



The Role of Inclusive Education in Enhancing Self-Esteem and Social Interaction among Students with Disabilities

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13569955](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13569955)

Leda T. Baluyot

Caniff Liberty Academy, Hamtramck, Michigan, USA

Osias Kit T. Kilag

PAU Excellencia Global Academy Foundation, Inc., Mercado St., Poblacion, Toledo City, Philippines

Raquel H. Noguerras

Warren County Schools, Warrenton North Carolina, USA and Western

Abstract

This study investigates the psychosocial well-being of learners with special educational needs (LSENs) within inclusive educational settings. Specifically, it examines self-esteem, social connectedness, and emotional regulation. Using a descriptive-correlational design, the research involved LSENs across various demographic profiles, and data were collected through a structured questionnaire. Results indicate that LSENs generally experience high levels of self-esteem, social connectedness, and emotional regulation, with aggregate weighted means of 2.66, 2.77, and 2.60, respectively. These findings suggest that inclusive environments positively impact LSENs' self-perception, peer relationships, and emotional management. Despite these positive outcomes, demographic factors such as age, gender, grade level, parent's occupation, number of siblings, and type of disability did not show significant relationships with psychosocial well-being. The study highlights the crucial role of inclusive education in enhancing various aspects of LSENs' psychosocial development, emphasizing that supportive and accepting classroom environments are more influential than individual demographic variables. Future research should explore the long-term effects of inclusive practices and investigate specific components of inclusivity that contribute to psychosocial well-being.

Keywords: Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSENs), Inclusive Education, Psychosocial Well-being, Self-Esteem

Introduction:

Inclusive education has increasingly become a focal point in contemporary educational discourse, championing the principle that every student, regardless of ability or disability, deserves equitable access to quality education within mainstream schools. This educational philosophy emphasizes that learners with special educational needs (LSENs) should be integrated into general education settings, where they receive tailored support to meet their unique needs and strengths. The core tenets of inclusive education, as outlined in the Salamanca Statement on Education for Special Needs, advocate for respect for human diversity and the right to equal educational opportunities for all students (UNESCO, 2004).

Despite the progressive nature of inclusive education, challenges persist, particularly concerning the psychosocial well-being of students with special needs. Research indicates that these students often face significant difficulties related to self-esteem, social acceptance, and emotional regulation. Shoshani and Steinmetz (2013) found that children with special needs frequently perceive themselves as less competent and socially accepted compared to their typically developing peers, which adversely affects their self-esteem. Furthermore, LSENs often struggle with social integration, encountering barriers such as rejection, isolation, or bullying, which can diminish their social connectedness (Davis & Byrd, 2017; Koutsoftas & Gray, 2021). The challenge of emotional regulation also becomes pronounced, as these students may experience heightened difficulties with managing emotions during routine changes or transitions (Zuckerman, 2018; Kern et al., 2016).

In the Philippines, the integration of students with special needs into mainstream classrooms has been a primary strategy in the public education system. This approach is rooted in Special Education Policies and Guidelines (1997), which promote the mainstreaming of exceptional learners as a key objective (DepEd, 1997). While inclusive education is praised for fostering a diverse and accepting society, empirical research is needed to comprehensively evaluate its impact on students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes. The benefits of inclusive education extend beyond academic performance, potentially enhancing social connections and emotional development, yet there remains a gap in research specifically addressing these aspects (Wolfendale et al., 2020).

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by addressing these gaps through a detailed examination of the effects of inclusive education on the self-esteem, social interactions, and emotional development of LSENs from



the perspective of educators. By focusing on these critical areas, the research seeks to provide insights that can inform educational policies and practices, thereby fostering more inclusive and equitable learning environments. The study will draw on theoretical frameworks including Seligman's PERMA model of well-being, Erikson's psychosocial development theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to explore how inclusive education impacts the multifaceted dimensions of students' well-being.

