

Differences in Emotional Well-Being, Social Inclusion and Academic Self-Concept Between Students With and Without Disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

Social and emotional development of all students is one of the important goals of inclusive education. The aim of this research is to examine differences in emotional well-being, social inclusion, and academic self-concept between students with and without disabilities from the perspective of teachers in the inclusive educational context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Teachers assessed their students in grades one to eight, including students with disabilities (N=53) and students without disabilities (N=54), all from the same class, representing both genders with an average age of 11.2 years. The assessment was conducted using the teacher's version of the Perception of Inclusion Questionnaire (PIQ-T). The results show statistically significant lower levels of emotional well-being, social inclusion, and academic self-concept among students with disabilities when compared to their peers without disabilities. The results indicate the need for further improvement in the implementation of inclusive education, especially regarding inclusive teaching that, according to previous research, could have a positive impact on social, emotional, and academic inclusion of students.

Keywords: *Academic Self-Concept, Emotional Well-Being, Social Inclusion, Students With Disabilities*

1. Introduction and Research Problem

The implementation of inclusive education is a common goal in European countries that requires the availability of support for students with special education needs and their teachers, the enhancement of teachers' competences for inclusive education (Žic Ralić, et. al, 2020), and the adoption of educational adaptations and new teaching methods in schools which consider the individual differences and needs of students. Within an inclusive context, teachers are not only asked to enhance students' learning outcomes, but also to support their social and emotional development.

Social and emotional competencies are important for success at school and in life, including the ability to understand and manage emotions, achieve positive goals, show caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Mahoney et. all, 2020). They are related to academic achievement, prosocial behaviour, and positive attitudes toward school, self, and others (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011). Therefore, the development of social and emotional competencies of all students is one of the important goals of inclusive education.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH), inclusive education started in 2004, primarily focusing on placing the students with mild disabilities in a general education classroom, and providing the necessary support concerning academic needs of children with disabilities (Dizdarević et al., 2017). The legislation regarding inclusive education is positive and affirmative, but implementation faced many obstacles. Bišćević et al. (2017) have reported that regular education teachers believe that the greatest obstacle to inclusion is the shortage of experts in regular schools who are professionally trained to work

with students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). It is of utmost importance to support regular education teachers in their efforts to support all students in their classes. Many (48.5 %) teachers in that study also pointed to the need for additional training in inclusive education (Bišćević et al., 2017). Insufficient resources for the implementation of inclusive education are reflected in the lower quality of education (Žic Ralić, et al., 2020), which can affect the academic, social, and emotional outcomes of inclusive education. Therefore, continuous research into the implementation of inclusive education and the outcomes achieved is needed.

2. Objectives of the Study

Inclusive education as a major change in the education system needs to be evaluated to determine the advantages and identify challenges in its implementation. There is a lack of research focusing on the social and emotional outcomes of inclusive education in low-income countries where there are limited resources for its implementation. According to the GDP, BIH belongs to low-income countries. BIH is a European country with about 3.5 million inhabitants, with a complex political structure. The country has 13 political entities, with 13 Ministries of Education, and with no Ministry of Education at the state level. Nevertheless, there are similar resources for providing inclusive education across the country. This research was conducted in three (out of 13) administrative entities in BiH located in the south of the country: Herzegovina-Neretva County, West Herzegovina County and Herzegovina-Bosnia County.

The aim of this research is to examine differences in social inclusion, emotional well-being, and academic self-concept between students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities from the perspective of teachers in the inclusive educational context of BIH. In this study, emotional inclusion refers to the student's emotional well-being in schools, especially as an indicator of how much a student likes school, which is considered one facet of school well-being. Social inclusion refers to the student's peer relationships in class, and it includes friendships as a positive indicator and feelings of loneliness as a negative indicator. Academic self-concept refers to the teacher's perception of students' general academic abilities, i.e., related to working speed and ability to solve tasks (Venetz et al., 2014). Since the social and emotional competencies of students are key to achieving the goals of inclusive education, the findings of this research seek to provide insight into implementation of inclusive education and difficulties in socio-emotional development of students with disabilities at schools in three counties of BIH.

