Group-Inclusion for Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools

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Abstract

Keywords:
special education; educational inclusion; mainstream schools; positive psychology; positive education; social inclusion; well-being; generative interactions; group-inclusion.

Inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools and mainstream classes is a global mission. Together with cases of success in including students with SEN in the mainstream structures, various studies highlight a lot of criticism concerning policy and implications. The failure of inclusion is reflected both in academic achievements and well-being of the students with SEN. It also affects families and is of great concern to stakeholders, principals, and educational staff as well. The present article emphasizes Group-inclusion as a social intervention for improving educational inclusion. The authors describe principles of Positive Psychology Theory and positive education, as well as principles of the Generative Interactions Theory, as the basis for successful Group-inclusion, which may contribute to the social involvement of students with SEN with their peers. Description of Group-inclusion and examples of implementation are given, and the advantages and costs of Group-inclusion are discussed. Through Group-inclusion the social feelings and attitude of students with SEN in mainstream schools can be improved, as well as their subjective well-being.

Zusammenfasung

Schlüsselworte:
Sonderpädagogik; Inklusion; Regelschulen; Regelklassen; Positive Psychologie; Positive Bildung; Soziale Inklusion; Wohlbefinden; Gruppeneinbindung.

Die Einbindung von Schülern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf in Regelschulen und Regelklassen ist eine globale Mission. Neben Erfolgsbeispielen bei der Integration von Schülern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf in die Regelstrukturen wird in der Literatur auch viel Kritik an der Politik und ihren Auswirkungen hervorgehoben. Das Scheitern der Einbindung spiegelt sich sowohl in den akademischen Leistungen als auch im Wohlbefinden der Studierenden mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf wider. Es wirkt sich auch auf die Familien aus und ist auch für Interessengruppen, Schulleiter und Bildungspersonal von großer Bedeutung. Der vorliegende Artikel betont die Gruppeneinbindung als soziale Intervention zur Verbesserung der Bildungsintegration. Die Autoren beschreiben Prinzipien der Positiven Psychologie und der positiven Bildung, sowie Prinzipien der Generativen Interaktionstheorie als Grundlage für eine erfolgreiche Gruppeneinbindung, die zum sozialen Engagement von Schülern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf mit ihren Mitschülern beitragen kann. Es werden eine Beschreibung der Gruppeneingliederung und Beispiele für die Umsetzung gegeben, und die Vorteile und Kosten der Gruppeneingliederung werden diskutiert. Durch Gruppeneinbindung können die sozialen Gefühle und die Einstellung von Schülern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf in Regelschulen sowie ihr subjektives Wohlbefinden verbessert werden.

1. Introduction

This paper highlights and discusses the challenges in the social aspect of *inclusion* of students with *special educational needs* (SEN), who study in mainstream schools (MSS) - the public educational system. The concept of educational inclusion raised from the Salamanca Statement (1994), with the commitment of "education for all", in terms of policy and implementation as much as possible in *mainstream schools* and *mainstream regular classes*. Since then, great efforts have been invested to achieve proper inclusion for all students. Today, students with SEN study in mainstream classes in MSS, which means full inclusion with students without SEN, or in special education (SE) classes in MSS, which means

partial inclusion, or in special educational schools (SES), which means exclusion mostly (Waissblai, 2018). Students with SEN who study in MSS, especially in junior high and in high school, face some challenges from the academic aspect (Kocaj et al., 2018; Nikolić et al., 2019), the social aspect (Broomhead, 2019; Kohrt et al., 2021), and the emotional aspect (Goldan et al., 2022; Tso et al., 2022).

The challenge of educational inclusion is a global challenge, and various difficulties concerning all aspects of educational inclusion are pointed out in literature (Claiborne & Balakrishnan, 2020; Iarskaia-Smirnova & Goriainova, 2022), as well as in popular

public publications (Buck, 2023; Trabelsi Hadad, 2023). In general, research addresses greater success in favor of SES compared to MSS, academically, socially, and emotionally.