Literature Review:

Inclusive education, an educational approach that aims to integrate all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, into general education classrooms, has gained significant attention and support globally. This approach is rooted in the principle of providing equitable educational opportunities to every student, thereby promoting a diverse and accepting learning environment (Ainscow, 2020). The Salamanca Statement on Education for Special Needs (UNESCO, 2004) serves as a foundational document advocating for inclusive education, emphasizing the need for inclusive practices to address the diverse needs of students within mainstream educational settings.

The primary objective of inclusive education is to enhance the academic performance of students with special educational needs (LSENs) by integrating them into general education classrooms. Research indicates that inclusive education can positively influence academic outcomes for students with disabilities. For instance, a study by Stainback et al. (2016) highlights that students with disabilities who are included in general education settings tend to show improved academic achievement compared to those in segregated settings. The exposure to a more diverse learning environment and the opportunity to interact with typically developing peers can contribute to better educational outcomes.

However, the effectiveness of inclusive education in improving academic performance is not uniform across all students. For instance, McLeskey et al. (2017) found that while inclusive education generally supports academic growth, the degree of its effectiveness often depends on the quality of implementation, including the adequacy of resources and teacher training. The study emphasizes the importance of providing appropriate support and accommodations to maximize the benefits of inclusive education.

Social and Emotional Outcomes

Beyond academic achievement, inclusive education significantly impacts the social and emotional development of students with special needs. The integration of LSENs into general education classrooms offers opportunities for social interaction with peers, which can enhance their social skills and emotional well-being. According to a review by Avramidis and Kalyva (2017), inclusive education positively affects social relationships and self-esteem among students with disabilities. The study notes that inclusive settings facilitate peer interactions, which can lead to increased social acceptance and a sense of belonging.

However, challenges persist in the social domain. Students with special needs often face difficulties in establishing and maintaining peer relationships. Lindsay (2015) highlights that despite the potential for improved social integration, students with disabilities may experience social exclusion, bullying, and difficulties in forming friendships. This social exclusion can have detrimental effects on their self-esteem and overall well-being. Research by Shoshani and Steinmetz (2013) supports this, indicating that students with special needs often perceive themselves as less competent and socially accepted compared to their typically developing peers, which can adversely affect their self-esteem.

Emotional regulation is another critical aspect of psychosocial well-being affected by inclusive education. Students with special needs may struggle with emotional regulation, particularly during transitions or changes in routine. Zuckerman (2018) notes that difficulties in identifying, understanding, and managing emotions are common among these students, which can lead to increased anxiety and frustration. The support provided in inclusive settings can help mitigate these challenges, but effective strategies and interventions are necessary to address emotional regulation issues (Kern et al., 2016).

Teacher Perspectives on Inclusive Education

The role of teachers in implementing inclusive education is crucial for its success. Teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and practices significantly influence the effectiveness of inclusive education. Positive teacher-student relationships and teacher preparedness are essential for fostering an inclusive environment. According to Fauth et al. (2014), strong teacher-student relationships are associated with better academic and psychosocial outcomes for students with special needs. Teachers who demonstrate understanding, support, and create a safe learning environment can enhance the psychosocial well-being of these students.

Moreover, the effectiveness of inclusive education is closely linked to teachers' training and professional development. Research by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) emphasizes the need for ongoing professional development to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge required for effective inclusive practices. Teachers who receive targeted



training on inclusive education are better prepared to address the diverse needs of their students and implement appropriate teaching strategies.

Legal and policy frameworks play a significant role in shaping the implementation of inclusive education. In the Philippines, several policies and laws support inclusive education. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 2004) provides a global framework for inclusive education, while the 1987 Philippine Constitution and Republic Act No. 7277 (Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities) establish the legal foundation for ensuring educational opportunities for students with disabilities (DepEd, 2021).

The Inclusive Education Act (RA 11650) and the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 further support the integration of students with special needs into mainstream classrooms. These policies emphasize the importance of creating inclusive learning environments and providing appropriate support and accommodations (DepEd, 2021). However, the effectiveness of these policies depends on their implementation and the availability of resources.

