



The impact of contact on students' attitudes towards peers with disabilities



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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand the relationship between contact with peers with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and students' attitudes towards their peers with SEN, by examining the inter-group contact theory in regular and inclusive classes. A total of 463 students in 8th grade, with a mean age of 14.42 years, from 25 secondary school classes in Styria (Austria) completed a self-report questionnaire regarding their contact with peers with SEN and their attitudes towards peers with disabilities. Contact was indicated by nominations for joint activities and examined in inclusive and regular classes. The German short version of the Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes towards Children with Handicaps scale (CATCH; Schwab, 2015b; Rosenbaum et al., 1986) was used to measure students' attitudes towards peers with learning disabilities and emotional disorders. Students with SEN are less frequently nominated by their peers for joint activities, such as working together on a school project. Students from inclusive and regular classes did not differ in their attitudes towards peers with SEN. However, those students who nominated at least one peer with SEN for a joint activity had more positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities. Freely choosing contact with a peer with SEN was associated with more positive attitudes towards disability while simply attending the same class may have no effect or even a negative impact on students' attitudes.

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1. Introduction

School inclusion has been endorsed by Austrian school law since 1993 and about 50% of all students with special education needs (SEN) are now educated in inclusive classes. As in other European countries, the allocation of teaching hours and school resources depends on the number of students with SEN per class. Nevertheless, substantive implementation differences exist between the individual federal states (Statistik Austria, 2014) and the social participation of students with SEN is not always successful (Schwab, 2015a).

The attitudes of all stakeholders (parents, students, teachers, school directors, politicians, other professionals) involved in the inclusive education of children with SEN in mainstream schools are considered essential for successful inclusion (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002) and influence both cooperation and the social climate in an inclusive school. Although an important aspect of inclusive education entails the social participation of all students (Avramidis, 2010; Bossaert Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2012), research consistently demonstrates that students with SEN show lower social participation than their

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peers without disabilities. They have fewer friends, are less accepted, interact less often with their peers and report more feelings of loneliness (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2011; Bossaert, Martens, Vanmarsenille, Vertessen, & Petry, 2013; Koster, Nakken, Pijl, van Houten, & Spelberg, 2008; Schwab, 2015a). It has further been shown that the kind of disability plays an important role in social participation, with students with behavioral disorders showing the lowest social participation compared to students with other types of SEN. However, the majority of students with SEN rate their own social participation as satisfactory (Koster, Pijl, Nakken, & Van Houten, 2010) and students with and without SEN can experience positive relationships with peers without disabilities in inclusive settings, which is not possible in special schools.

One reason for the relatively low social participation of students with SEN in inclusive classes may be the attitude of peers towards students with disabilities. Research has shown that students with disabilities are often the target of negative attitudes (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002) and, again, the kind of disability plays an important role (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002; Schwab, 2015b). For example, the attitudes towards children with intellectual disability (ID) are more negative than attitudes towards students with physical or learning disabilities (Schwab, 2015b; Siperstein, Norins, & Mohler, 2007).

1.1. *The influence of having contact with students with disabilities*

The intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) presumes that intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice. It can be assumed that students in inclusive classes, who have regular contact and make friends with students with disabilities, develop a more positive attitude towards these students (Vignes et al., 2009). However, research outcomes vary. Some studies reported a more positive attitude of students who are educated in inclusive classes towards peers with disabilities (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002) or outcomes that seem contradictory (Gash, Gonzales, Pires, & Rault, 2000), whereas others did not find any differences (Schwab, 2015b; Schwab, Huber & Gebhardt, 2016). This indicates that the mere placement of students with and without disabilities in the same classroom does not automatically lead to more positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities. In a recent review, De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2012) analyzed three studies dealing with the relation between students' attitudes and social participation. The analysis revealed that students' attitudes towards inclusion are positively related to the social participation of students with disabilities, i.e. students with more positive attitudes showed more willingness to interact with students with disabilities in free play situations. A second review by MacMillan, Tarrant, Abraham and Morris (2013) further showed that contact with people with disabilities was positively related to attitudes in 22 out of 35 studies, while in only two studies a negative relation was found. Moreover, Armstrong, Morris, Abraham, Ukoumunne, and Tarrant (2016) showed that the amount of contact is positively related to children's attitudes towards handicapped children. However, it has also been shown that positive attitudes are more related to having high quality contact (i.e. having positive interpersonal experiences) with peers with disabilities than to having frequent contact (McManus, Feyes, & Saucier, 2010; Keith, Bennetto, & Rogge, 2015). In a quasi-experimental design, Keith et al. (2015) showed that a 10-week cooperative-learning program or social-contact program lead to a higher social participation and smaller social-distance of students with disabilities.

Based on the studies mentioned above that included students in both primary and secondary education, it can be assumed that the quality and intensity of contact influence students' attitudes towards students with disabilities. To our knowledge, there are no studies in secondary schools in Austria that have explored direct contact with peers with SEN in joint activities (assessed via sociometric network analysis) in relation to the attitudes towards these peers.

1.2. *Objectives*

The present study was designed as a cross-sectional study to estimate the relationship between inclusive education and students' attitudes towards peers with disabilities and to contribute to a contemporary debate about the importance of contact in joint activities related to students' attitudes. The current study sought to examine three hypotheses:

1. Students with SEN in inclusive secondary school classes are less often nominated for joint activities than students without SEN.
2. Students from inclusive classes (who have classroom contact with peers with SEN) have a more positive attitude towards peers with disabilities than students from regular classes without classroom contact.
3. Students with positive interpersonal experiences with peers with SEN in joint activities have a more positive attitude towards peers with disabilities than students with superficial contact.

2. **Method**

2.1. *Participants*

Participants were 436 Austrian students in the 8th grade (secondary education) with a mean age of 14.42 years ($SD = 0.73$) at the time of measurement and exactly 50% were female. The students came from twelve inclusive classes and thirteen regular classes of ten different schools (named "Neue Mittelschulen"). The schools were located both in urban and rural areas with varying socioeconomic status. The distinction between inclusive and regular classes is solely based on the number of students with diagnosed SEN in the class (0 in regular classes and at least 1 in inclusive classes). SEN is officially diagnosed

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