3. Scope and Significance of the Study

There is a dearth of available studies providing insight into the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities in BIH society, as well as insight into their social and emotional development. The lack of knowledge and understanding about the importance of encouraging the social and emotional development of students in the school context negatively affects the implementation of education in BIH, both for students with and without disabilities. The results of this research will provide evidence of the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classroom communities and raise awareness about students' academic learning and performance as well as their

general satisfaction and development. Most of the conducted research on social and emotional inclusion and academic self-concept was based on the self-assessment of students, while this research intends to provide insight into teacher's assessment.

4. Review of the Relevant Literature

4.1. Students' Well-Being in School

Well-being has been defined in different ways, typically including reference to individuals' happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Diener, 1984). Duckett et al. (2010) describe that the concept of student well-being begins with the idea that if the school members feel happy and secure at school, they will actualise their potentials. The students' well-being positively influences their learning process and outcomes. The students feeling satisfied with their schools will develop positive attitudes towards learning-teaching process and improve their achievements (Jarvela, 2011).

The study of Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim (2020) revealed links between students perceiving that their teacher cares about them, and their self-esteem, well-being, and engagement in school, indicating the role of student-teacher relationships in mediating these connections. Alnahdi et al. (2022) and Pozas et al. (2021) have indicated that students' rating of their teachers' differentiated instruction practice is positively associated with their well-being in school.

Regarding the emotional well-being of students with SEN, some studies have shown weaker emotional well-being in these students compared to those with typical development (Alnahdi et al., 2022; Pozas et al., 2021; McCoy & Banks,

2012; Skrzypiec et al., 2016), whereas other studies have found no differences between groups (Zurbriggen et al. 2018).

4.2. Social Inclusion

Although students with disabilities are present in schools today, their presence does not imply their social inclusion. Social participation in the school context implies the involvement of students in the life of the peer group, which means, for example, interaction with peers, acceptance by peers, being part of a dyad and/or friendship network within the class and a sense of belonging to that peer group (Schwab et al., 2021). More recent reviews of the literature indicate a lower level of social participation of students with disabilities, as well as a lack of friendships (Hassani et al., 2020). Students with disabilities achieve social interactions significantly lesser than students without disabilities, are less accepted by others and form fewer social relationships, which increases the risk of their social marginalization within the class (Hassani et al., 2020).

Two recent studies of inclusive education (Alnahdi et al., 2022; Pozas et al., 2021) showed significant differences in social inclusion between students with special educational needs and their peers without SEN and found that a higher level of inclusive teaching practice is associated with more positive social inclusion of students.

4.3. Academic Self-Concept

In a general sense, academic self-concept can be defined as one's academic self-perceptions or one's perception of one's general ability in school (Shavelson et al., 1976). It can vary across academic disciplines and can be affected by past academic performance. Students with high levels of academic

self-concept are those students that feel they can do well in their schoolwork. In the context of inclusive education, a positive connection was established between academic self-concept and the assessment of teachers' differentiated instruction practice (Alnahdi et al., 2022, Pozas et al., 2021). Research also shows that students with SEN have a lower academic self-concept compared to students without SEN (Alnahdi et al., 2022; Pozas et al., 2021).

5. Research Methodology

To gain insight into the inclusion of students with disabilities in their inclusive classes, the teachers assessed the social inclusion, emotional well-being, and academic self-concept of their students with and without disabilities.

