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# Introduction: the social position of pupils with special needs in regular education

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## Introduction

Currently, the education provision for pupils with special needs has become much more varied and geared towards regular education (Pijl *et al.*, 1997; Vislie, 2003). The prevailing view is that pupils with special needs should be educated alongside their peers in regular education settings. Separate school systems have therefore been replaced by an 'inclusive' system. The term 'inclusive education' refers to removing barriers to learning and participation for all students, thus encompassing a large diversity of pupils and providing differential education to reflect this diversity. The OECD (1995, p. 15) defined it as: the process that maximizes the interaction between disabled and non-disabled pupils, showing that much value is placed on implementing conditions that foster good relations between students. Pupils with special needs should have contacts, relationships and friendships in school just like other pupils. Relationships among students is a key issue in inclusive education.

Parents especially regard the possibilities for social contact as an important reason for placing their child with special needs in a regular school. They expect their child to learn to handle social situations, make friends and integrate into the local community. Generally, children form friendships with other children in close proximity to themselves. Attending a special school is clearly a serious hindrance in developing friendships with peers without special needs and makes it more difficult to participate in the local community. It seems obvious that inclusive education brings more chances for interaction and is a promising arena for practising social skills. Physical integration, the lowest level of integration Kobi (1983) distinguishes, is thus an

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important first step. However, physical integration, or 'just being there', is only a very basic condition. Research has shown that inclusion does not automatically lead to more social contacts and friendships with children without special needs, since these pupils prefer to associate with other pupils without disabilities (Guralnick *et al.*, 1995; Flem & Keller, 2000; Skårbreivik, 2005) and the same applies to special needs pupils (Minnett *et al.*, 1995).

The following three papers presented here address new empirical data to illuminate the social position of pupils with special needs in regular education. The papers describe their position in different school systems in three countries, namely Germany, The Netherlands and Norway. Each of the papers has been presented in an earlier version at the ISEC Conference in Glasgow in August 2005.

## Method

Colleagues in the aforementioned countries were invited to use sociometric techniques to describe the social position of pupils with special needs in regular education in their country. In sociometric tests pupils are, for instance, asked which pupils they like best and which they do not like. Based on these scores, the pupils are then divided into five groups: popular, rejected, ignored, controversial and average. It is not always possible to gather data using both questions: the participating Norwegian teachers regarded the second question as unethical and this study is therefore based on the positive nominations.

It is obvious that pupils with special needs scoring 'average' or 'popular' in a sociometric test, and pupils receiving many positive nominations, seem to have found an acceptable position in the group. It is not quite clear which conditions are of importance here. Having a certain social position in a group may well depend on the pupils' social skills, the characteristics of the peer group, the type of disability and teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Establishing a good position in the peer group under less favourable conditions may prove to be much more difficult.

If pupils become socially isolated in the regular classroom and are described as 'ignored' or even 'rejected', or receive no positive nominations at all, it may harm their development (Asher & Coie, 1990). This could result in lower self-esteem, fear of failure, lower self-confidence, fear to attend school, deviant behaviour, lack of motivation, lower performances on school tasks or other negative effects like being bullied, dropping-out and likely referral to special settings.

The research design of the studies comprised mapping the social position of pupils with special needs by using sociometric techniques and comparing their position to those of pupils without special needs. It was further agreed to link the data on pupils' social position to one or more variables from the aforementioned conditions or effects.

By gathering data about the social position of pupils with special needs using sociometric techniques in different countries, we expected to get comparable cross-national databases. One of the problems with cross-national research is that despite straightforward methodological designs, the national context often leads to changes

in the studies' designs. In the Norwegian study, for example, we were unable to gather data on negative nominations and due to recent policy changes the Dutch sample consisted largely of young pupils.

## Results of the studies

The first aim of all three studies was to describe the social position of pupils with special needs in regular education classes compared to that of their peers in the same class. The studies from Norway and Germany, in particular, show that their social position leaves much to be desired. The Dutch study addresses the position of young pupils with special needs and presents a more positive picture. This, unfortunately, cannot be taken as a sign that the Dutch have found the solution to pupils' difficulties in establishing a satisfying social position. Earlier Dutch studies (Scheepstra, 1998; Monchy *et al.*, 2004) focusing on the social position of older pupils with special needs produced outcomes similar to the studies done in Germany and Norway. Generally, pupils with special needs face a larger risk of being excluded.

