

SCHOOL-BASED FRIENDSHIPS AMONG STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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School-based friendships among students with special educational needs¹

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BACKGROUND

Inclusive education is a key goal of education systems worldwide with much of the policy emphasis on educating children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Part of the human rights agenda, the principle of inclusive education argues that any form of segregation for students is morally wrong. Ireland has lagged behind other countries in implementing inclusive education policies, although this has begun to change over the last decade. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) was a landmark document. It emphasises the need for students with special educational needs to be educated alongside their peers in mainstream settings. Since its publication, the profile of mainstream primary classrooms has changed with over a quarter of children having some form of additional need. Despite these changes, many caution against simply physically including children with special educational needs in mainstream settings and stress the need for genuine inclusion with meaningful social participation. Previous research has shown that positive peer relations can affect not only the wellbeing of the child but also their academic outcomes.

CONTEXT

Based on analysis of the *Growing Up in Ireland* study of 8,578 nine year old children, their parents and their teachers, this paper examines whether peer relations differ among typically developing students and students with different types of special educational needs in mainstream school environments. Both the quantity and quality of peer relations are considered, in terms of the number of

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Banks, J., McCoy, S., and Frawley, D., "One of the gang? Peer relations among students with special educational needs in Irish mainstream primary schools", *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1327397>

friends a child has and their score on a well-established measure of peer relations.

FINDINGS

The findings show that children with special educational needs have fewer friends in school compared to their peers. Furthermore, when they report having friends they are more likely to have poor quality peer relations compared to students without additional needs. The type of special educational needs also matters. Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) and those with multiple disabilities are more likely to experience having few (or no) friends or poor quality peer relations. This is a concern because previous research has also shown that students with emotional or behavioural difficulties are more likely to dislike school. There were also differences in the nature of peer relations between boys and girls more generally, with girls more likely to report having fewer friends and more negative peer relations compared to boys. Social class background also appears to make a difference, with children from the lowest income group more likely to report having one or no friends in school. Not surprisingly, these measures of peer relations are centrally tied up with the child's broader self-concept.

IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION WORKING?

The findings highlight risks associated with inclusive education in relation to how children with special educational needs socially interact and maintain friendships in mainstream primary schools. In particular, those with emotional or behavioural difficulties appear to struggle, even when compared to children with other types of special educational needs. The findings suggest the need for specific programmes to encourage positive peer interactions for this group of students. Furthermore, the paper suggests that alongside academic measures of student progress, more subtle aspects of children's development and participation should be considered. In particular, improvements in a child's social outcomes, such as day-to-day peer group participation, may well provide an effective measure of inclusion and prove important in enhancing school engagement.

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