The criteria for the teacher's participation in the research are that he/she teaches in an inclusive class within a mainstream school in the three mentioned counties, that the parents have given their consent for the teacher to assess their children with and without disabilities, and that the teacher agrees to participate in the research. The definition of the inclusive class concept holds that there is at least one student with a diagnosed developmental disability in the class. The sample consists of teachers (N=53) who met the stated criteria. There are 50 female teachers and 3 male teachers in the sample. The sample includes classroom teachers (N=24) and subject teachers (N=29). Teachers report that they receive support in their work from the professionals of the school, or from the local community; pedagogues (68.5%), speech and language pathologist (44.4%), special education professionals (42.6%), psychologists (35.2%) and social pedagogue (7.4%).

The criteria for selecting a sample of students with disabilities involve having a diagnosed disability, falling within the age range of 7 and 13, attending classes in an inclusive class in a mainstream school in the specified counties, obtaining consent from both their parents the participating teacher. The criteria for selecting a sample of students without disabilities involve being in the same age and gender group as students with disabilities, attending classes together (where they are evaluated by the same teacher for this research), and obtaining parental consent for their assessment made by the teacher.

Teachers assessed social inclusion, emotional well-being, and academic self-concept of their first to eighth-grade students (N=106) who met the stated criteria for participation in the research. The sample of students includes female (N=47) and male (N=56) students. Mean age of students is 11.2 years, with students aged 10 and under (N=45), and students aged 11 and over (N=60). The sample of students is divided into two subsamples equalised by age, gender and class: students with disabilities (N=53) and students without disabilities (N=53). The sample of students with disabilities consists of students with various mild disabilities: learning disabilities (N=22), speech-language disorders (N=10), intellectual disability (N=8), attention deficit/hyperactive disorder (N=7), autistic spectrum disorder (N=5), motor disorders (N=5), visual impairment (N=4), hearing impairment (N=1). Regarding the educational programme, 11 students (20.76%) participated in the regular programme with individualised procedures, 31 students (58.5%) participated in the regular programme with content adjustment and individualised procedures, while there was no information available about the educational programme for 8 students (15%).

5.1. Measuring Instrument

The teachers first filled out a questionnaire providing general information about themselves. General information about the students was provided by the parents. Social inclusion, emotional well-being, and academic self-concept were measured by Perception of inclusion questionnaire, teacher version PIQ-T (Venetz, et al., 2015). The PIQ-T consists of 12 items that measure three central dimensions of subjectively perceived inclusion in school: emotional well-being in school (e.g., He/she likes going to school), social inclusion in class (e.g., He/she has a lot of friends in his/her class) and the academic self-concept (e.g., He/she does well in his/her schoolwork). Answers are provided on a 4-point scale: 1=*not at all true*, 2=*rather not true*, 3=*somewhat true*, and 4=*certainly true*. The PIQ is freely available in several language versions, including Croatian language, which is one of the official languages in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The psychometric properties for the teachers' version of PIQ have been confirmed in the study by Venetz et al. (2019) for secondary school teachers and by Schwab et al. (2020) for primary school teachers. Cronbach's Alpha values for each subscale were determined on the sample of this research: social inclusion $\alpha = .87$; emotional well-being $\alpha = .80$; academic self-perception $\alpha = .75$.

5.2. The Study Procedure

The survey was conducted online during the spring of 2021. After obtaining the consent of the Ministries of Education in three counties, 43 schools from these counties of BIH were contacted by e-mail or telephone and explained the idea and purpose of this research. The criteria for choosing a school are that it is a mainstream school in the mentioned counties and that it is attended

by students with disabilities. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic and the increased workload in occasional distance teaching, communication with schools was difficult. 28 schools agreed to participate. Professional associates contacted all teachers in their school who have students with disabilities in their class and gave them written information about the research. If the teacher agreed to participate, written information about the study was sent to the parents of students with disabilities in his class. If the parents agreed for the teacher to evaluate their child with disabilities, the selection process for students without disabilities began. For every student with disabilities, teachers find a couple, i.e., a student of typical development who is of the same sex and age with the student with disabilities and attend the same class. The selection of a child without disabilities was carried out by taking the seventh student in alphabetical order in the diary with a change of +/- 2 students if the seventh in a row is not of the same sex as the child with disabilities, or if the parents did not give their consent. Parents of students with and without disabilities confirmed their consent by providing information about their child via the survey link. To ensure anonymity, student names were coded. Parents and teachers used the child/student code when providing information/assessment.