It was expected that pupils with special needs in Norway would generally have a better social position compared to the Dutch and German pupils. After all, Norway's long experience in inclusive education might have made teachers, parents and pupils more used to having pupils with special needs in regular classes, changed attitudes and resulted in skilled and experienced school support services. The data gathered in these three studies do not support this expectation. To make sure that this was not an aspect of the methodological limitations of this cross-national exercise, a secondary analysis was done on the Dutch data. The position of Dutch pupils with special needs without any positive nominations (considered as being 'at risk' in the Dutch sample) was compared to their position according to classic sociometric procedures. The analysis shows that all pupils with few or no positive nominations were either ignored or rejected. Not collecting data on negative nominations has not resulted in a more negative image of the social position of pupils with special needs in the Norwegian sample.

A second aim of the studies was to gather data about possibly relevant conditions for the social position of pupils with special needs and the effects of a social position in class. The study done in Germany addressed the social position of pupils with behaviour problems and linked this to the type of behaviour problem and to the composition of the peer group. The latter was done by comparing pupils in regular and special settings. The Norwegian study focused on the social skills of pupils with special needs as a possibly relevant factor in building and maintaining social relations. Finally, the study from The Netherlands described the effects of a social position in the peer group by studying the relation between pupils' social position and their cognitive, social and social-emotional development.

The data from the German study show that pupils with behaviour problems run a greater risk of being rejected in both regular and special schools. Pupils with behaviour problems in special schools have a peer group with more peers with behaviour problems. It seemed likely that their behaviour would be more in line with that of the

other pupils and that they would thus be less vulnerable to being rejected. The results do not support this expectation. Many hesitations about inclusive education in, for instance, The Netherlands and Germany are based on exactly this expectation: many pupils with special needs would be better off in special schools because they would be among 'equals' and would be more easily accepted. The German study has appended a large question mark to this assumption.

The study done in Norway focused on social skills as a possible means to improve the social position of pupils with a low peer acceptance or no friends. The idea was that if such pupils showed insufficient sets of social skills, developing or applying social skills training might be worthwhile. The data show that, in general terms, the relation between social position and social skills is very modest. This suggests that there is no reason to offer social skills training to pupils with a problematic social position. However, for pupils with behaviour problems there is a clear relation between social position and social skills and the relation becomes stronger as pupils grow older. For this particular group, early starting support focusing on developing an appropriate set of social skills could help them in building and maintaining friendships with other pupils.

According to the Dutch study, sociometric studies present a more sober picture of friendships in class compared to the views of teachers and parents. The positive views of teachers and parents (for a discussion on whose judgement is best see Monchy *et al.*, 2004) regarding the social position of pupils with special needs could hinder early intervention. In the Dutch study a panel of independent assessors were invited to evaluate the cognitive, social and social-emotional development of the pupils with special needs. Again, the panel were more concerned about the development of pupils with special needs compared to the evaluations of teachers and parents. There was no clear relation between social position and pupils' development.

## Discussion

Despite the difficulties involved in cross-national research, it is obvious that the social position of some of the pupils with special needs can be regarded as worrying. Compared to their typical peers, they face a larger risk of being rejected. It is too easy to blame inclusion for this. Pupils with behaviour problems in special schools are also rejected to a similar degree.

A surprising finding is that pupils with special needs in regular schools in Norway also have difficulties in finding their place in the peer group. It was expected that Norway's long experience in inclusive education would make a difference in terms of social position compared to the Dutch and German pupils, but the data do not support this expectation. It is far from easy to come up with an explanation for this finding. After all, it seems plausible that decades of inclusion must have resulted in a change of attitudes in both teachers and peer group. Yet, for some reason that does not pay off in terms of social position.

The Dutch study found that in general parents and teachers of pupils with special needs in regular classes do not evaluate the social position as negatively as sociometric

data and independent assessors do. This could be due to the fact that they feel involved, very much want to make a success out of regular school placement and tend to underestimate the negative experiences. This is not a new phenomenon; it has been described in general terms as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1954), and has been often noticed in research on social position of pupils with special needs (Scheepstra, 1998; Monchy *et al.*, 2004; Pijl *et al.*, submitted). Key persons in education, teachers and parents, do underestimate the difficulties pupils have in establishing an acceptable social position in school and it is likely that they do not notice when intervention is needed.

The overall results of the three studies in this issue of the *European Journal of Special Needs Education* give reason for concern: a considerable number of the pupils with special needs face a larger risk of being rejected; decades of experience with inclusive education does not make a difference; social skills training is not an easy way out and teachers and parents underestimate the difficulties pupils with special needs have in this respect. In starting this cross-national project we looked for some answers. As so often happens we came up with many question marks, and questions so important to pupils' well-being in school that cross-national research and intervention programmes are now being developed.

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