

# **Students with Disabilities: How their Self-image changes due to the Transfer from Regular Education to Special Education**

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## **Abstract**

This article provides an overview of the literature about the inclusion and exclusion of students with disabilities in regular education, with specific reference to students' changing image of the self. Based on recent literature, the following themes form the central issues of this article. First, the arguments in favor of and against inclusion of disabled students in regular education are discussed. Secondly, the influences on students' image of the self are addressed. Finally these two parts are compared and contrasted in order to provide an explanation of the ways in which the students' image of the self changes due to their admission to special education programs. To conclude, a cautious judgment is given from the student's perspective with regard to the ongoing debate as to whether students with disabilities should be included in regular education or not.

**Keywords:** Special education; regular education; inclusion; student; disabilities, self-image; self-esteem; peer acceptance; reference group theory.

## **Introduction**

The question as to what is the most appropriate educational environment for students with disabilities has been a matter of intense public debate for a long time. In the Netherlands, and in many other countries, pupils with special needs have long been taught in separate schools. This segregated educational system stemmed from the idea that children's specific cognitive needs could be better met in small classes with specially trained teachers and adapted teaching materials (Peetsma, Vergeer, Roeleveld & Karsten, 2001). Furthermore, researchers believed that special classes would further the pupils' psychosocial development, especially their self-confidence. But after a few decades, people are now starting to question the value of segregated classes. Recently, educating students with special needs in inclusive classrooms has become an important objective of the educational policy of many countries (Koster, Pijl & Nakken, 2010).

Research suggests that, as students move into and out of traditionalist and inclusive classrooms, they present a changing self-image (Fitch, 2003). On the one hand, Fitch (2003) suggests that students in inclusive classrooms constructed a self-image that was different and more positive than those in segregated classrooms. On the other hand, Bakker and Bosman (2003) suggest that students in special education had a better self-image than low-achieving students in regular education. This may account for the fact that students in special education were somewhat more accepted by their peers than low-achieving

students in regular education. The fact is that peer acceptance seems to be related to the self-image of students with disabilities and therefore is important for the development of students with disabilities (Pijl & Frostad, 2010). The way in which students with disabilities are accepted by their peers influences their perception of relationships with these peers, which is one of the most important aspects of self-image. Other aspects of students' self-image which will be further explained in this article are feelings of self-worth and feelings of competence (Bakker, Denessen, Bosman, Krijger & Bouts, 2007).

The question as to whether inclusion is a good thing or not will be further explained from the student's perspective in order to examine the variable of students' self-image. Three questions will be answered in this article, which is based on recent literature. In the first section, the question as to whether students with disabilities should participate in regular or special education will be discussed. In the second section, the ways in which students' self-image is influenced will be addressed. In the last section, the extent to which students' self-image changes due to the transfer to special education will be explored.

## **Regular versus special education: the debate**

This section will explain the present selection procedure with regard to special education in the Netherlands, as well as the arguments in favor and against inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education, which are part of an ongoing public debate.

In the Netherlands, a distinction is made between students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) and students with general learning disabilities (GLD). Specifically, those with special learning disabilities usually are below grade level in only one domain (reading, spelling, or arithmetic) despite a normal IQ, whereas students with general learning disabilities have low academic performance in more than one domain, accompanied by a below-normal IQ (Bakker et al., 2007). The first phase in making the decision to refer to special education is solely based on achievement. The second phase, which determines whether the student has general or specific learning disabilities, depends very much on the child's performance on IQ tests (Pijl & Pijl, 1998). This diagnostic label is necessary for a student to become eligible for services. However, it does not guarantee remedial help, the provision of which depends on the accessibility of resources (Bakker et al., 2007). Several additional factors play an important role as well: Is the regular school able and willing to provide additional or remedial help? Is there a waiting list for the special school? And what is the parent's opinion with respect to referral? However, the problems with special education can be traced to its use of the categorization system for classifying students' needs and for providing services (Blair, 1993). Individual children have individual needs, so it is preferable to provide for a child's needs rather than to fit the child to the services that are currently available (Blair, 1993). Placement of children in separate special education schools began to be viewed as an infringement of the right to equal educational opportunities (Bakker et al., 2007). Therefore, educating students with special needs in inclusive classrooms is an important objective of the present educational policy. The hope is that inclusive education will help plant the seeds of a more inclusive and tolerant society (Bakker & Bosman, 2003), in which a more positive self-image is important.

The question then becomes important whether students with disabilities benefit in terms of their cognitive and psychosocial development from inclusion in regular education. On the one hand, there are several counter-arguments against inclusion. First, substantial numbers of both regular and special education teachers, as well as parents of pupils now in special education, are skeptical about integration. They do not reject the push toward more integration in principle, but believe that pupils with learning difficulties are better off in segregated

special schools with their highly differentiated and individually focused teaching and counseling. They consider students with disabilities to have special, deeply-rooted problems which make a regular school placement inappropriate (Pijl & Pijl, 1998). Secondly Bakker and Bosman (2003) suggest that students in special education seem to be better off than disabled students in regular education with regard to well-being and peer acceptance. .