Social inclusion at school is basic to individual development among all ages, especially during adolescence (Skarstein et al., 2020; Warrington & Younger, 2011), and is often reflected in the academic and emotional state of students (Luna et al., 2020; Skarstein et al., 2020). For students with SEN in MSS social inclusion can be a tough mission (Cook et al., 2020. In order to acquire successful social inclusion, these students need help from another person, like teachers (Hind et al., 2019).

Problem statement

Social inclusion of students with SEN who study in SE classes and in mainstream classes, both in MSS, is part of the challenges with which they cope. Many research studies indicate a lower sense of social inclusion among students with SEN in MSS, compared to SES. This subject will be perused in this theoretical paper, with a connection to the theories of *Positive Psychology* (Seligman, 2019) and the *Generative Interactions Theory* (Sessler Bernstein et al., 2020). The following part will present an alternative of *Group-inclusion*, to improve social inclusion of this population of students.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1 Educational inclusion

Inclusion refers to the process by which all students get a proper and equal opportunity to participate in learning, in culture, and in the community. All over the world countries are committed to educational inclusion of students with SEN, thanks to the declaration of 92 countries and around 25 organizations in the Salamanca Statement for "education for all" (1994). Since then, worldwide efforts have been conducted to improve the inclusion of students with SEN, with various needs, through the improvement of policies and implementations (UNESCO, 2009, 2017). According to the Salamanca Statement mainstream schools (MSS) would be the most effective result for students with SEN, an internationally expended process of inclusion in mainstream schools and mainstream classes is noted (Carter et al., 2022; Kauffman et al., 2018; Kocaj et al., 2018).

Inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) means having the proper attitude and implementation towards treating, teaching, and educating in mainstream schools (MSS). This will lead to fulfilling their needs at school (Claiborne & Balakrishnan, 2020, p. 2; Kauffman et al., 2018) and to maximize the possibility for successful inclusion in society as adults (Hornby, 2021).

In Israel, like other countries, students with SEN study in mainstream classes (full inclusion), in special education (SE) classes in MSS (partial inclusion), or in special education school (SES) (from exclusion to a limited extend of inclusion) (Kocaj et al., 2018; Waissblai, 2023). According to recent data (2022-2023), more parents in Israel prefer full inclusion in mainstream classes for their children, but still 41% of students with SEN in Israel study in special schools (SES)/class (SE), with an ongoing decrease in SES and an increase in SE classes (Waissblai, 2023). In the USA, during the scholastic year 2019-2020, an increase of 6% of students with SEN among ages 3-21 who spent more than 80% of their day at school in regular classes was reported (Ministry of Health, 2023).

In general, students with SEN who study in MSS, especially in junior high and high school, face various difficulties, including:

1. They face their peers' academic standards of success without SEN, most of the time without reaching similar success (Hurwitz et al., 2020; Nikolić et al., 2019).

2. They face social challenges, quite often they are more likely to feel a social stigma and they must struggle for social recognition and acceptance at all school ages (Broomhead, 2019; Kohrt et al., 2021; Pinto et al., 2019).

3. Their subjective well-being is lower than their peers without SEN in MSS (Goldan et al., 2022), as well as their peers in SES (Rathmann et al., 2018).

Research studies pointed out some successful cases of inclusion (Ianes et al., 2020). However, essential difficulties regarding almost every aspect of inclusion were discussed, from policy and confusion of terms and definitions to the process itself, implementation, and consequences. For example, Amor et al. (2019) reviewed and found that only 5% of research studies published in English, from 2002-2016, faced practical aspects, such as intervention programs, when other researchers concluded that the failure of inclusion was correlated to lack of teachers' professionalism for inclusion (Buchner & Proyer, 2020; Hagiwara et al., 2019). Difficulties in educational inclusion are not noted only in research,

