

## Socio-Emotional Support for Special Needs Students: Experience Sharing

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### Abstract

Children need various abilities to navigate the world, build relationships, and control their emotions. These abilities are called social and emotional development. Socio-emotional support also has an impact on student's cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes (Pianta, Hamre and Allen, 2012); (Wang and Degol, 2016). The California Department of Education (2019) notes that "there is a growing body of research proving that social and emotional support is fundamental to academic success and must be woven into the work of every teacher in every classroom."

Students with special needs often have challenges with both self-regulation and demonstrating positive socialisation. As a result, students with special needs often display behaviours that are atypical for socialisation, resulting in various forms of consequences ranging from difficulty building and maintaining friendships to violent acts of aggression that result in formal school consequences.

This paper explores the critical importance of providing socio-emotional support for students with special needs. It expands upon various experiences from personal life and school settings and highlights the role of socio-emotional support in transforming the lives of children with special needs.

Later, some light is put on how such support can be provided in schools through various strategies adopted by the stakeholders (parents, educators, policymakers, counsellors, and special educators). Additionally, the paper examines the challenges and barriers that may impede the effective implementation of socio-emotional support initiatives, such as resource constraints, lack of training of educators and stigma surrounding special needs.

**Keywords:** *Psychological needs, Socialisation skills, Stakeholders of education, and Inclusion*

### Introduction

Students with special needs refer to individuals who require additional support or accommodations to access education and participate fully in learning activities due to a variety of physical, cognitive, emotional and developmental challenges.

These challenges may include learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), physical disabilities, sensory impairments, speech or language disorders, emotional or behavioural disorders, and other health impairments.

#### *Specific Learning Disability*

The DSM-5 considers SLD a type of Neurodevelopmental Disorder that impedes the ability to learn or use specific academic skills

(e.g., reading, writing, or arithmetic), which are the foundation for other academic learning.

#### *Sensory Processing Disorders*

Sensory integration disorders are conditions that affect the way the brain processes sensory information from the environment. Individuals with sensory disorders may have difficulty interpreting and responding to sensory stimuli, such as sounds, sights, textures, tastes, and smells. These difficulties can impact various aspects of daily life, including social interactions, academic performance, and emotional well-being. Common types of Sensory Processing Disorders are:

#### *Autism Spectrum Disorder*

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as well as restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities.

### ***Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder***

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a disorder that manifests in childhood with symptoms of hyperactivity, impulsivity, and/or inattention. The symptoms affect cognitive, academic, behavioural, emotional, and social functioning.

### ***Socio-emotional development***

Socio-emotional development in child psychology refers to the growth and maturation of a child's social and emotional skills, abilities, and understanding from infancy through adolescence.

Socio-emotional development encompasses various aspects of social interactions, emotional regulation, self-awareness, empathy, and relationships with others. It plays a crucial role in shaping a child's overall well-being, behaviour, and relationships and lays the foundation for their social and emotional competence in adulthood.

### ***Emotional support***

Emotional support refers to the provision of understanding, empathy, encouragement, and comfort to individuals who are experiencing emotional distress, challenges, or difficulties. It involves offering nonjudgmental listening, validation of feelings, and expressions of care and concern to help alleviate emotional burdens and promote well-being.

By providing emotional support to other people, you offer them reassurance, acceptance, encouragement, and care, making them feel valued and important (Burleson, 2003).

Social Support can come from many sources, such as family, friends, neighbours, coworkers, organisations, religious or spiritual communities,

etc., that help individuals cope with stress, adversity, or challenging life circumstances.

It plays a crucial role in promoting resilience, coping skills, psychological well-being, and overall quality of life.

The need for socio-emotional support for students with special needs increases because they already face a lot of discrimination and neglect due to their limitations. Children with special needs may feel neglected, frustrated, anxious, embarrassed, sad and angry.

This negative spiral leads to suppressed emotions, physical distress and avoidance, which lands them in severe psychological distress.

