



Loneliness among students with special educational needs in mainstream seventh grade

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ABSTRACT

The goals of this study were twofold. The first aim was to explore loneliness prevalence in typically developing students, students with ASD and students with motor and/or sensory disabilities in mainstream 7th grade in Belgium. The second aim was to explore the relations between number of friends, friendship quality, social self-concept on the one hand and loneliness on the other for each of these three groups, and to compare them across groups. In this study, 108 students with special educational needs (SEN; i.e., 58 students with ASD and 50 students with motor and/or sensory disabilities) were matched to 108 typically developing classmates. Students with ASD reported more loneliness than typically developing students and students with motor and/or sensory disabilities. Loneliness prevalence for typically developing students and students with motor and/or sensory disabilities did not differ significantly. Factors related with loneliness differed between typically developing students and students with SEN (i.e., students with ASD and students with motor and/or sensory disabilities). For students with SEN, same-sex social self-concept was related with loneliness, but not, as for typically developing students, number of friends and opposite-sex social self-concept. Also friendship quality had a marginally significant effect on loneliness feelings for students with SEN. Implications for further research and practice are discussed.

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Over the last decades, worldwide educational policies concerning the education of students with special educational needs (SEN) have shifted in favor of inclusive education. In current literature, students with SEN are defined as “students with various (combinations of) difficulties in participating in education (Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2008, p. 389)”. As stated in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability of 2006, inclusive education aims to provide effective individualized support in environments “that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion” (United Nations, 2006). Belgium is one of the states that signed the Convention. In the federal state of Belgium, each community has its own education system (De Ro, 2008). Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, has long been known for its two-track education system (i.e., special and regular education system are two distinct systems; Meijer, 2003).

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Recently, a slow shift toward more inclusive education is noticeable. Currently, about 15% of all the students with SEN are fully included in Flemish mainstream schools (Watkins, 2010).

One of the leading motives of inclusive education is the social participation of students with SEN (Symes & Humphrey, 2011). However, researchers disagree about the actual social participation of students with SEN in mainstream schools. Whereas some researchers sketch a positive social situation for students with SEN (Avramidis, 2010), others point to the risks (e.g., Frostad & Pijl, 2007). One of these risks is loneliness. Loneliness is a subjective, unpleasant and distressing experience resulting from a discrepancy between the perceived quantity and quality of one's desired and one's actual relationships (Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). High levels of loneliness among students with SEN in mainstream schools are a sign of low levels of social participation of students with SEN and imply that these students are socially at risk.

Loneliness among children seems to be widespread. A recent literature review showed that about 10–15% of the children and adolescents felt very lonely (Galanaki & Vassilopoulou, 2007). Based on studies among typically developing individuals, a peak in the prevalence of loneliness can be expected during adolescence (Perlman & Landolt, 1999). During adolescence, the social expectations, roles, relationships, and personal identities of individuals undergo significant changes (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Social relations become increasingly important and adolescents spend considerably more time with their peers, away from adult supervision (Brown & Klute, 2003; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Additionally, early adolescence coincides with the transition from elementary to secondary school. In recent years, this transition phase, which is often marked by the breakup of old friendships and forming new relationships, has been highlighted as an area of concern (Hardy, Bukowski, & Sippola, 2002; Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006). These significant changes in adolescents' social worlds might be related to the peak in the prevalence of loneliness during this time.

It seems that students with SEN experience even more loneliness (e.g., Pijl, Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2010; Reversi, Langher, Crisafulli, & Ferri, 2007). One of the subgroups of students with SEN fully included in Flemish mainstream schools are students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Students with ASD form a special group when it comes to loneliness. For a long time, it has been suggested that children with ASD have a "basic desire for aloneness" (Kanner, 1943, p. 249). Aloneness is distinct from loneliness. Whereas aloneness is associated with a pleasant, positive and sometimes desirable situation, loneliness is not (Margalit, 1994). Only recently researchers have tried to solve the question whether students with ASD are satisfied with their aloneness, as suggested by Kanner, or if they do feel lonely. So far, several studies have indicated that children and adolescents with ASD indeed reported higher levels of loneliness in comparison to their typically developing peers (e.g., Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2003, 2004; Lasgaard, Nielsen, Eriksen, & Goossens, 2010; Locke, Isjijima, Kasari, & London, 2010; Whitehouse, Durkin, Jaquet, & Ziatas, 2009).

Although these studies provide important insights into the experiences of individuals with ASD, a lot of questions remain unanswered. First of all, not much is known about loneliness prevalence of students with ASD during early adolescence. Former studies on loneliness of individual of ASD had very broad age ranges, with subjects between 8 and 17 years old. In only two studies, the grade/age range of the participants was limited to three grade levels (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotherham-Fuller, 2007; Lasgaard et al., 2010) and one study did not report the grade/age ranges of the participants (Locke et al., 2010).

Secondly, although these studies give us a general idea about loneliness feelings among individuals with ASD, knowledge on loneliness among students with ASD in fully inclusive settings is still scarce. To date, the majority of the studies compared loneliness of students with ASD in special education or in self-contained classrooms in mainstream settings to loneliness feelings of typically developing students in mainstream education. Two studies have focused on loneliness among students with ASD in fully inclusive settings (i.e., Locke et al., 2010; Whitehouse et al., 2009). In the Whitehouse study (2009), students with ASD from three different provinces in Australia were compared to typically developing students from one particular school. In this study, students with ASD displayed higher levels of loneliness than the typically developing students. However, by comparing students of ASD with typically developing students from different schools, possible context-related factors could not be controlled for. Following the interactionist approach on loneliness, which considers loneliness as a result of the interaction between one's personal characteristics and their socio-cultural context, loneliness could differ across contexts (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). To rule out possible context-effects, it is important to compare loneliness rates of students within the same schools, and preferably within the same classes. Locke et al. (2010) has compared the loneliness prevalence of seven students with ASD with those of his/her typically developing classmates. Also in this study, students with ASD reported higher average loneliness rates than typically developing students.

Third, it is unclear if the loneliness rates of individuals with ASD differ from loneliness prevalence among other students with SEN. Currently, no comparisons in the loneliness rates of students with different types of SEN are available. Nonetheless, these comparisons are necessary to better understand if, and which, problems are unique to students with certain types of SEN (Chambers & Kay, 1992; Whitehouse et al., 2009).

Fourth, although we do not have direct comparisons of loneliness rates of students with different types of SEN, we do have comparisons of loneliness rates of students with other types of SEN to rates of typically developing peers. The majority of these studies have focused on students with learning disabilities, whereas studies on loneliness among students with motor and/or sensory disabilities are rare (Pijl et al., 2010). Not much is known about loneliness prevalence among students with motor and/or sensory disabilities at the start of mainstream secondary education. The scarce studies among hard-of-hearing students or students with visual impairments report higher rates of loneliness compared to their typically developing peers (Huurre & Aro, 1998; Kent, 2003; Most, 2007; Pijl et al., 2010). However this lack of knowledge on loneliness among students

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