



Facilitating the social participation of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools: A review of school-based interventions

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) has become a global trend. However, a considerable number of studies have shown that mere enrolment in mainstream classrooms is not enough to support the social participation of pupils with SEN. These children are at risk of experiencing difficulties in their involvement with peers at school. Thus, the question arises of how social participation can be fostered in mainstream classrooms. A systematic review of 35 studies was conducted to investigate which interventions are effective in inclusive mainstream preschool and elementary classrooms. Teaching interaction strategies to typically developing pupils, group activities in the academic context (cooperative learning and peer-tutoring), support groups for pupils with SEN, and training paraprofessionals to facilitate social interactions, were found to improve the social participation of pupils with SEN in general education classrooms. Nevertheless, there is need for more intervention studies implementing a variety of strategies and including different groups of pupils with SEN.

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1. Introduction

The UN Convention on the Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to an inclusive education system at all levels (United Nations, 2006). As a consequence, in recent decades, inclusive education of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools has become a global trend (Bless, 2004; Huber, 2006; Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & van Houten, 2009; Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2008; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). Enrolment in mainstream classrooms is meant to give pupils with SEN the opportunity to live and learn next to typically developing (TD) children of the same age and to be considered full members of the classroom and the community. However, many studies reveal that the social participation of pupils with SEN in inclusive classrooms is not optimal and therefore interventions are clearly needed. Yet, sound knowledge on effective teaching practices in this domain is lacking. Our review attempts to fill this gap and provide an overview of the research on the topic. The following question shall be answered: What type of school-based interventions can foster the social participation of pupils with SEN in mainstream preschool and primary classrooms?

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Firstly, we describe the results of studies on the social participation of pupils with SEN in general education classrooms. Secondly, we present a systematic review of the research identifying school-based interventions aiming to foster the social participation of children with SEN in general education classrooms. Compared to other reviews and meta-analyses published up to the present, which focus on a specific group of children with SEN, mainly children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), this study takes into account all pupils with SEN (e.g., children with learning disabilities, intellectual disability, ASD, and behavioural difficulties). In addition, while the previous reviews and meta-analyses describe only studies published in English, our systematic research also considers studies in German and French.

1.1. Social participation of SEN pupils in inclusive classrooms

The concept of social participation usually involves the aspects of engagement in activities, feelings of belonging, and social interactions (Eriksson & Granlund, 2004; Falkmer, Granlund, Nilholm, & Falkmer, 2012; Hammel et al., 2008). The concept can be defined in many different ways, however, depending on the context (e.g., school, leisure, professional life; Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2013; Falkmer et al., 2012; Simeonsson, Carlson, Huntington, Sturtz McMillen, & Brent, 2001). In the context of inclusive primary school, Koster et al. (2009) carried out a review of the literature to evaluate the definitions used in different studies to describe the social participation of pupils with SEN included in mainstream classrooms. They identified four dimensions of social participation in inclusive classrooms: (1) the acceptance of pupils with SEN, (2) the pupils' perceptions of their acceptance by the classmates, (3) the presence of positive social interactions between pupils with SEN and their classmates, and (4) social relationships/friendships. Intuitively, the social interactions between pupils with SEN and their classmates can be regarded as the most essential dimension for social participation. Without social interactions with classmates, it is technically impossible for pupils with SEN to build friendships or to be socially accepted by them. Further, social acceptance not only manifests itself within social interactions, but can also facilitate social interactions and consequently the creation of friendships. From the individual perspective, feeling accepted by peers and having friends is important for positive experiences in social participation. In the following section, the research on the social participation of pupils with SEN will be described along these four dimensions.

1.1.1. Social acceptance of pupils with SEN

The most studied dimension of social participation is the social acceptance of pupils with SEN. A majority of the studies show that pupils with SEN included in preschool or primary classrooms are more often rejected and less well accepted by their peers than TD pupils (Avramidis, 2013; Cambra & Silvestre, 2003; Estell et al., 2008; Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans, & Soulsby, 2007; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Garrote, 2016; Grütter, Meyer, & Glenz, 2015; Hestenes & Carroll, 2000; Huber & Wilbert, 2012; Koster, Pijl, Nakken, & van Houten, 2010; Krull, Wilbert, & Hennemann, 2014; de Monchy, Pijl, & Zandberg, 2004; Nadeau & Tessier, 2003; Nowicki, 2003; Nepi, Fioravanti, Nannini, & Peru, 2015; Odom & Diamond, 1998; Pijl & Frostad, 2010; Pijl, Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2010; Rotheram-Fuller, Kasari, Chamberlain, & Locke, 2010; Yude, Goodman, & McConachie, 1998). This is the case not only during recess but also in the classroom (Cambra & Silvestre, 2003; Frederickson et al., 2007). TD pupils in primary schools prefer not to work with pupils with SEN or with low-achieving pupils (Huber & Wilbert, 2012; Krull et al., 2014; de Monchy et al., 2004). These findings mean that achievement plays an important role regarding the acceptance of pupils in primary school. Additionally, social acceptance by peers depends on the social behaviour of children with SEN (Avramidis, 2013; Huber & Wilbert, 2012; Pijl et al., 2008; Schwab, Gebhardt, Krammer, & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2015). Thus, pupils with behavioural difficulties (BD) are at greater risk of being rejected by their peers than pupils with learning disabilities (LD) or motor and/or sensory disabilities (Avramidis, 2010; Krull et al., 2014; Pijl et al., 2008).

1.1.2. Self-perception of SEN pupils of their social acceptance

Findings are more ambivalent regarding the pupils' perception of their social acceptance. Some studies involving 6- to 9-year-old pupils with SEN show that their perception of social acceptance does not differ from the perception of their peers, who are more accepted (Koster et al., 2010; Krull et al., 2014). Studies involving older pupils with SEN found that these pupils feel less socially accepted and report more feelings of loneliness than their TD peers (Cambra & Silvestre, 2003; Schwab et al., 2015). Nevertheless, altogether, the SEN pupils' self-perception of social acceptance is positive, even if their real social acceptance in the classroom is low (Avramidis, 2013; Cambra & Silvestre, 2003; Koster et al., 2010; Krull et al., 2014; Schwab et al., 2015). The question arises as to whether other aspects of social participation, such as being involved in social interactions or having friends, may have an effect on the pupils' self-perception of social acceptance. Indeed, friendships can have a positive influence on the socio-emotional development of children (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003) and can reduce the negative impact of social rejection (Peters, Riksen-Walraven, Cillessen, & de Weerth, 2011; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 2011).

1.1.3. Social interactions between pupils with and without SEN

Only a few studies have focused on social interactions; however, they show consistently that pupils with SEN are less involved in social interactions with their peers than their TD classmates in preschool and primary school. This has been especially shown for pupils with ASD, intellectual disability (ID), and Down syndrome (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000; Kasari, Locke, Gulsrud, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2011; Kemp & Carter, 2002; Koster et al., 2010; Scheepstra, Nakken, & Pijl, 1999). Studies on the social interactions of other groups of pupils with SEN are lacking. Extending knowledge on this dimension of

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