6. Results and Discussion

Descriptive analysis of the teacher's assessment of inclusion shows that both groups of students achieve the highest level of inclusive education related to social inclusion, and the lowest level in academic self-concept (Table 1). The distribution of results for emotional well-being and social inclusion in both groups of students shifted towards higher values (theoretical mean for the scales is $M=8$). Since the arithmetic means of the results are higher than the

theoretical average, it can be said that students with and without disabilities in three counties of Bosnia and Herzegovina achieve positive social inclusion and emotional well-being. However, the distribution of results for academic self-concept shifted towards lower values for students with disabilities, but not for students without disabilities. Arithmetic means of the results indicate that students without disabilities achieve a positive academic self-concept, while students with disabilities have a slightly lower academic self-concept than the theoretical average. However, high mean scores do not automatically imply that all students are reaching satisfying levels of social and emotional outcomes of inclusive education. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to students who are at risk of not achieving social and emotional well-being in school and to implement appropriate prevention and intervention strategies.

The teachers estimated that students with disabilities compared to students without disabilities achieve lower results on all three dimensions (Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive Analyses of Results on Perception of Inclusion Questionary (PIQ) for Students With Disability and Their Typical Peers

PIQ-T	Pupils	MIN	MAX	MEAN	Stand. Dev.	Shapiro-Wilk	Kolmogorov-Smirnov
Emotional well-being in school	Disability	4	16	12,62	2,683	,003	,000
	Typical	8	16	13,68	2,119	,000	
Social inclusion	Disability	5	16	13,23	2,658	,000	,000
	Typical	8	16	14,64	1,882	,000	

Academic self-concept	Disability	4	14	7,74	2,647	,034	,096
	Typical	7	16	12,96	2,557	,000	

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for the results of all pupils and the Shapiro-Wilk test for the sample of students with disabilities and for the sample of students without disabilities showed that the distributions of results on almost all PIQ-T subscales deviated statistically significantly from normal. The nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the significance of the differences between the results.

Table 2: The Significance of the Difference in Results on PIQ-T Between Groups of Students With Disabilities and Typical Students With Mann-Whitney U Test

PIQ-T	Pupils	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Emotional well being	Disability	47,25	2504,50	1073,5	,034
	Typical	59,75	3166,50		
Social inclusion	Disability	44,55	2361,00	930,0	,002
	Typical	62,45	3310,00		
Academic self-concept	Disability	31,60	1675,00	244,0	,000
	Typical	75,40	3996,00		

Teachers estimate that students with disabilities achieve statistically significant lower level of inclusion in comparison with their peers without disabilities (Table 2). It was found that students with disabilities achieve significantly lower results on the subscales of emotional inclusion, social inclusion, and academic self-concept.

Results of this research are in accordance with previous studies of Alnahdi et al. (2022) and Pozas et al. (2021) whose results indicated that for all three dimensions (emotional well-being, social inclusion, and academic self-concept) students with SEN scored lower levels of inclusion compared to their peers without SEN.

The determined lower emotional well-being of students with developmental disabilities indicates that, according to the teacher's assessment, they like school less than students without disabilities, which confirms the results of previous research (Alnahdi et al., 2022, Pozas et al., 2021; McCoy & Banks, 2012; Skrzypiec et al., 2016). Bearing in mind the importance of the teacher-student relationship for emotional well-being (Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim, 2020), it is possible that the insufficient education of teachers for inclusive education and the insufficient support of special education professionals (Bišćević et al., 2017) are related with a possible distance in the relationship between students with disabilities and their teachers, that is, less care and attention of teachers about the emotional well-being of students with disabilities compared to students without disabilities. Further research is needed to gain a clearer insight into this possible connection. Furthermore, previous research has established a significant connection between students' emotional well-being and an inclusive teaching practice that considers individual differences and students' needs (Pozas et al., 2021, Alnahdi et al., 2022). By applying this method of teaching, students feel respected, they experience that the teachers care about them, which is reflected in their well-being at school. Given that available research on inclusive education in Bosnia and Herzegovina points to the need for teachers to be additionally educated to work in inclusive conditions (Bišćević et al., 2017), it is possible that the lack

