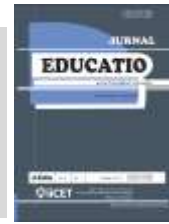




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The important role of inclusive education for the social interaction of students with special needs

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education plays a crucial role in fostering social interaction among students with special needs. This study aimed to explore how inclusive education impacts the social development of children with disabilities through a systematic literature review. The research identified key benefits of inclusive education, including improved communication skills, stronger peer relationships, and enhanced self-esteem for students with special needs. Additionally, typically developing students also gained empathy and social awareness through inclusive settings. However, the study found significant challenges, such as social isolation, peer rejection, and inadequate teacher training, which hinder the effectiveness of inclusive education. The research emphasized the importance of targeted interventions, such as structured social skills programs and peer-mediated strategies, to improve the inclusion experience. Moreover, the voices of students with disabilities, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder, were found to be underrepresented in discussions about best practices, leading to ineffective inclusion strategies. This study highlights the need for better teacher preparation, increased social support, and student-centered policies to create a truly inclusive learning environment. By addressing these challenges, inclusive education can be a powerful tool for promoting social integration and equality in schools.



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Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a crucial framework in global educational policies, aiming to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. The core principle of inclusive education is to integrate students with special needs into mainstream classrooms, fostering an environment where diversity is valued and all learners can develop academically, socially, and emotionally (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). Despite its widespread advocacy, the implementation of inclusive education faces significant challenges, including inadequate teacher training, lack of specialized support, and persistent social barriers that hinder effective integration.

One of the primary concerns in inclusive education is the social development of children with special needs. Social interaction plays a pivotal role in a child's emotional and cognitive growth, yet many inclusive schools struggle to facilitate meaningful peer relationships between children with and without disabilities. While previous studies have extensively examined the structural and policy-related challenges of inclusive education. (Safrudin & Ahmad Qomarudin, 2021; Purbasari, 2022), fewer have explored its direct impact on the social

skills of students with special needs. Additionally, some research has highlighted how inclusive settings may still foster segregation, either through separate learning spaces or a lack of adequate teacher support (Pratiwi, 2019). These gaps in research raise critical questions about the effectiveness of inclusive education in promoting genuine social integration.

Social skills refer to a number of skills that enable individuals to influence desired responses from others. These skills include aspects such as communication, influence, leadership, being a catalyst for change, conflict management, network building, cooperation, collaboration, and the ability to work in teams (Masni, 2018). Social development is a crucial aspect of a child's growth. It encompasses an individual's interactions with others, self-control abilities, as well as motivation and perseverance in various activities. Children's social development is related to their self-perception (such as self-confidence, fear, interest in learning, pride in cultural heritage, anxiety about mistakes), their behavior (including aggression, anger, skills in managing conflict), and their interpersonal relationships, especially with significant individuals in their lives (such as parents, teachers, and peers) (Melinda and Izzati, 2021).

Hurlock suggests that the improvement of children's social behavior is influenced by three main factors. First, is the child's level of expectation for social acceptance. Second, is their understanding of strategies to improve their behavior. Third, is the development of increased intellectual abilities, which allows them to understand the correlation between the behavior they show and social acceptance (Hurlock, 2018). Based on the previous background, this research was carried out to review the important role of inclusive education on the development of social skills of children with special needs through a literature study of relevant references.

This study offers a focused perspective on how inclusive education impacts the social interactions of students with special needs. While many studies have explored the structural and policy aspects of inclusive education, fewer have examined its direct effects on students' ability to engage with peers and integrate into their social environment. Social interaction is a crucial factor in children's emotional and cognitive development, yet many inclusive schools struggle to provide the necessary support systems to foster meaningful relationships between children with and without disabilities. This study aims to critically examine the role of inclusive education in enhancing the social skills of students with special needs, particularly in the development of communication abilities, peer relationships, and overall social adaptation. Unlike prior research that has primarily focused on policy implementation and infrastructural challenges, this paper highlights the direct social impact of inclusive education and its effectiveness in fostering a more inclusive society. By addressing this research gap, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the practical implications of inclusive education and offers recommendations for improving social integration in inclusive learning environments.