### **Theories**

Several social theories contribute to our understanding of child development, emphasising the role of social interactions, relationships, and cultural contexts in shaping children's growth and behaviour. Here are some key social theories of child development:

#### **Social Theories**

Erikson's psychosocial theory emphasises the importance of successfully resolving each stage's developmental task in order to achieve psychological well-being and a sense of personal fulfilment.

It highlights the interplay between individual development and social context, cultural influences, and interpersonal relationships in shaping human identity, relationships, and life experiences.

Especially when it comes to students with special needs already lack academic performance, which is one of the main factors why they are never acknowledged or appreciated, which further exacerbates their difficulties in academic settings. This cycle can have significant negative impacts on their self-esteem, motivation, and overall well-being. However, it's important to recognise that academic performance is just one aspect of a student's abilities and potential. Students with special needs often have unique strengths, talents, and interests that may not be adequately

recognised or appreciated within traditional academic frameworks.

### **Social Learning Theory - Albert Bandura**

According to Bandura's social learning theory, learning occurs through observations and interactions with other people. Essentially, people learn by watching others and then imitating their actions. The theory emphasises the importance of observational learning, self-efficacy beliefs, and the reciprocal interaction between individual characteristics, behaviour, and the environment. When applied to children with special needs, Bandura's theory offers insights into understanding how they perceive themselves, learn new skills, and interact with their surroundings.

Adults play a crucial role in the lives of students with special needs, both in understanding their needs and in modelling supportive behaviour for others. Empathy is essential for displaying helpful behaviour so that others can also see and learn from it.

For example- If a teacher in a classroom is not giving equal opportunity of participation to a child with autism in the class, the other students are going to imitate and not include their classmate with disability in even daily conversations. This will trap the child with a disability in the downward spiral of distress.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow's theory can be applied to understand social development within the context of interpersonal relationships and societal interactions. It highlights the importance of social needs, interpersonal relationships, and social contributions to human development and well-being. Fulfilling social needs fosters a sense of belonging, acceptance, and connectedness while achieving esteem and self-actualisation. This involves navigating social interactions, gaining recognition, and making meaningful contributions within social contexts.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be applied to children with special needs, who may have different needs and developmental stages from those of typically developing children.

Emotional support is a multifaceted concept that draws upon various theories and frameworks from psychology, sociology, and interpersonal communication. Here are several theories that underpin our understanding of emotional support.

**Attachment Theory:** Developed by John Bowlby, attachment theory explores the dynamics of emotional bonds between individuals, particularly between infants and caregivers. It emphasises the significance of secure attachment relationships in fostering emotional security, regulating distress, and promoting healthy development across the lifespan. Secure attachments serve as a foundation for seeking and providing emotional support in later relationships.

**Cognitive-Transactional Model of Stress and Coping:** Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman proposed this model, which elucidates the cognitive appraisal processes involved in stress and coping. It suggests that individuals evaluate stressors based on their perceived threat and their perceived ability to cope. Emotional support functions as a coping resource by influencing perceptions of stress, enhancing coping efficacy, and buffering the impact of stressors on psychological well-being.

**Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis:** This hypothesis proposes that empathic concern for others can motivate altruistic behaviour aimed at alleviating their distress. Empathy involves the ability to understand and share the emotional experiences of others, fostering compassion and a desire to provide emotional support without the expectation of personal gain. Altruistic acts of emotional support contribute to the enhancement of interpersonal connections and the promotion of collective well-being.

These theories offer valuable insights into the nature, functions, and dynamics of emotional support within interpersonal relationships and social networks. By understanding the underlying mechanisms and processes involved, we can cultivate more effective strategies for providing and receiving emotional support in diverse contexts.

## Review of Literature

Hapke, L. (2015), in his study on Social Support networks among children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, examined multiple facets of social support, focusing on observed interactions and first-hand perceptions of middle school students with IDD.

