

One size does not fit all – inconsistent effects of inclusion on learning and psychosocial adjustment of children with special needs



Findings point to the need for an individual assessment of the specific child's educational and psychosocial needs.

What is the aim of this review?

This review aims to explore the effects of placing children with special needs in inclusive educational settings, compared with segregated placement on measures of academic achievement and psychosocial adjustment. A secondary aim is to explore how different child or setting characteristics (gender, age, type and severity of special need, part- or full-time inclusive education, and co-teaching) might moderate outcomes.

The effects of placing children with special needs in grades K-12 into inclusive educational settings are inconsistent. Findings from this review suggest that, in general, inclusion neither increases nor decreases learning and psychosocial adjustment of children with special needs in the OECD countries.

What is this review about?

This review and meta-analysis summarises evidence from studies exploring the effects of inclusion on children with special needs in regular educational settings, compared with segregated educational settings.

The review summarises evidence from 15 non-randomised studies in three meta-analyses on language and literacy outcomes, math outcomes and overall psychosocial adjustment of children.

What studies are included?

This review includes studies that evaluate the effects of placing children with special educational needs in mainstream educational settings (inclusion). A total of 94 studies were identified. However, only 15 of these were assessed to be of sufficient methodological quality to be included in the meta-analyses and only between six and eight studies could be synthesized in each of the meta-analyses.

Four studies were from the USA, three from the UK, two from the Netherlands, and one each from Switzerland, Finland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Belgium and Denmark.

The studies included children with multiple types of disabilities such as learning disorders/intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, physical handicaps, visual impairments, and Down syndrome.

The studies all had important methodological weaknesses. None of the included studies used experimental designs with random assignment.



How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies up to 30 September 2021.

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About this summary

This summary is based on Dalgaard, N. T., Bondebjerg, A., Viinholt, B. C. A., & Filges, T. (2022). The effects of inclusion on academic achievement, socioemotional development and wellbeing of children with special educational needs. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 18, e1291. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1291>.

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What are the main findings of this review?

Results of the meta-analyses do not suggest any consistent positive or negative effects of inclusion on children's academic achievement as measured by language, literacy and math outcomes, or on the overall psychosocial adjustment of children. The studies in the analysis demonstrated a wide range of both large positive and large negative effect sizes; and although the average effect sizes did favour inclusion, they were small and none were statistically significant.

How has this intervention worked?

Supporters of mainstreaming or inclusion claim that segregated educational placement causes stigmatisation and social isolation, which may have detrimental effects on the self-concept, social identity, and self-confidence of students with special educational needs.

On the other hand, opponents suggest that placement in general education classrooms may have adverse effects for children with special needs, especially if the time and resources allocated for individualisation and differentiation are not aligned with student needs.

In line with these opposing positions, the findings from this review suggest that while some children with special needs may benefit from inclusive educational placement, other children may benefit from traditional special education in a segregated setting. Unfortunately, it was not possible to explore the effects of different kinds of inclusive education for different kinds of children with special needs.

What do the findings of the review mean?

The overall effects of inclusion on the academic achievement and overall psychosocial adjustment of students with special needs are inconsistent. Our findings are very similar to the results of previous systematic reviews and meta-analyses, which include studies published before 2000. It is very unlikely that inclusion in general increases or decreases learning and psychosocial adjustment in children with special needs.

These findings point to the need for an individual assessment of the specific child's educational and psychosocial needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to placement in special education.

Research should explore the effects of different kinds of inclusive education for different kinds of children with special needs, to expand the knowledge base on what works for whom.