Method

This research employs a qualitative descriptive review method using a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to examine the role of inclusive education in the social interaction of children with special needs. The study follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to enhance the transparency and reliability of the literature selection and analysis process. The data collection process involves a comprehensive search of scholarly articles, books, and peer-reviewed journals relevant to the research topic. The inclusion criteria for selecting literature are: (1) publications from reputable sources within the last ten years to ensure up-to-date findings, (2) studies specifically discussing the social impact of inclusive education, and (3) empirical or theoretical research that provides relevant frameworks for analysis. Exclusion criteria include studies focusing solely on policy implementation without discussing social interaction, non-peer-reviewed sources, and duplicate findings. The data analysis process follows several stages: (1) data reduction, where selected literature is categorized based on key themes such as communication skills, peer relationships, and social adaptation; (2) data presentation, where findings are systematically organized and synthesized; (3) verification, where the validity and relevance of the selected literature are assessed; and (4) conclusion drawing, where insights are integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns and key arguments in the reviewed literature. By employing a systematic and structured approach, this study ensures the credibility and rigor of its findings while contributing to a more profound understanding of how inclusive education fosters social interaction among children with special needs.

Results and Discussions

The results was conducted from the review of literature that presents in the table 1. The literature review highlights the significant role of inclusive education in fostering social interaction among students with special needs. Research indicates that inclusive education not only benefits students with disabilities but also enhances

the social skills and empathy of their typically developing peers, promoting broader societal solidarity and tolerance.

Table 1 <Review of Related Study>

Title and Author	Method	Research Objective / Research Questions	Findings
Experiences and Perceptions of Special School Personnel Regarding Inclusive Education: A Qualitative Study (Farwa Chaudhary, Bareera Shahid, and Nazia Bashir, 2022)	Phenomenological qualitative research	What are the experiences and perceptions of special school personnel towards inclusive education?	Inclusive education is also found to improve the social skills and empathy of regular students, which can be important for improving social solidarity and tolerance in society. However, there are some conditions to the success of inclusive education, which include improved teacher training, staff training, school resources, and social support.
Inclusion of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Listening and Hearing to Voices from the Grassroots (Tawanda Majoko, 2015)	Qualitative method	1. What are the social barriers to inclusion of children with ASD in Zimbabwean mainstream primary school classrooms? 2. What are the enablers of inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream primary school classrooms in Zimbabwe?	The study concludes that while inclusive education offers significant benefits, several challenges must be addressed to make it effective. Social isolation, peer rejection, and a lack of teacher preparedness hinder successful inclusion. However, with proper training, tailored teaching strategies, structured environments, and active collaboration, children with ASD can be meaningfully integrated into mainstream classrooms.
Strengthening Social Skills in Students With an Intellectual Disability in Secondary Education (Drossinou-Korea Maria and Panopoulos Nikolaos, 2017)	-	To examine school inclusion of students with ID having in mind that it is connected firstly to the modification of educational techniques using a Targeted, Individual, Structured, Integrated Program for Students with Special Educational Needs (TISIPfSENs)	The results showed that educational interventions that are focused on the enforcement of social skills are a basic priority for the inclusion of students with ID inside the school community.
Interventions for students with autism in inclusive settings: A best-evidence synthesis and meta-analysis.	Meta-Analysis, Quantitative Method	To examine the characteristics of interventions for students with ASD in inclusive settings, offer quantitative analysis of	Function-based interventions, visual supports, self-monitoring strategies, and peer-mediated interventions resulted in mostly large effects, and teacher delivered interventions produced the largest overall effects. More high-quality studies for students with ASD in inclusive