It was found that subjective and objective measures of quality of life were significantly lower for children with disabilities compared to their peers. Still, their parents' measurements were only slightly lower than global averages. This reiterates the importance of involving the clients in the conversation, especially if they are children.

Miller Sherman, A. (2022), in his study, investigated the role of theatre in improving social support in children with autism or learning disabilities. He reported that the theatre class played a major role in supporting their reading and comprehension, self-esteem, social skills, collaboration, self-expression and ability to engage in creative play.

Sharma, R. (2017), in her study on Resilience and Social Support among college students with disabilities, investigated the role of social support (mainly parents, peer, and partner support) on the academic performance of students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education.

Their study's results indicated that although social support can significantly improve the academic success of college students with disabilities, the type of social support reported by students is most important.

Rahmi, I. (2021), in her study on the role of perceived social support in the social skills of students with special needs, states that parental involvement is positively correlated with these skills. Similarly, Bennett and Hay (2007) also found that healthy family relationships lead to the greater development of children's social skills.

Riley et al. (2017) state that children who get emotional support and autonomy show increased

social skills, especially related to self-control. This finding is important for a family with a special needs child because even though their children become college students, they still need to increase their social skills, and family is one of the most important supporters for college students with special needs to learn and improve their social skills. Families with special needs children can provide emotional support by showing empathy, care, and concern toward children to give them a feeling of comfort, peace, and being loved. This form of support makes children feel valued, accepted and cared for.

A study by Hasan and Handayani (2014) stated that peer social support has a significant correlation with social adjustment in inclusive education settings. This finding is important for counsellors and educational practitioners in schools that provide education for students with special needs. Schools can arrange peer-mediated social skills training programs for students with special needs as training with peers makes students with special needs feel fewer barriers than training with adult or older trainers (Chung et al., 2007).

A study done by Harter, S. (2012) on The construction of the self: Developmental and sociocultural foundations Self-Concept and Identity Formation investigated the development of self-concept and identity among CWSN, exploring how their perceptions of themselves and their disabilities influence their emotional experiences. Understanding and accepting one's disability can positively impact self-esteem and emotional well-being.

Rose, C. A., Monda-Amaya, L. E., & Espelage, D. L. (2011) researched Bullying and Victimization and concluded that CWSNs are at increased risk of bullying and victimisation, which can have profound effects on their emotional health. Research has highlighted the prevalence of bullying among CWSN and the detrimental impact it can have on their self-esteem, social relationships, and overall psychological adjustment. Interventions aimed at preventing bullying and fostering inclusive



school environments are essential for promoting the emotional well-being of CWSN.

Hastings, R. P., & Beck, A. (2004) study on Stress intervention for parents of children with intellectual disabilities revolved around Parental Support and Coping Strategies.

The research derived that Parents play a crucial role in supporting the emotional needs of CWSN. Studies have explored parental coping strategies, stressors, and experiences of raising a child with special needs. Positive parental involvement, emotional support, and access to resources and services are associated with better emotional outcomes for CWSN.

Raver, C C. (2011) emphasised Educational Interventions and Emotional Regulation: Educational interventions that focus on promoting emotional regulation skills and socio-emotional learning can benefit CWSN. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions, social skills training, and cognitive-behavioural strategies in enhancing emotional self-regulation and coping abilities among CWSNs.

Morningstar, M. E.(2013), in his study “Beyond the schoolhouse doors: The impact of transition on families of young children with disabilities,” discussed how Transition periods, such as moving from early intervention to school settings or transitioning to adulthood, can be particularly challenging for CWSN. Studies have explored the emotional experiences and support needs of CWSN during these transitions, highlighting the importance of continuity of care, individualised planning, and collaborative support systems.

Overall, research on the socio-emotional needs of CWSN underscores the importance of adopting a holistic, person-centred approach that recognises their unique strengths, challenges, and identities. By addressing social, familial, educational, and environmental factors, we can create supportive and inclusive environments that promote their emotional well-being and resilience.