but in popular publications as well. Recently, an article was published in a daily popular newspaper in Israel, under the title: "The inclusion that failed". It appeared on the back page, on the side, contained less than one column (Trabelsi-Hadad, 2023, June 9th), and described teachers' opinions towards full inclusion in mainstream classes. According to the article, the teachers couldn't find any academic or other benefit from inclusion, mainly due to a lack of proper preparation of teachers for the inclusive class. A few months earlier an article was published in a Canadian popular online site under the title "The rise of seclusion rooms represents the failure of inclusion in schools", referring to the increasing use of seclusion as a way of coping with inclusion, a way which leads to exclusion of students (Buck, 2023, March 20th).

2.2 Social inclusion

Social inclusion is essential and vital in all ages and affects positively or negatively other aspects of development and function, such as academic aspect, social aspect, and subjective well-being (Garrote et al., 2020; Skarstein et al., 2020).

As mentioned in the previous section, the subject of social inclusion of students with SEN can be complicated, and it is investigated and compared in the literature. Comparisons referred to the viewpoint of students with SEN from SES versus MSS and mainstream classes. Pre-school to high school students with SEN scored lower than their peers without SEN in their social feelings (Broomhead, 2019), like sadness and loneliness. Primary school students exhibited similar feelings. Pinto et al. (2019) found lower scores among students with SEN who studied in mainstream classes, in peer acceptance and friendship relations, compared to peers without SEN. Beyond these findings, the researchers also found that frequency of contact between students with and without SEN led to the best results when measuring the variable of friendship relations, more than the variables of impairment or behavior of students with SEN. Kohrt et al. (2021) compared student placement in SES and in mainstream classes, and found among 4th grade students greater social inclusion, was due to placement and not to their conditions. Even in high school, Olsson et al. (2018) reported better scores, both academically and socially, among deaf and hard-of-hearing adolescents who studied in SES, compared to mainstream classes. Social acceptance and social friendship affect students' well-being and academic achievements and can promote the process of inclusion (Colum & Mcintyre, 2021).

Important data occurs when taking into consideration and listening carefully to the voices of students with SEN attending MSS. For example, according to Olsson et al. (2018), hard-hearing adolescents who attended SES reported higher levels of satisfaction with life, as well as better social and academic inclusion, compared to MSS. More precisely, when trying to understand these differences, de Boer & Kuijper (2020) referred to the method by which students with SEN in MSS received help out of class or after school hours. This attitude caused negative emotional and social outcomes such as feelings of sadness and anxiety, due to less interaction with peers.

Teachers can influence the social status of students with SEN by exhibiting a positive attitude and a connection between peers (Hind et al., 2019), or by classroom management techniques (Garrote et al. (2020), but the main actors in the whole picture of social inclusion of students with SEN in MSS are their peers without SEN. It was found that among primary students in Greece, students with SEN in MSS cared more for the quality of close friendship than for acceptance in general (Avramidis et al., 2018). The same importance for meaningful relations with peers without SEN was found by Pinto et al. (2019). It is very important to note that during adolescence, peers without SEN tended to accept emotionally a student with SEN when they had a family member or a friend with SEN and accept them cognitively when they had a classmate with SEN (Dias et al., 2020). Adolescents' attitudes towards inclusion might be influenced by friendship with a peer with SEN, including changing a negative attitude into a more positive attitude (Grütter et al., 2017), but not always - Schwab (2017) reported that superficial contacts with students with SEN in class led to more negative attitude towards these students, compared to students who didn't have students with SEN in their class. Changes in attitude might lead to changes in the students' lives.

In summary of this paragraph, as students with SEN experience difficulties in social inclusion, and with the increasing tendency of inclusion of students with SEN in SE classes in MSS and in mainstream classes, attention must be focused on the social inclusion of students with SEN with their peers without SEN, based on frequency and types of contact.

