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A comparison of the social competence of children with moderate intellectual disability in inclusive versus segregated school settings

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ABSTRACT

This is the first study to compare the social competence of children with moderate intellectual disability in inclusive versus segregated school settings in the Republic of Ireland. A convenience sample was recruited through two large ID services. The sample comprised 45 children across two groups: Group 1 ($n = 20$; inclusive school) and Group 2 ($n = 25$; segregated school). Parents and teachers completed the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* and the *Adaptive Behaviour Scale—School: 2nd edition*. A series of 2×2 ANOVAs were carried out on social competence scores using educational placement type (inclusive vs segregated school) and proxy rater (parent vs teacher) as the independent variables. Key findings indicated that children in inclusive schools did not differ significantly from children in segregated schools on the majority of proxy ratings of social competence. This supports the belief that children with intellectual disabilities can function well in different educational settings. Present findings highlight the importance of utilising the functional model of ID when selecting and designing school placements for children with moderate ID.

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1. Introduction

The inclusive model of education (or 'inclusion') presumes that all students, including those with intellectual disability (ID), are educated in the general education classroom (Wehmeyer & Lee, 2007).

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Its focus is closely aligned with the functional model of ID (see American Association on Mental Retardation definition of mental retardation; AAMR, 2002) in that they both strive to abandon the traditional notion of levels of ID based on IQ scores and instead focus on environmental (or school-wide) changes required to support the needs of each individual (Wehmeyer & Lee, 2007). This model is current best practice in the education of individuals with and without ID (Bergsson, Wood, & Quirk, 2003; Harris, 2002). However, while inclusion has been internationally accepted both philosophically and legally (Wang & Baker, 1985/86), its practical implementation has had very variable success (Guetzloe, 1999). In Ireland, for example, only 5–10% of individuals with ID are educated in their local inclusive schools (Department of Education & Science, 1993).

A key desired outcome of inclusive schooling for children with ID is the promotion of social competence (Laws, Taylor, Bennie, & Buckley, 1996). Social competence is a multidimensional construct (Gresham & Reschly, 1988) that encompasses the social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills that an individual needs for successful social adaptation (Welsh & Bierman, 1998). Global delays in the skill components of social competence are common in children with ID (Kasari & Bauminger, 1998). The enhancement of social competence is important for this population as abilities in this area have been found to be crucial to the overall adjustment and quality of life of the individual with ID (Chadsey-Rusch, DeStefano, O'Reilly, & Gonzalez, 1992; Leffert & Siperstein, 1996).

It has been posited (e.g. Kasari & Bauminger, 1998) that inclusive educational settings promote the social competence of children with ID. One of the arguments for this position is that models of appropriate social behaviour are more readily available within the inclusive education classroom. In addition, it has been argued that the inclusive school offers a richer social and language environment in which to develop friendships with neighbourhood peers, thus increasing opportunities for social interactions and modelling at home as well as in school (Gurlanick, 1978, 1984; Laws et al., 1996). Many (e.g. Hornby, 1999), however, still hold the view that the segregated education continuum of services offers unique advantages (including small class sizes, specially trained teachers, emphasis on functional skills and individualised instruction and procedures; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1993). In addition, concerns continue to be expressed about the potentially negative impact that being placed with much more able students will have on the emotional well-being and self-esteem of students with ID (Freeman & Alkin, 2000).

One of the barriers to the inclusion of children with ID in inclusive schools has been the lack of empirical studies demonstrating the benefits of such inclusion (e.g. Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995; Wang & Baker, 1985/86). Results of the limited number of cross-sectional studies that do exist (e.g. Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994; Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997) indicate that students with ID attending regular schools have either similar or significantly better social abilities than their segregated counterparts. Meyer and colleagues (Cole & Meyer, 1991; Fisher & Meyer, 2002) carried out the only two longitudinal studies available in the literature assessing actual gains made in social and developmental functioning by students with ID in inclusive and segregated school settings. The earlier study found significant gains in social competence for the inclusive group while the later study found significant gains on a developmental measure for the inclusive group.

The few empirical studies that do exist, however, are hampered by a number of important limitations. Firstly, previous studies have tended to include heterogeneous samples of children. For example, some studies (e.g. Cole & Meyer, 1991; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Hunt et al., 1994) have included children with a range of ID (e.g. mild to profound) and other disabilities (e.g. autism, cerebral palsy, dual sensory impairments). Secondly, most previous studies have employed limited outcome measures (i.e. use observation exclusively; e.g. Hunt et al., 1994). Thirdly, previous studies have failed to assess the impact of inclusion beyond the school environment. Finally, the present author failed to locate previous empirical studies comparing the efficacy of inclusive versus segregated schooling for children with ID in Ireland.

The main aim of the present study, therefore, was to assess the social competence of children with moderate ID across inclusive and segregated Irish school settings (i.e. inclusive national (junior) schools and segregated national (junior) schools). This study aims to investigate childrens' social competence at home (as rated by parents) and at school (as rated by teachers) to answer the two main research questions:

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