## Discussion

In an increasingly fast-changing, complex and diverse world, social and emotional skills are becoming ever more important.

Social and emotional skills influence how well people adjust to their environment and how much they achieve in their lives. The development of these skills is important for the well-being of individuals and society as a whole.

When children are diagnosed with a disability, people naturally worry about how it will affect their school or academic performance. What they often do not think about is how having a disability may affect the child emotionally or socially. This is not to say that every child becomes frustrated, sad, angry, anxious or stressed, but it is common for children to go through a phase of emotional struggle. (Ehmke, 2016)

Wendelborg and Kvello (2010) found that the more severe a disability or impairment is, the lower the child's perceptions of social acceptance and peer intimacy are; this may be due to many factors, including isolation from typically developing peers during school, less participation in after school activities, and marginalisation of children with disabilities due to their peers having negative stigmatisms of disabilities (Bellanca, & Pote, 2013; Mpofu, 2003; Mundhenke et al., 2010; Putnam, Markovchick, Johnson, & Johnson, 1996).

Providing socio-emotional support for children with special needs involves collaboration among various stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school administrators, support staff, therapists, and community members. Each stakeholder plays a unique role in creating supportive environments and addressing the socio-emotional needs of these children. This is why it is so vital for all of them to be aware of the signs of a child who is struggling emotionally or socially.

Role of different stakeholders in providing socio-emotional support to students with special needs:

### *Parents and Caregivers*

- Parents and other primary carers exert the strongest influence on children's social and

emotional development because they provide the most stable interactions.

- Advocating for their child's socio-emotional needs within the school and community.
- Providing a supportive and nurturing home environment that promotes emotional well-being.
- Collaborating with educators and professionals to develop and implement effective support plans.
- Participating in training and workshops to enhance their understanding of their child's needs and how to support them.

### **Teachers**

- Schools are communities, 'political entities' in which children and young people learn how to become part of society (Alexander, 2013, p. 3). Schools are also one of the few shared social institutions that can create a sense of belonging or exclusion.
- Teachers who work with children with disabilities should focus on helping them foster positive relationships with peers and others in their community. This will strengthen their social support network and help buffer against some of the negative effects of perceiving a low amount of social support (Migerode et al., 2012; Mpofu, 2003; Wendelborg & Kvello, 2010).
- Creating inclusive and supportive classroom environments that accommodate diverse learning styles and needs.
- Implementing evidence-based socio-emotional learning (SEL) programs and interventions.
- Providing individualised support and accommodations to help children with special needs succeed academically and socially.
- Building positive relationships with students and fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance in the classroom.

### **School Administrators**

- Establishing policies and practices that promote inclusivity, diversity, and equity within the school community.
- Providing professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their skills in supporting socio-emotional development. (In-service training and Capacity building programs)
- Collaborating with parents, teachers, and community partners to create a comprehensive support network for children with special needs.

### **Support Staff (e.g., Counselors, Psychologists)**

- Conducting assessments to identify socio-emotional strengths and needs of children with special needs.
- Providing individual and group counselling to address emotional challenges and develop coping skills.
- Collaborating with teachers and parents to develop behaviour intervention plans and strategies.
- Offering crisis intervention and support during challenging situations.

### **Therapists and Specialists**

- Specialised therapies, such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, and behavioural therapy, are provided to address specific socio-emotional needs.
- Collaborating with educators and support staff to integrate therapy goals into the child's educational plan.
- Offering training and guidance to parents and caregivers on how to support their child's socio-emotional development at home.

### **Community Members and Organizations**

Offering extracurricular activities and programs that promote social skills, peer interactions, and inclusion.

Providing resources and support services, such as respite care, support groups, and recreational opportunities, for families of children with special needs.

Advocating for inclusive policies and practices within the community to ensure access and equal opportunities for children with special needs.