2.3 Group-inclusion

Various conclusions arise from the literature regarding improving the social inclusion of students with SEN in MSS and in mainstream classes. As

mentioned in previous sections, teachers' attitude towards students with SEN is a crucial factor for social inclusion (Hind et al., 2019; Moberg et al., 2020). In a wide range of studies, as viewed previously, peer-acceptance and close friendship relations with peers without SEN were found as central expressions of social inclusion of students with SEN (Avramidis et al., 2018; Colum & Mcintyre, 2021). Frequency of contact with peers without SEN was found to be an important component for improving peer acceptance and social inclusion (Pinto et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2020; Signorelli et al., 2021).

Various activities at school were found by students to be efficient for improving aspects of social inclusion, like sports activities (Luna et al., 2020). Anyhow, participants were not defined regarding SEN.

2.3.1 Group-inclusion definition

Group-inclusion is defined as interactions of groups of students, on a basis of common fields of interests or common goal to be achieved. The groups will be created in a natural authentic way, students may be with and without SEN, with no discrimination.

2.3.2 Group-inclusion: Basic principles

As the current paper is a theoretical article, detailed principles, and methods of operating the group-inclusion process will be published in the future. Basic principles include participants in the group can be from the same class, from the same grade, or in other groups, narrower or wider; Activities time will be planted in curricula; Participating in a group will be defined upon a predetermined period of time; The school's staff will be part of the program; The activities will be followed by instructed group meetings.

2.4 Positive psychology and subjective well-being

Positive psychology is a psychological theory that emerged during the 1990's, and aimed essentially to enhance the quality of life. That means concentrating on good and on the thing that causes good feelings and strength - good memories, pleasure, gratitude, and more (Carr et al., 2021; Seligman, 2019). Terms like sustainability, happiness, and well-being are essential (Hendriks et al., 2019), in each field of life (Huffman et al., 2020; Vada et al., 2020). Interventions based on the positive psychology principles are very common, with clinical and non-clinical populations (Carr et al., 2021).

Subjective well-being is one of the components that are measured to evaluate quality of life. Adolescence is a specific span in life, with specific characteristics. There is an ongoing decrease in age with decreasing in subjective well-being among adolescents and preadolescents, before COVID-19 (Casas and González-Carrasco, 2019; Marquez & Long, 2021), and more worrying during the pandemic (Dumont et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2022), including feelings of loneliness and sadness in higher rates comparing before the pandemic (27% in confront to 17% in 2017). School connectedness played an important role in preventing a steeper decline (Moore et al., 2022), and it can be taken together with the data on social inclusion for further discussion.

Students with SEN reported before COVID-19 (Goldan et al, 2022) and during the COVID-19 pandemic a significantly lower level of overall well-being (Tso et al., 2022). Their reports included lower levels of life satisfaction in general, lower levels of satisfaction with school and enjoyment, and higher levels of loneliness and tiredness. Parhiala et al. (2018) compared with peers and found significant correlations between academic difficulties and low well-being among adolescents.

Positive education is a branch of positive psychology, aiming to both educational skills for academic achievements and for future life, together with educating for happiness (Seligman et al., 2009). According to Seligman et al. (2009), schools must occupy positive education, due to the rising rates of depression and decreasing rates of well-being among children and youth. They showed, through different interventions, based on the principles of well-being, reduction of depression, anxiety, and adjustment problems (Seligman et al., 2009).

Connecting these data to the fact that adolescents with SEN tend to suffer from social exclusion - an intervention in class should contain motives of well-being, not through an academic route.

2.5 The Generative Interactions Theory

The Generative Interactions Theory is a psycho-sociological theory, that suggests that engagement in positive interactions among diverse people, through an institutionally organized set of practices, will facilitate inclusion. The sets include various components, as keeping members of groups for a long period of time together, achieving a common purpose, and providing interdependent activities (Sessler Bernstein et al., 2020). The generative interactions will help the organization to investigate its assumptions, and to lead

to equity and efficient inclusion (Sessler Bernstein et al., 2020). From the beginning of the process to its final multilevel outcomes, including equity and social justice, there are important phases in the theory, such as opportunity for interactions, willingness, and the ability to engage, continuing frequent, positive interacting, prejudice reduction & skill development, and more. The authors conclude that this theory enables diversity interactions to occur, in a process from diversity to inclusion.

