

# Teachers' Approaches to Facilitating Positive Peer Relationships for Students with Disabilities

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**Abstract.** The development of social openness enables the educational needs of people with disabilities and their right to equal education to be progressively emphasized. More and more students with disabilities started to study in the same class as typically developed students. However, how to help them develop and maintain a positive relationship with peers can be challenging for educators since there exist certain challenges between them in becoming friends. In that case, this paper based on the environment of inclusive education briefly analyzed the benefits of inclusive education and figured out the potential challenges that children with disabilities can face when getting along with typically developed students in the inclusive classroom from both internal and external perspectives. Based on that, the core research question is to help teachers with different roles in an inclusive classroom to find ways of help students with disabilities maintain a positive relationship with other typically developed children to ensure the right of children with all situations are able to receive the same level of education, enjoy the same friendship and help them better adapt into the society in the future life. The meaning of this review is practical which provides educators with approaches to helping children with disabilities and leads to further thinking for researchers about other strategies to help them and offer them a growing-up environment as comfortable as typically developed students. Future research is expected to focus more on the development, well-being and rights of children with disabilities.

## 1 Introduction

With the development of the openness and acceptance of society, there is less prejudice against people with disabilities and greater social inclusion for them. Education, as a way that helps all students finally get into society, should also get to be more inclusive and accepted for all students. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 240 million children are facing different kinds of disabilities in several aspects which leads to barriers in their lives [1]. They are more vulnerable than typically developed children in many areas like depression, dropping out of school and discrimination [1].

To provide students with disabilities an equal environment of receiving education like all other students, based on the convention protecting the right of people with disabilities to equal access to education and not excluded from general education made by Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) [2], inclusion education which makes all students in different situations and different needs in one classroom and provide them a chance of growing up together with general children is being more and more frequent use by many regions [3]. However, the general progress of the development of inclusive education is

still slow and requires many changes from the traditional teaching system [3].

Besides, children with disabilities and special needs can more easily be misunderstood or ridiculed by peers who do not know much about their inside personalities but only visible differences which makes develop and maintain a positive relationship between typically developed students and students with disabilities. Thus, it is highly significant to figure out what educators can do to guide and help them to maintain a positive relationship in an inclusive classroom which can also promote the evolution and development of inclusive education further in general.

In that case, the main question of this paper is to research how educators from different roles which mainly classroom teachers and inclusive support teachers can help students with disabilities and typically developed children to maintain a relationship with each other in an inclusive classroom. There will be a brief introduction to inclusive education and its benefits as a general background in the beginning. The possible challenges that children with disabilities making friends with typically developed children from both sides of internal and external will also be analyzed before the teachers' approaches.

## 2 Introduction of inclusive education

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## 2.1 Inclusive education

Inclusive education is an emerging teaching and schooling system based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which states protecting the right of children with disabilities to be supported, included and equal in a general education system [2]. According to UNICEF, inclusive means an equal chance for all students who might be in a minority group which has been discriminated against and exclusive in the past [3]. It provides all students from different backgrounds and under different situations the chance to sit together, learn together and realize their future ambitions and dreams together [3].

## 2.2 Benefits of inclusive education

Education is a process of helping all students finally successfully enter and adapt to society, and so is inclusive education. It should be process-oriented [4]. It should be educational and career-oriented which helps them to learn and gain things they need in the future life rather than only knowledge from the textbook, and also integrative which allows students to learn to cooperate with others and work as a team [4]. The development of all the mentioned skills and other several areas in society might be needed requests communication skills and the ability to develop a relationship with others. Long-term isolation in a specific area with only special education with children in similar situations may leave their communication skills with other typically developed children which is the majority they might deal with in society unexercised and degraded. Thus, through inclusive education combining students with different characters, in different situations and having different requests is highly significant and necessary for their future success.

As Eriksson and colleagues mentioned in research, children in certain situations might have a lower level of communication skills which is related to their emotional support network [5]. Deficiencies in socialization skills might cause several negative impacts on the school life of children like academic performance, and relationship issues with peers which they are expected to achieve in school [6]. Those impacts can be long-term and last into adulthood. In that case, in the article, Eriksson and colleagues suggested that children with a lower level of communication and social skills need early training as early as possible or they might be exclusive in certain activities [5]. In the process of students gaining future skills which they might use in society, an inclusive education environment with all kinds of students can provide children with a natural environment in which they get in touch with other students. In an inclusive classroom, they can not only learn theoretical skills but also have an environment to practice with classmates and learn to get in touch with them. Besides, this is also a win-win situation for both children with disabilities and typically developed children since for creating a sustainable and improving inclusive society, it is also important for typically developed children to learn how

to work with people with special needs and how to treat and help them in an appropriate way.