of such an approach contributes to the established differences between students with and without developmental disabilities. According to recent research (Schwab et al., 2022), emotional well-being is significantly related to the teacher's positive feedback on the student's behaviour and his achievement, with positive feedback on behaviour having a stronger influence. The established difference in emotional well-being in this research can be explained by possible less frequent positive feedback to students with disabilities compared to students without disabilities.

Regarding social inclusion, the results show that students with disabilities have fewer interactions with their peers in class than students without disabilities, which is in line with the results of previous research (e.g., Alnahdi et al., 2022, Pozas et al., 202; Hassani et al., 2020). It is obviously necessary to systematically encourage interactions between students with disabilities and their peers, to familiarise peers with the challenges faced by students with disabilities to better understand their behaviours and thus accept them more. In addition, the impact of teacher feedback on students' social acceptance plays a significant role, i.e., information about peers that comes from teachers serves students as a basis for decision-making and leads to higher or lower peer acceptance depending on negative or positive teacher feedback, whereby negative feedback has a stronger influence (Schwab et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important for teachers to be aware of the impact of their negative feedback on students' relationships with his peers. Moreover, Pozas et al (2021) and Alnahdi et al. (2022) provided evidence on the significant positive role that teachers' practice of differentiated instruction, (i.e., intentional, systematically planned and reflected practices that enable teachers to meet the needs of all learners in heterogeneous classrooms), can have in fostering students' social

inclusion. Therefore, teachers' didactic adaptation of teaching and learning processes to the individual needs of students in a class and establishment of collaborative relationships among students contributes to positive contact between peers and leads to higher levels of social inclusion (Pozas et al., 2021). Although these studies offer possible explanations for the obtained significant differences in social inclusion, further research in Bosnia and Herzegovina is needed to determine whether the weaker social inclusion of students with disabilities is related to the lack of differentiated teacher instruction and more negative feedback.

The significantly lower academic self-concept of students with disabilities obtained in this study is in accordance with earlier studies that indicated that SEN students in regular education had lower academic self-concept in comparison with their non-SEN peers (Alnahdi et al., 2022, Pozas et al., 2021, Zurbriggen et al., 2018). Research by Pozas et al. (2021) and Schwab et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of positive teacher feedback on academic self-concept, where it is important to use an individual reference standard orientation while providing feedback to students with SEN in inclusive classes. Therefore, students with disabilities receive feedback about their individual progress, so that they are less compared to the achievements of their peers.

Among the limitations of this research, it should be noted that the research was conducted in three out of thirteen administrative entities in BIH, and thus results are not representative for students with disabilities in the country or internationally. Furthermore, the size of the sample of this research did not allow analysis by types of disabilities, and it is possible that there are

differences in emotional, social and academic inclusion between students with different types of disabilities, which should be considered in future research. In addition, this research did not provide analyses on the contribution of inclusive teaching practice on student inclusion, which needs to be done in future research.

7. Conclusions

The results of this research show that according to teachers' perceptions, students with disabilities in three counties of Bosnia and Herzegovina, have significantly lower levels of emotional well-being, social inclusion and academic self-concept compared to their peers without disabilities. The determined lower inclusion of students with disabilities points to the need for further improvement in the implementation of inclusive education, especially in relation to the social and emotional well-being of these students. It is necessary to pay more attention to the inclusive method of teaching, which considers individual differences and students' needs and which, according to earlier research, is connected with better academic, social and emotional inclusion.

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