This theory can be applied at school - its basic assumptions and the route in which a member of a group can achieve a better sense of inclusion, as well as the whole (class, grade etc.) are suitable for the Group-inclusion. Hence it can serve as a basic theoretical frame to Group-inclusion among students with and without SEN in MSS, with specific indications.

3. Research question

The research question is: "What is the contribution of a group-inclusion intervention program to the social inclusion of students with SEN who study in junior high MSS?"

4. Research goals

The research goals are:

1. To get a deeper understanding of the present situation and the difficulties among students with SEN who study in junior high MSS regarding their social inclusion.

2. To evaluate the efficiency of the intervention program, emphasizing group-inclusion activities.

3. To understand the possible impact of the group-inclusion intervention program on academic achievements and subjective well-being of students with SEN in junior high MSS.

5. Research methods

The research method is a mixed methods methodology, quantitative and qualitative, to enable the most detailed contribution to a wider understanding of the social inclusion of the chosen population, from objective and subjective points of view.

6. Findings

6.1 Educational inclusion

With the ongoing tendency of inclusion of students with SEN in MSS and in mainstream classes, various difficulties cause this inclusion to be hard to achieve.

Kauffman & Hornby (2020) presented a vision of inclusion versus a special education reality, concluding that placement and instruction of students with SEN must be carefully designed and conducted. Budget for inclusion in its implementational meaning and preparation of teachers to cope with SEN in their classes are not covered enough (Buchner & Proyer, 2020; Meijer & Watkins, 2019).

6.2 Social inclusion

Social inclusion is important to individual development at all ages. Being accepted by peers and by peer groups is an essential aspect of daily life and at school (Gay, 1992, 207, in Warrington & Younger, 2011; Schwab, 2017). Students with SEN experience social exclusion, lack of peer acceptance and friendship relations (Avramidis et al., 2018; Colum & Mcintyre, 2021), and among all the components as teachers' attitudes and more - frequency of positive contact appeared to be the most important component for improving sense of inclusion and social inclusion in reality (Cook et al., 2020; Dias et al., 2020; Grütter et al., 2017). Principles from the Positive Psychology Theory, together with the Generative Interactions Theory are suitable for an intervention program at school, focusing on positive social interactions and social inclusion.

7. Discussion

Students with SEN are part of the society, and thanks to declarations (UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2009) and amendments (Waissblai, 2020; AFI, 2023) they are included continuously in MSS. Despite increasing in numbers of students with SEN in MSS, both professional and popular sources indicate different difficulties in the implementation of inclusion. Difficulties were reported, starting from policy and placement of students (Buchner et al., 2021; Shevlin & Banks, 2021), definitions and a lack in agreement about the interpretations of inclusion, including ethical aspects (Reindal, 2016). Kauffman et al. (2021) and Shaked (2020) focused on what is good education in conditions of SEN - mainstream or separate structure, and a lot of studies raised questions and conclusions about possible advantages and disadvantages, for example of social inclusion (Kohrt et al., 2021), or success as adults based on the preparation from school (Hornby, 2021). Most of them were in favor of SES and not MSS, and when the budget was too low it was hard to achieve changes in many European countries (Meijer & Watkins, 2019).

Is it a final state for the educational system? Can inclusion exist and succeed in MSS? Buchner et al.