Title and Author	Method	Research Objective / Research Questions	Findings
(Watkins, L., Ledbetter-Cho, K., O'Reilly, M., Barnard-Brak, L., & Garcia-Grau, P. (2019))		intervention effects, examine potential moderating variables that influence outcomes, analyze the social validity of these interventions, and provide recommendations for practice and future research.	school settings are needed to advance evidence-based practice for this population.
Social acceptance and the choosing of favourite classmates: a comparison between students with special educational needs and typically developing students in a context of full inclusion (L. D. Nepi, J. Fioravanti, P. Nannini and A. Peru, 2015)	Quantitative method	To investigate the social position of students with special educational needs and typically developing students studying in regular classroom environments in Italian primary and secondary schools.	The results demonstrated that students with special educational needs are significantly less accepted and are very rarely chosen as favoured classmates by their typically developing counterparts. The theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed.
Social skills critical for success in elementary school: teachers and special educators' perspective (Slobodan Bankovic, Branislav Brojcin, Ivana Vasilevska Petrovska, Marina Antonijevic, and Aleksandra Bukovica, 2023)	Quantitative method	To determine which social skills are considered critical for classroom success by regular teachers who teach students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive classrooms and special educators in special schools.	Both participant groups attributed the highest value to Cooperation skills, however skills related to Responsibility and Self-Control were also highly valued. Ratings of teachers and special educators differ significantly only for Empathy skills, with significantly lower values attributed by special educators. Significant differences between participants who teach in lower and upper elementary grades were found only for special educators, with a higher value for Assertion attributed by special educators in upper grades.
Sekolah Inklusi Untuk Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus: Tanggapan Terhadap Tantangan Kedepannya (Jamilah Candra Pratiwi, 2015)	Literature Review	To analyze the implementation of inclusive schools for children with special needs and the challenges faced in its implementation in Indonesia.	The results show that inclusive schools provide significant benefits for children with disabilities, especially in improving their social interactions, self-esteem and social competence. By learning alongside their peers in regular schools, these children have a greater chance of adapting to the wider social environment and reducing the stigma against them. However, various challenges still hamper the effectiveness of inclusive schools. One of the main obstacles is the

Title and Author	Method	Research Objective / Research Questions	Findings
			unpreparedness of teachers in dealing with children with disabilities due to a lack of training and understanding of special needs. In addition, limited facilities and infrastructure, such as disability-friendly facilities and learning aids, are also an inhibiting factor. Low public and parental awareness of the importance of inclusive education also exacerbates the situation, with many believing that children with disabilities are better suited to special institutions. Administrative burdens and difficulties in modifying the curriculum to suit the needs of children with disabilities also pose challenges for educators.
Autistic Voices are Missing in Research on Inclusion Best Practices (Stephanie C. Holmes, 2022)	Literature review	<p>The study aims to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Examine the barriers to inclusive educational practices for students on the autism spectrum. 2. Propose more inclusive practices based on the firsthand experiences of autistic individuals. 3. Highlight the impact of ineffective inclusion, including negative stigma, feelings of exclusion, and adverse effects on mental health. 4. Advocate for further research that actively includes autistic individuals in defining effective inclusive practices. 	<p>The study found that autistic voices are largely missing from research on inclusion, with most studies focusing on the perspectives of educators, administrators, and clinicians. As a result, many well-intentioned inclusion practices fail to feel inclusive for autistic students, who often experience exclusion, segregation, and even bullying from both peers and educators. The research highlights that current models of inclusion primarily emphasize physical presence in mainstream classrooms but neglect social inclusion, which is crucial for meaningful interactions. Social skills training should be extended not only to autistic students but also to their neurotypical peers and educators to foster better communication and understanding. Additionally, teachers who are willing to implement inclusive practices frequently lack support, resources, and training from their administrations, making effective inclusion difficult to achieve. The study also underscores the negative impact of inadequate inclusion on mental health, as many autistic students face increased anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation due to social isolation and exclusion. These findings emphasize the urgent need to include autistic voices in the development of best practices for inclusive education.</p>

Despite its benefits, successful implementation of inclusive education requires specific conditions, such as improved teacher training, adequate school resources, and strong social support. Studies reveal that one of the major barriers to effective inclusion is the lack of preparedness among educators, which can hinder the social

integration of students with special needs. Teachers often struggle with modifying curricula and employing tailored teaching strategies due to insufficient training and administrative burdens.

Social isolation and peer rejection remain significant challenges for students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Research shows that students with special educational needs are less socially accepted by their typically developing classmates and are rarely chosen as preferred peers. This lack of social inclusion negatively impacts their ability to form meaningful relationships, potentially leading to feelings of exclusion and low self-esteem.

However, targeted interventions, such as structured educational programs, visual supports, peer-mediated strategies, and self-monitoring techniques, have been shown to enhance social engagement among students with disabilities. Cooperation, responsibility, and self-control are identified as key social skills necessary for success in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, promoting mutual understanding between neurodiverse and neurotypical students can help bridge social gaps and create a more inclusive school environment.