Despite the progress made in inclusive education, there are several gaps in the existing research. While numerous studies have explored the academic outcomes of inclusive education, there is a need for more research on its impact on the psychosocial well-being of students with special needs. As noted by Wolfendale et al. (2020), research on self-esteem, social connectedness, and emotional regulation in the context of inclusive education is limited. Further studies are needed to explore how inclusive education affects these aspects of students' lives and to identify effective strategies for addressing their needs.

Additionally, research should focus on the perspectives of teachers and other stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and successes associated with inclusive education. By examining teachers' experiences and insights, researchers can identify best practices and areas for improvement in the implementation of inclusive education.

Methodology:

This study investigates the impact of mainstreaming learners with special educational needs (LSENs) into regular classrooms on their psychosocial well-being. The research methodology includes the design, study flow, environment, respondents, data collection procedures, statistical treatment, and ethical considerations relevant to the study.

The study employed a mixed-method approach that combined descriptive, evaluative, and correlational methodologies. The descriptive survey design was used to collect quantitative data on the psychosocial well-being of LSENs, enabling an exploration of the current state and distribution of various social features and their relationships to specific attitudes or behaviors. The evaluative aspect assessed the impact of mainstreaming on LSENs' self-esteem, social connectedness, and emotional regulation. The correlational method examined the relationships between LSENs' demographic profiles—such as age, gender, and disability type—and their psychosocial well-being, determining significant associations between these profile variables and the students' well-being outcomes.

The study followed a structured process comprising input, process, and output phases. In the input phase, data collected included LSENs' demographic information (age, gender, grade level, parent occupation, and type of disability) and psychosocial measures (self-esteem, social connectedness, and emotional regulation), which were analyzed to determine their effects on students' well-being. During the process phase, the psychosocial status of LSENs was analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as weighted means, to determine their current state. Inferential statistics, including the Chi-square Test of Independence, were used to ascertain significant correlations between demographic variables and psychosocial well-being. In the output phase, recommendations were formulated based on the findings to improve mainstreaming practices, which could take the form of action plans, programs, or activities aimed at enhancing the integration of LSENs into regular classrooms.

The collected data were analyzed using various statistical tools. Frequency and percentage were used to describe the demographic profile of LSENs, while weighted mean and standard deviation were applied to evaluate their self-esteem, social connectedness, and emotional regulation. The Chi-square Test of Independence was employed to test for significant relationships between LSENs' demographic profiles and their psychosocial well-being.

Results and Discussion:

The data indicates that LSENs experience high levels of self-esteem within inclusive settings. The highest ratings were observed in feelings of personal success and competence, such as feeling good about oneself (2.83) and doing well in class (2.80). This suggests that inclusion in regular classrooms positively impacts students' self-perception and confidence. The high self-esteem can be attributed to the opportunities for success, recognition, and participation in diverse activities provided by mainstream settings. This aligns with existing research highlighting that inclusive education fosters a positive self-image by acknowledging students' strengths and capabilities (Vaz et al., 2015).



Mainstreaming allows LSENs to engage in group activities and gain peer recognition, which contributes to their self-esteem. Positive interactions and recognition from peers further bolster their confidence, underscoring the significance of inclusive practices in supporting emotional and psychological growth (Sharma et al., 2020).

LSENs report a high level of social connectedness, as evidenced by their strong sense of belonging and engagement in class activities. The highest scores were in feelings of brotherhood/sisterhood (2.93) and participation in group activities (2.90). This high social connectedness suggests that inclusive settings foster meaningful relationships and a strong sense of community. Regular interaction with peers promotes the development of social skills, empathy, and understanding, which are critical for social integration (Strain & Hoyson, 2000).

Inclusive classrooms often create a culture of acceptance and reduce stigmatization, which contributes to a supportive social environment where LSENs feel connected and valued (LaRocque et al., 2011). This enhanced social integration is likely to improve their overall well-being and academic success (Sharma et al., 2015).