On the other hand, there are several arguments in favor of inclusion. First, those who argue for integration regard cognitive differences as less relevant. For them, the issue is more of a civil rights argument: Segregation should be avoided and teachers need to learn to accommodate pupils with special needs (Pijl & Pijl, 1998). Secondly, the finding of no differences between low-achieving regular education students and low-achieving students in special education with regard to both self-image and peer acceptance clearly offers proponents of inclusive education support for their position (Bakker & Bosman, 2003). Finally, Peetsma et al. (2001) suggest that special-needs students educated in regular classes do better academically and socially than students in non-inclusive settings. Self-confidence, social behavior, attitude to school work, health and support for education from home were all variables that were judged to be more positive for pupils in regular education than for pupils in special education, and all of these factors can positively influence students' self-image.

In sum, there appear to be sound arguments both in favor of and against inclusion. Overall it seems that there is a positive effect of mainstreaming students with disabilities. However, implementing inclusive learning has to be done carefully. Inclusion involves assuring that the instruction provided in schools meets the needs of all students and is impacted by factors such as changing schools, organizations, curricula, teacher training, legislation, etc. (Peetsma et al., 2001). In the next section, this ongoing debate will be further explained from the student's perspective as part of an examination of students' self-image.

### **Students' self-image**

In this section, several important components of students' self-image will be explained and a general explanation of students' self-esteem will be provided.

With regard to the self-image of special education and regular education students, a

distinction can be drawn among several components of self-image. The most important aspect of students' self-image is their perception of relationships with peers. Students with disabilities are generally less accepted by their peers and have a more negative self-concept (Pijl & Frostad, 2010). Pijl and Frostad (2010) suggest that there is a moderate to strong relationship between peer acceptance and self-concept, which means that students with learning disabilities who are not accepted by their peers will develop a negative self-concept, which is confirmed by Roeleveld (in this volume). Koster, Pijl and Nakken (2010) also confirm these findings, stating that students with special needs displayed significantly less social participation than those without special needs. Students with special needs had, on average, fewer friends, were less likely to have a group of friends, and were also generally less accepted than their peers without special needs. Special-needs students also displayed a lesser degree of interaction with their classmates, but a higher degree of interaction with their teachers (Koster et al., 2010). Consequently, it can be stated that students with disabilities are less accepted by their peers than their non-special needs peers, which in turn will negatively influence their self-image. Comparisons with respect to peer acceptance and self-image between students with disabilities in regular education and students with disabilities in special education are also instructive. Bakker and Bosman (2003) suggest that students in special education appear to be at an advantage when compared to poorly achieving students in regular education. Their peers accept them more and their self-image is considerably higher. These findings can be largely explained in terms of the reference group theory (Bakker & Bosman, 2003). That is, students in special education receive an adapted form of education, which limits both their personal experience of failure and of being seen as failing by their peers (Bakker & Bosman, 2003). However, participating in regular education provides special needs students the opportunity to judge themselves in relation to *both* similarly achieving peers and typically achieving peers (Bakker et al., 2007). Their unfavorable social-emotional evaluation in regular education may be due more to the special status assigned to them than their mediocre school performance (Bakker & Bosman, 2003). In fact, the label "learning disabled" itself seems to place them in a marginal position. But after all, meaningful relationships with peers are as important for

students with disabilities as they are for students without disabilities, whatever educational environment they find themselves in. Specifically, and as previously stated, the more accepted students are by their peers, the more positive their self-concept will be. Parents, teachers, and peers are important actors in interventions aimed at improving the students' social participation and, concomitantly, their self-image (Koster et al., 2010).

In addition to perceptions of relationships with peers, two other important components of students' self-image are feelings of self-worth and feelings of competence (Bakker et al., 2007). With regard to feelings of competence, Ochs and Roessler (2001) suggest that students in special education specifically view themselves as less ready to make future career and educational decisions. That is, special education students reported less clarity in their vocational identities than their regular education peers. As a result of these feelings of relative inadequacy, students with disabilities have a lower sense of self-worth, which also means they have a more negative self-image. To help students with disabilities overcome their own internalization of low expectations, teachers, parents, and counselors must encourage students with disabilities to participate more actively in a wide range of postsecondary vocational training and educational options (Ochs & Roessler, 2001).