## 3 Possible challenges of peer relationship

### 3.1. Internal

The reason for causing the challenges can be variable. Children with disabilities are a diverse population with different kinds of situations like genetic disorders, acquired injuries, stress, and so on [7]. Internal beliefs towards themselves and their identity can be a strong factor causing their difficulties in maintaining a relationship since psychological well-being issues occupy a domain position in every range of age as a combination of other disabilities [7]. There is a possibility of them having a certain negative attitude about their situation which lead to internal stress and difficulties in peer relationship.

Based on the research done by Luciano and Savage on learning disabilities, they mentioned that children with learning disabilities are more likely to suffer from a school bully because of their lack of self-confidence, academic performance, and communication difficulties since they are considered weak and less likely brave enough to retaliate [8]. Although generally peer bullying is seen as the external reason for barriers to maintaining a positive relationship, it actually exists an internal core for children with disabilities which is their character like low self-esteem, submissive, or negative which needs to be taken seriously by educators and figure how to provide help in protecting them and improve relationship [8]. Besides, according to Son et al., children with disabilities from a lower income family tend to have a higher difficulty in language ability and have other problematical externalizing behaviour which can further impact their social behaviour [9]. Those can lead to difficulty in communication between classmates and cause barriers in peer relationships.

Furthermore, the research done by Chen et al. found that there is a homophily effect in children with disabilities [10]. They found that even with control of several factors, there is still a strong homophily effect that the children with disabilities are more likely to develop a relationship with other students with disabilities rather than typically developed students [10]. This might be due to a lower level of social skills than typically developed students [5].

### 3.2 External

Besides internal beliefs and attitudes, there are also external factors which can cause students challenges in developing positive relationships, especially with peers themselves since they are the person students with disabilities in contact with most at school. Eriksson et al. found that children with disorder, disabilities or other special needs thought that they have a lower observed engagement which is probably because the help from

teacher are too active which are teacher-initiated rather than spontaneous [5]. They suggest that the help from educators should be measured and should be guided by the goal of equipping the students with the skills to seek help but not help them with everything [5]. Besides, as mentioned in the previous internal factor, there is also a high tendency of students with disabilities to suffer from school bully because of their interval attitude towards themselves. However, stigma from the outside world is another significant cause of their difficulties and harm in school life. Nahal and colleagues made a study about children with spina bifida in 2019 and researched the social difficulties that children with spina bifida face in their lives [11]. The study found that children with spina bifida feel hard about the eyesight from others which is sympathy or strange because of their differences [11]. For students who are at a more immature age, the difficulties and some aspects that children with spina bifida show differently can become aspects of their ridicule of children with spina bifida [11]. They might be rejected from their peer group and feel a higher sense of exclusivity in school which is the place they spend the majority of their time which increases their vulnerability and future abilities to communicate or get along with people [11].

Overall, several reasons mentioned previously about both internal and external causes children with disabilities can be barriers to developing a positive relationship with peers. It can not only cause harm to children with disabilities in both emotional and academic areas but also barrier to the building of a harmonious school environment which can lead to further issues for all students. Thus, it is necessary and significant for educators to help them change the situation and build a positive relationship.

## **4 How to help with peer relationship**

### **4.1. Classroom teacher**

The classroom teacher is the person who spends most of the time with students in school and is responsible for their school life in many aspects. They are like a bridge which connects the relationship of typically developed students and students with special needs in education and guides them in the strategy of making friends and maintaining relationships. In the article by Eriksson et al., they mentioned that it is significant for schools and teachers to pay more attention to the activities that the children with special needs engaged less and a long-term intervention is also needed to maintain the effectiveness of interventions [5]. They also suggested that making special education needs children sit near a typically developed peer is a significant way of helping them be included in the classroom since it benefits their seeking help from peers academically [5]. Thus, classroom teachers can adjust seating positions to provide them with more opportunities for communication to promote a better peer relationship.