The data reveals that LSENs exhibit high emotional regulation, with an aggregate mean of 2.60. Despite some lower scores in expressing negative emotions (2.47) and controlling emotions (2.33), LSENs generally manage their emotions well by positively expressing happiness and maintaining calm in stressful situations (2.70). Mainstreaming appears to support emotional regulation by providing opportunities for LSENs to observe and learn from their typically developing peers (Embregts & van Nieuwenhuijzen, 2008).

The interaction with peers and exposure to a supportive environment can enhance emotional regulation skills, as students learn and adopt appropriate emotional responses from their classmates (Braad, 2015). Additionally, inclusive settings help LSENs develop self-efficacy and confidence, which are crucial for effective emotional management (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002).

The overall psychosocial well-being of LSENs in inclusive settings is high, with all three components—self-esteem, social connectedness, and emotional regulation—falling within the "High" range. This suggests that inclusion in regular classrooms positively impacts various aspects of LSENs' psychosocial development. The supportive and accepting environment of mainstream classrooms contributes to improved self-esteem, strong social bonds, and effective emotional regulation.

The findings highlight the importance of inclusive education practices in promoting a holistic approach to student development. By creating an environment where LSENs feel valued and integrated, schools can enhance students' overall well-being and support their academic and social success (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

The analysis indicates that the psychosocial well-being of LSENs is not significantly affected by demographic factors such as age, gender, grade level, parent's occupation, number of siblings, or type of disability. This suggests that psychosocial well-being is more influenced by the inclusive environment rather than individual demographic characteristics.

These results reinforce the idea that inclusive practices, rather than specific demographic variables, play a crucial role in supporting LSENs' psychosocial development. Ensuring that all students, regardless of their background or personal characteristics, benefit from inclusive education can foster an environment that supports high self-esteem, social connectedness, and emotional regulation (Rose, 2009).

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that LSENs in inclusive settings generally exhibit high levels of self-esteem, social connectedness, and emotional regulation. The inclusive classroom environment significantly contributes to their psychosocial well-being. No significant relationships were found between demographic factors and psychosocial well-being, underscoring the importance of inclusive practices in promoting positive outcomes for LSENs.

Future research should continue to explore the impact of inclusive education on psychosocial well-being and consider longitudinal studies to assess long-term effects. Additionally, examining specific components of inclusive practices and their direct impact on different aspects of psychosocial well-being could provide deeper insights into effective strategies for supporting LSENs.

References:

- Ainscow, M. (2005). Developing inclusive education systems: what are the levers for change?. *Journal of educational change*, 6(2), 109-124.
- Avramidis, E., Vlachos, F., Didaskalou, E., Tzivinikou, S., Nikolaraizi, M., Vlachou, A., & Strogilos, V. (2019). Peer tutoring as a means to implementing inclusion: process and efficacy.



Byrd, D. R., & Alexander, M. (2020). Investigating special education teachers' knowledge and skills: Preparing general teacher preparation for professional development. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 4(2), 72-82.

DepEd. (1997). Institutionalization of SPED Programs in All Schools. Department of Education, Philippines. https://www.deped.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/1997/03/DO_s1997_26.pdf

Policy Guidelines on the Provision of Educational Programs and Services for Learners with Disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program. Department of Education, Philippines. https://www.deped.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/DO_s2021_044.pdf

Fauth, B., Decristan, J., Decker, A. T., Büttner, G., Hardy, I., Klieme, E., & Kunter, M. (2019). The effects of teacher competence on student outcomes in elementary science education: The mediating role of teaching quality. *Teaching and teacher education*, 86, 102882.

Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011). Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British educational research journal*, 37(5), 813-828.

Koutsoftas, A. D., Harmon, M. T., & Gray, S. (2009). The effect of tier 2 intervention for phonemic awareness in a response-to-intervention model in low-income preschool classrooms.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2024). Self-determination theory. In *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 6229-6235). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Seligman, M. E. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Simon and Schuster.

Shoshani, A., & Steinmetz, S. (2014). Positive psychology at school: A school-based intervention to promote adolescents' mental health and well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 15, 1289-1311.

UNESCO. (2004). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000098427>