Boer, 2012).  Conditions to

foster relationships are paramount to enable social inclusion. This is similarly suggested by other research as the development of contact and friendships between students and their peers with SEN does not happen spontaneously (Pijl and Hamstra, 2005, cited in McCoy and Banks, 2012). Bossaert et al. (2015) found in a cross-national study that there was a negative relationship between progress in implementing inclusive education and the social participation of some students.

"Attitudes will ultimately affect the level of acceptance or rejection a person experiences" (Krischler, Pit-Ten Cate and Krolak-Schwerdt, , 2018, p.21). This might be explained by findings (Keith, Bennetto and Rogge, 2015; Schwab, 2017) that the nature of contact between students dictates whether students will develop positive attitudes to students with SEN and that superficial contact resulted in more negative attitudes than those who had no contact with peers with SEN. Pijl et al. (2008, p.401) conclude that lack of acceptance by peers is a barrier for social adaptation "since having friends is important in developing social skills and self-esteem, while holding a ventral position in a network yields leadership experiences". The authors identify that support is necessary but acknowledge that the type of support which will be most effective is "as yet a largely open question" (Pijl et al., p.403). Supports are also necessary for teachers who have been found to overestimate the social position of students with SEN. This is another barrier as teachers may not take positive action to promote interaction and the development of friendships (ibid,).

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations focus on overcoming barriers to social inclusion.

**Overcoming the Barriers to Social Inclusion**
A body of research advocates that individuals with SEN have opportunities to experience acceptance and belonging as well as having a forum where meaningful social relationships

and participation in social activities can be developed (Patterson, 2007; Thorn, Pittman, Myers & Slaughter, 2009). Several variables can be challenging for the quality of social inclusion, one of them being the type of disability (Senicar and Kobal Grum, 2012, such as children with emotional/behavioural and multiple disabilities having a more difficult time adjusting than children with specific physical, visual, hearing or speech difficulties (McCoy and Banks, 2012).

Three key areas in relation to supporting students with SEN will be addressed in this section:

1. The role of the school and the perspective of inclusion

2. The concept of direct instruction as a factor to facilitate social inclusion

3. A collaborative approach

**The Role of the School and the Perspective of Inclusion**

The school has a role in the effective social inclusion of students with SEN, including the physical aspects mentioned above including policies, the physical environment and accommodations as well as fostering positive attitudes. Students with SEN view the role of the teacher as a very important aspect in relation to inclusion, with literature acknowledging that teachers can over protect the student with SEN or can have a negative attitude towards disabilities (Rheams and Bain, 2005). Training for teachers is necessary as this enables understanding and leads to the promotion of positive attitudes (Rheams and Bain, 2005), as well as a sense of effectiveness (Hutzler, Zach and Gafni, 2005). Recchia and Lee (2004) identify communication between key personnel such as service providers, families and the teacher as paramount for social inclusion. This, coupled with structured activities and with inclusive games, enables a greater sense of social inclusion (Carvalho, Perry, Bebko and Minnes,2014). These factors facilitate the social inclusion of students with SEN, enabling them to develop both academically and socially.

**The Concept of Direct Instruction as a Factor to Facilitate Social Inclusion**

Understanding and recognising the individuality of each individual and the promotion of an environment where students feel valued and included is a key factor in literature (Vrăşmaş, 2001; Gheorghiu, Colibaba and Mihoci, 2012;). Pedagogy plays a fundamental role in inclusive education (Mamas, 2012; Florian, 2014,). Direct instruction regarding knowledge about the nature of impairments, enabling students to enhance the capacity of their peers with SEN and supporting relationships between students and their peers with SEN, while carrying out play and study activities, resulted in more positive social interactions between students and their peers with SEN (Nota et al., 2018).

**A Collaborative Approach**

Essential to the accomplishment of an inclusive school is collaboration, joint problem solving (Dyson, Meagher and Robson, , 2002; Dyson, Farrell, Polat and Hutcheson, 2004), the sharing of specialist knowledge among colleagues, as well as having access to specialist literature (McGee, 2004). Teamwork is assessed as having an important role to play for an inclusive environment (Lindsay, 2007). This is further consolidated in literature that asserts that social relations partnerships between teachers and peers have a strong influence on school engagement and enjoyment for students with SEN (Estell, Jones, Pearl and Van Acker, 2008; McCoy and Banks, 2012).

**CONCLUSION**

This paper has demonstrated the efficacy of social inclusion in education for academic achievement. Academic achievement is concerned with the progress made by the student presenting with SEN, given his/her starting point and is not concerned with preconceived outcomes. The assumption that placement in mainstream schools is sufficient for social inclusion has been delineated and investigated. It has been found that social inclusion enhances academic achievement through relationships with peers, teacher, supports,

pedagogical considerations and supported conditions for inclusive practice. Yet, this is not without barriers. Frazee (2003) asserts that even though peer relationships and community participation is a valuable part of their life, students with SEN continue to experience low levels of social inclusion. Suggestions to overcome barriers to enhance social inclusion have been identified by focusing on three specific areas such as the role of the school, pedagogy and collaboration and how these three aspects can facilitate the social inclusion of students with SEN. For social inclusion to flourish, overcoming challenges is paramount (Hill, Davis, Prout and Tisdall,, 2004), so that students with SEN can participate in quality inclusive classroom and school practices (Koller, Le Pouesard and Rummens, 2018). What is established is that social inclusion is a key aspect in the development and progress of the student with SEN as a valued and contributing member of the community (Murray and Greenberg, 2006; Masse, Miller, Shen, Schiariti and Roxborough,, 2012;).

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