Research on social support has indicated that people with strong social support networks tend to report fewer psychological, physical and social problems than those without such social support systems (Cohen and Willis, 1985; Geric, 2013; Hupcey, 1998) and (Wang & Eccles, p. 872). Yamada et al. explored the role of social support in helping mediate psychological distress and academic self-perception

Research shows that social support can have a significant effect on a child's self-esteem and that in adolescence, teenagers rely more heavily on their peers for emotional support and begin to distance themselves from their parents (del Valle et al., 2010; LaBarbera, 2008; Martínez et al., 2011; Popliger et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2014). Because of this, being able to create strong relationships with peers is crucial for healthy development, but it is often harder for children with disabilities to foster friendships compared to their typically developing peers for a variety of reasons.

Some key strategies and approaches to providing socio-emotional support for these children:

- Create a Nurturing Environment where children feel valued, accepted, and respected for who they are. Create spaces that are conducive to emotional expression and provide opportunities for children to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings.
- Build Positive Relationships by showing empathy, warmth, and understanding. Listen to their concerns, validate their emotions, and offer encouragement and support. Building strong connections with trusted adults can help children feel secure and develop a sense of trust and attachment.
- Elledge et al. (2016) explored the protective role of teacher-student relationships in grade school. They discovered such a relationship holds the potential to mitigate the negative effects of peer victimisation and social risk among students.

- Encourage Emotional Expression, whether through verbal communication, art, music, or play. Help them identify and label their feelings, and teach them coping strategies to manage strong emotions effectively. Validate their experiences and provide reassurance.
- Teach Coping Skills to manage stress, anxiety, and frustration. This may include deep breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, relaxation techniques, or positive self-talk. Help children develop a toolbox of coping strategies they can use when they encounter challenging situations.
- Individualised Support: Recognize that each child with special needs is unique and may require individualised support based on their strengths, challenges, and preferences. Tailor emotional support strategies to meet each child's specific needs, taking into account their developmental level, communication abilities, and sensory sensitivities.
- Involve Families: Collaborate with families and caregivers to provide consistent and coordinated emotional support for children with special needs. Keep open lines of communication, share information about the child's emotional well-being and progress, and involve families in decision-making processes related to emotional support and interventions.
- Promote Self-Esteem and Resilience: Encourage children to develop a positive self-concept, self-esteem, and resilience in the face of challenges. Celebrate their strengths, accomplishments, and efforts, and provide opportunities for them to experience success and build confidence. Help children develop a growth mindset and a sense of optimism about their abilities and potential.
- Seek Professional Support When Needed: Recognize when additional support from mental health professionals, counsellors, or therapists is needed. Consult with specialists who are experts in supporting children with special needs and provide referrals for specialised services or interventions as necessary.

- It is necessary to provide a nurturing and supportive environment for students with special needs because:
- Promotes Well-Being: It helps them feel safe, valued, and respected, which are essential for their emotional and psychological health.
- Facilitates Learning: A supportive environment enhances the learning experience for students with special needs by reducing stress, anxiety, and distractions. When students feel supported, they are more likely to engage in learning activities, ask questions, and take risks.
- Boosts Self-Esteem: Positive feedback, encouragement, and recognition of their efforts and achievements boost their self-esteem and confidence.
- Encourages Independence: Supportive environments empower students with special needs to develop independence, self-advocacy skills, and self-determination. When students feel supported, they are more likely to take initiative, set goals, and advocate for their needs.
- Enhances Social Skills: Nurturing environments provide opportunities for students with special needs to develop social skills, build relationships, and participate in social activities. Positive peer interactions, cooperative learning experiences, and inclusive practices promote social inclusion and acceptance.
- Reduces Stigma and Discrimination by promoting acceptance, empathy, and understanding; they create a culture of inclusivity and respect within schools and communities.
- Supports Holistic Development: Nurturing environments support the holistic development of students with special needs, addressing their academic, social, emotional, and physical needs. They recognise the importance of addressing the whole child and providing comprehensive support to foster growth and well-being.
- Fosters Resilience: A nurturing and supportive environment helps students with special needs

develop resilience, coping skills, and adaptive strategies to navigate challenges and setbacks. It provides a foundation of support that helps them persevere and thrive in the face of adversity.