Moderate teacher involvement can be positive. Buysse and colleagues made a study about teaching

strategies teachers use to support friendship in an inclusive classroom and suggested that teachers should be more involved in the progress of making friends when there are children with disabilities in class [12]. Although one strategy they found teachers use often is to allow students to choose their own friends they want when ready, for students with disabilities, the involvement of the teacher is significant since they might need the teacher to help with providing a more convenient or offer some physical help if they are in mobility difficulties [12]. They also suggested that it is significant for teachers to put more free time for students to play with peers and adjust the environment or class schedule to create more communication opportunities for students [12]. According to Buysse and colleagues, if a teacher works as a social coach or a social opportunities provider who provides students with appropriate, correct guidance in making friends can help children especially those with disabilities get involved with peers better [12]. Furthermore, keeping a connection with parents is also helpful for teachers to share information about students' possible friendships so that parents will have a chance to help them in further relationship development outside the classroom [12].

### **4.2 Support teacher**

Besides the classroom teacher, a support teacher in an inclusive classroom or other teaching assistants specifically set for students with special needs effort a lot to build a truly inclusive classroom environment. Compared with classroom teachers, they have more professional knowledge in special education and will specifically put more energy and attention to the children with special needs. When a classroom teacher has a whole class to take care of, the support teacher will be able to provide extra support for the children with special needs to bridge the gap between them and typically developed children. Many people may think that the support teacher or assistant needs to be proactive in caring for students in every way possible, however, according to Eriksson et al., an appropriate time and way of support to help students is important [5]. The help should not be given by the teacher but should be asked by the students first which means the teacher should focus more on the students' autonomy of asking for help rather than just providing help [5]. They also suggest that the support teacher should be the middle person who connects students with other students and the teacher and guides the communication between them [5].

Gavish mentioned an ideal pattern of how inclusive support teachers can support students with special needs in the research which teachers are not self-centred but student-centred and put students in an equal position [13]. They work together with children and also cooperate with general classroom teachers to find a differentiated teaching method for each student who needs extra support according to their own needs and requests [13].

### **4.3 Cooperation**

There is always a limit to what one person can do. Teachers, especially classroom teachers with less professional knowledge and experience with children with disabilities, might have difficulties helping children with disabilities independently which emphasizes the importance of cooperation with a special educator [14]. Bešić and colleagues mentioned that having a special education support teacher join the classroom is a good way of bringing new resources and ideas to help students succeed [14]. They share responsibility, thoughts and solution plans with each other to provide the student with more possibilities by utilizing their unique professional skills and combining their strengths together [14].

Actually, not only between the teachers, a wider cooperation should be created in a greater range of society. As Gavish mentioned, the cooperation between the general teacher, inclusive support teacher, community, parents and school worker can work together to create and maintain a caring and acceptance of diversity of students based on the individualized education for each child [13].

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper reviewed the previous research in the area of inclusive education and aimed to figure out the potential challenges between typically developed children and children with special education needs and how educators can help maintain a positive relationship for them. According to research, inclusive education is an efficient opportunity for children with disabilities to improve their communication skills and relationship-built ability with others which is significant for their now and future life in the society. However, children's world is now relatively narrow, so they may not be as open to differences as adults are. Thus, it is necessary for educators to find the possible challenges of children getting along with each other. In general, there are two main categories of causes which are internal reasons from the students with disabilities like low self-confidence, social and language abilities and homophily effect and external reasons from mainly school environment like overhelp from teachers, stigma, and peer bullying. Based on those challenges, there are several ways educators from different roles can do to help students maintain a positive relationship. As the two characters are most often in contact with the students, the classroom teacher and support teacher take on most of the help for both general students and students with disabilities and special needs. They support students in the areas of friendships, academics, and adaptability to help them adjust to an inclusive classroom environment and succeed in their peer relationships with the cooperation and help from other social groups.

However, the research today still has different kinds of limitations including a lack amount of participant who is willing to share their experiences of having a disability, a lack of categorization of the severity of disability, data collected in a more subjective way and so on. These limitations request further research in related areas to

increase the accuracy of research findings and provide practices with a better theory base. Additionally, the privacy of children with disabilities needs to be highly concerned since enough security of privacy protection is what makes them more comfortable to share their experiences for research and finding ways to help them.

Children are not only the future of the world, but also starters who have their own journeys to go on in the future. One day they will leave school and step into society with a diversity of people. It is significant for educators who are important characters in school life to help students especially students with disabilities who are easier to become the outsider or rejected because of their differences find a comfortable way of getting along with people well and maintain a positive relationship to integrate into the community and peers. Hopefully, this paper can provide teachers who are working with children directly the ideas of how to help students with peer relationships in an environment of different kinds of students better and inspire researchers for future research to keep delivering new theoretical support. In the future, hopefully, there will be more educators and researchers focusing on the development of children with disabilities and working on their rights in education, friendship and life.

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