After examining the three components of students' self-image, it is clear that, in general, disabled students have a more negative self-image than typical students. However, if we consider another aspect of self-image, namely self-esteem, a slight qualification can be made with respect to this negative self-image. Self-esteem involves how one feels about the self in an overall sense, in which a distinction can be made between general views as well as domain-specific views of the self (Conley, Ghavimi & Von Ohlen, 2007). Indeed, such domain-specific self-esteem may be advantageous because it allows individuals to maintain a positive view of themselves in the face of sub-par performance in certain domains (Conley et al., 2007). Furthermore, psychological research has indicated that stigmatized individuals as a group do not have lower self-esteem than do their non-stigmatized peers (Conley et al., 2007). One reason for this appears to be that individuals creatively compare themselves to others in such a way as to maximize their positive impressions of themselves. In addition, they may derive a greater proportion of

self-esteem from arenas in which they are successful or in which they feel competent. Finally, they may define terms idiosyncratically so that their own strengths are represented best (Conley et al., 2007). Therefore, the relatively poorer self-image of students with disabilities may be a result of their feelings of inadequacy on specific dimensions, rather than overall negative impressions of themselves. It appears that students in general, and special education students specifically, believe that domains in which they are the most competent are more important than the domains in which they are less competent (Bakker & Bosman, 2003). Therefore, the more negative overall self-image of students with disabilities does not necessarily mean that they have an overall negative impression of themselves.

#### **Change in self-image due to the transfer to special education**

In general, students with disabilities are less accepted by their peers, have fewer friends, and generally have a more negative self-concept. Furthermore, they show a lack of feelings of competence and are less ready to make future career and educational decisions. These factors all influence their self-image. But does this mean that the self-image of disabled students in regular education is different from that of students in special education? And, when students make a transfer from regular to special education, in which ways will their self-image change? This section will address these questions.

A distinction can be made between students with general learning disabilities and students with specific disabilities, even though they both receive a diagnostic label in order to become eligible for services. They are both seen as less competent in one or more domains of knowledge. It is clear that being labeled different or even deviant greatly influences their self-image. In certain kinds of classrooms, students come to accept a conception of this perceived ability that is consistent with the conception of the society at large. The relationship of the stigmatized individual to his or her peer group is crucial to one's identity as either "normal" or "deviant" (Fitch, 2003). That is, the peer group of disabled students in regular education is very different from the peer group of disabled students in special education. With regard to the reference group theory, as mentioned before, it is as if special education emerged as a way to escape and mediate the sting of public ridicule and failure for disabled

students. That is to say, segregated special education seems to serve an important function in helping students to obscure what they saw as the humiliating condition of their disability.

With regard to the disabled students' transfer from regular to special education, they present a changing sense of themselves and social belonging (Fitch, 2003). Their reference group changed from typical students to students who have disabilities as well. Consequently their label as "learning disabled," which was used to place them in a marginal position, is not as influential on the way they are seen by their environment as before. The adapted form of education limits their chance of failure, especially in the eyes of their peers who are disabled as well. They have a higher degree of peer acceptance (the most important aspect of students' self-image) and therefore their self-image is more positive. However, with regard to students' self-esteem, it is important to make a distinction as regards the type of special education classification. As said before, lower self-esteem may be a result of students' feeling of inadequacy on a specific dimension, rather than overall negative impressions of themselves. Consequently, students with general learning disabilities may experience feelings of inadequacy on several dimensions, whereas students with specific learning disabilities may experience feelings of inadequacy on only one dimension. That means that the consequences of making the transfer to special education can have different effects on students' self-image with regard to their learning disabilities.

To conclude, it is clear that certain decisions can be made with respect to students' transfer to special education based on their changing self-image. Overall, there seems to be a more positive self-image when students move from regular education to special education.

#### **Conclusion**

This article provides an overview of the literature about the inclusion and exclusion of students with disabilities in regular education, with regard to the students' changing self-image. Three questions are addressed. First, several arguments for and against inclusion were presented, and it was shown that there appears to be a generally positive effect of mainstreaming students with disabilities. With regard to students' self-image, a distinction can be made among three components: perceptions of relationships with peers, feelings of self-worth, and feelings of competence. In general, disabled

students have a more negative self-image with respect to these components. However, by further defining self-esteem, a slight qualification can be made with respect to this negative self-image. Finally, it seems that disabled students present a changing sense of themselves and of their social belonging when they transfer from regular to special education. When such a transfer occurs, their reference group changes and their label as “learning disabled” does not distinguish them from peers any more. Overall, they are now more accepted by their peers, and peer acceptance is the most important aspect of students’ self-image. Therefore, their self-image becomes more positive in special education.

Further, a tentative judgment can be made from the student’s perspective in order to examine students’ self-image with regard to the ongoing debate about whether students with disabilities should be included in regular education or not. In general, disabled students have a more negative self-image when compared to their typical peers. However, the self-image of disabled students in special education is more positive compared to disabled students in regular education. When they make the transfer to special education, their self-image improves. Therefore there seems to be a positive effect of excluding disabled students from regular education, when the ongoing debate is examined from the student’s perspective. This finding contradicts the finding of a positive effect of including disabled students overall. Consequently, this article contributes to the ongoing debate, from the student’s perspective, by supporting the opponents of inclusion of disabled students. However, it is hard to pass judgment with regard to what is better for *all* students. Children have individual needs and are different from each other in many ways. Therefore, one should always try to account for these individual differences and do what is the best for the individual rather than to follow a single rule based on a common label.

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