(2021) claimed that no progress can be evaluated if inclusion doesn't also include students with cognitive disabilities. Kauffman and Hornby (2020) claimed, in opposition, that instead of insisting on education for all students by presence in mainstream classes as the meaning of inclusion, meaningful instruction is more important. That meant that special education should continue to exist side by side with inclusion in mainstream classes, for whom it is suitable, providing an appropriate opportunity for efficient learning in the short term and in the long term (Kauffman et al., 2018). Tiernan (2022) added to the previous conclusion (referring to inclusion in Ireland), that full inclusion can be understood as the opportunity for all students to study with their peers in mainstream classes, only if specific interventions and support they need to ensure their development will be given.

Maciver et al. (2021) reported a success in promoting students with SEN in mainstream primary classes, thanks to a wide program, including staff as well as stakeholders. The program was based on promoting teachers' self-confidence by coping with SEN and was enlarged to other parts of Scotland. It is interesting, that in confronting to 'social environment', one of the parts of the program, explanation referred to mostly the connection between teacher and students, and not among students. Literature referred widely to the social aspect of students with SEN in mainstream classes, concluded the importance of peer acceptance, close relations with peers without SEN, and contact with peers. Cook et al. (2020); Grütter et al. (2017); Dias et al. (2020) - They all referred to the importance of contact at school or in groups of friends among peers with and without SEN, to improve positive attitude towards students with SEN and social inclusion of these students. This is achievable through common activities, as suggested by Luna et al. (2020). Interventions at school and in classroom must contain social interactions of students with diversity, as shown by Sessler Bernstein et al. (2020). The tendency of inclusion brings together students with various behavioral, emotional and more SEN, and Group-inclusion can be a core model for building a bridge over the differences among students and achieving social inclusion in junior high MSS. Positive contact may cause reduction in stereotypes and in bullying (Cook et al., 2020). Interventions based on Positive Psychology Theory (Carr et al., 2021) led to better general well-being, and together with the Generative Interactions Theory (Sessler Bernstein et al., 2020), which contributes to social inclusion - the Group-inclusion model can serve as a

proper tool for the scholastic environment. Taking in consideration the need of the scholastic system to support this program, by setting the curricula in order to achieve the right process, Group-inclusion can promote natural meetings with peers with and without SEN, in a positive contact which may lead to greater acceptance and peer friendship. As part of the model, it is offered to create meetings of students from each group, to reflect on the process and help students with SEN (and without) to develop and strengthen their social skills. Social skills are an important issue especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, when there was a loss in social contact. Adolescents reported that during the pandemic they felt they were losing their friends and their social skills (Branquinho et al., 2020). These data emphasize the need to involve social goals in everyday school activities (Luna et al., 2020; Signorelli et al., 2021). This increase in social inclusion may lead to an increase in the development of social skills, and in subjective well-being (Luna et al., 2020), and academic achievements as well. According to Sainio et al. (2021), Adolescents with learning difficulties reported lower levels of happiness and enjoyment, and higher levels of anxiety, so improving the social inclusion through Group-inclusion may lead to an improvement in other aspect in the short and the long terms, hence an improvement in educational inclusion.

8. Conclusions

The present paper aimed to focus on the social aspect of inclusion of students with SEN in MSS, especially junior high MSS. According to literature focused on both the difficulties in social inclusion all over the world and the importance of social inclusion in all ages - Group-inclusion is an efficient model to promote social inclusion, with a new deeper contribution in the social aspect. The possibility to interact with peers without SEN, on an authentic base of common fields of interest, or a common goal is a proper opportunity to contact with each other, to build friendship, to gain peer acceptance, and to achieve better social inclusion.

Group-inclusion is a low-budget intervention, easy to operate, with an involvement of staff, who will be able to know the students with SEN better, in a positive environment. Moreover, students will be able to practice their social skills and improve them.

To answer the research question, Group-inclusion may increase the social inclusion of students with SEN in MSS, especially in junior high MSS, and may contribute to students with SEN as well as to other

students, and their well-being. It may also contribute to the whole staff involved in the intervention program, increase teachers' ability to cope with students with SEN, hence to the success of educational inclusion, in the short and in the long term.

Authors note:

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