The voices of students with special needs, particularly those on the autism spectrum, are often absent from discussions on inclusion best practices. As a result, many inclusion efforts fail to address the social and emotional needs of these students. To ensure effective inclusion, it is essential to incorporate the perspectives of autistic individuals, reduce stigma, and foster a more accepting and supportive classroom culture.

In discussing the findings, this study draws upon several key studies that highlight both the benefits and challenges of inclusive education in fostering social interactions among students with special needs.

Social Benefits of Inclusive Education

The study by Chaudhary, Shahid, and Bashir (2022) emphasizes that inclusive education improves the social skills and empathy of typically developing students, thereby fostering broader social solidarity and tolerance. This finding aligns with the argument that inclusive education benefits all students, not just those with special needs. Additionally, Pratiwi (2015) highlights that inclusive schools provide children with disabilities better social adaptation opportunities and reduce stigma, reinforcing the importance of social interaction in inclusive settings.

Challenges of Social Inclusion in Inclusive Classrooms

Despite its advantages, inclusive education does not always guarantee meaningful social integration. The study by Nepi, Fioravanti, Nannini, and Peru (2015) found that students with special educational needs are significantly less socially accepted and rarely chosen as preferred classmates by their typically developing peers. Similarly, Majoko (2015) identified social isolation and peer rejection as major barriers to the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in mainstream classrooms. These findings support the argument that while inclusive education provides access to mainstream learning environments, it does not automatically ensure positive peer relationships.

The Role of Targeted Interventions and Teacher Preparedness

Effective interventions are crucial in addressing social challenges within inclusive education. Watkins et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis that highlighted the effectiveness of function-based interventions, visual supports, peer-mediated strategies, and self-monitoring techniques in fostering social engagement for students with ASD. Additionally, Maria and Panopoulos (2017) emphasize that structured educational interventions, such as the Targeted, Individual, Structured, Integrated Program for Students with Special Educational Needs (TISIPfSENs), significantly improve the social skills of students with intellectual disabilities. However, Bankovic et al. (2023) found that while cooperation skills are highly valued in inclusive classrooms, teachers and special educators often hold different perceptions regarding the importance of empathy, indicating a gap in teacher training and preparedness.

The Absence of Student Voices in Inclusive Education Research

A critical issue raised by Holmes (2022) is the absence of autistic voices in research on inclusion best practices. The study argues that many inclusive strategies focus on academic placement rather than genuine social inclusion. Autistic students often face segregation, bullying, and exclusion due to a lack of peer understanding and inadequate teacher support. The failure to incorporate the perspectives of students with disabilities in research and policy discussions results in inclusion models that prioritize physical presence over meaningful social integration.

Advancing the Understanding of Inclusive Education

The discussion builds on these studies by reinforcing the need for a more holistic approach to inclusive education. While previous research has documented the structural and policy-related aspects of inclusion, this study contributes to the field by emphasizing the necessity of fostering genuine social interactions. By implementing evidence-based interventions, enhancing teacher training, and incorporating the perspectives of

students with disabilities, inclusive education can move beyond accessibility and truly enhance the social development of all students.

Conclusions

Inclusive education is very important for helping students with special needs develop their social skills. This study has shown that when children with disabilities learn alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms, they have more opportunities to improve their communication, make friends, and feel included. At the same time, their typically developing classmates also benefit by learning empathy, patience, and acceptance, which helps create a more understanding and tolerant society.

However, there are still many challenges to making inclusive education successful. Some students with disabilities still feel isolated and left out, while many teachers do not receive enough training or support to help them effectively. Without proper teacher preparation and school resources, students with special needs may struggle to fully participate in social activities and make meaningful connections with their peers.

Another important issue is that the voices of students with special needs, especially those on the autism spectrum, are often ignored in discussions about inclusive education. Many programs focus only on placing students in regular classrooms without making sure they truly feel included and supported. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and frustration, making it harder for them to succeed both socially and emotionally.

For inclusive education to work well, schools need to go beyond just placing students together in the same classroom. They must actively create an environment where all students feel welcomed, understood, and supported. This includes providing better teacher training, using strategies that encourage social interaction, and listening to the needs of students with disabilities.

In the end, inclusive education is not just about giving children with special needs a place in regular schools, it is about making sure they truly feel like they belong. By improving support systems and ensuring that every student has the opportunity to build friendships and develop social skills, we can create a more inclusive and caring society for everyone.

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