### Experience Sharing

As an educator, I've had the privilege of witnessing the transformative power of socio-emotional support for students with special needs. One memorable experience involved a student named Alex, who struggled with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and faced significant social and emotional barriers in the classroom.

Understanding Alex's unique needs was paramount. I collaborated closely with his parents, therapists, and other professionals to develop a comprehensive support plan. We recognised that Alex thrived in structured environments but found social interactions overwhelming. Thus, we implemented a range of strategies to help him navigate social situations and regulate his emotions.

Firstly, we incorporated social stories and visual schedules into his daily routine, providing predictability and reducing anxiety. These tools helped Alex understand social cues and anticipate changes, empowering him to engage more confidently with his peers. Additionally, we established a buddy system, pairing Alex with a supportive classmate who served as a peer mentor. This arrangement encouraged positive social interactions and fostered empathy and understanding among his peers.

Moreover, mindfulness exercises became an integral part of our classroom routine. Through guided breathing exercises and relaxation techniques, Alex learned to recognise and manage his emotions more effectively. These practices not only enhanced his emotional regulation skills but also promoted a sense of calm and focus, creating a conducive learning environment for all students.

Beyond individualised interventions, creating an inclusive classroom culture was paramount. We celebrated diversity, promoted kindness, and emphasised the value of empathy and acceptance. Through collaborative projects and



group activities, students learned to appreciate each other's differences and unconditionally support one another.

Over time, I witnessed remarkable growth in Alex's socio-emotional well-being. He became more confident in social settings, forged meaningful connections with his peers, and demonstrated increased resilience in the face of challenges. Seeing his progress reinforced the importance of holistic support and reaffirmed my commitment to advocating for the socio-emotional needs of students with special needs.

In conclusion, providing socio-emotional support for students with special needs is not just about implementing strategies; it's about fostering a culture of empathy, understanding, and inclusion. By recognising and embracing each student's unique strengths and challenges, we can create environments where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential.

This narrative reflects the significance of individualised support, collaborative partnerships, and inclusive practices in promoting socio-emotional well-being for students with special needs. It underscores the transformative impact of empathy, understanding, and acceptance in creating nurturing learning environments where every student can thrive.

Several challenges and barriers can impede the effective implementation of socio-emotional support initiatives for children with special needs. Some of these challenges include:

**Resource Constraints:** Limited financial resources, staffing shortages, and inadequate infrastructure can hinder the implementation of socio-emotional support initiatives. Schools and organisations may lack the funding needed to provide sufficient staff, training, materials, and programs to support the socio-emotional needs of children with special needs.

**Lack of Training of Educators:** Many educators may not have the necessary training or professional development to support the socio-emotional needs of children with special needs effectively. This lack of training can result in

ineffective or inconsistent implementation of support strategies, leading to suboptimal student outcomes.

**Stigma Surrounding Special Needs:** Negative attitudes, stereotypes, and misconceptions about children with special needs can contribute to stigma and discrimination within schools and communities. Stigma can create barriers to accessing support services, limit opportunities for social inclusion, and negatively impact the self-esteem and well-being of children with special needs.

**Limited Awareness and Understanding:** Educators, parents, and the broader community may lack awareness and understanding of the socio-emotional needs of children with special needs. This lack of awareness can lead to misconceptions, misunderstandings, and inadequate support for these children.

**Complexity of Needs:** Children with special needs often have complex socio-emotional needs that require comprehensive and individualised support. Addressing these needs may require collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including educators, therapists, healthcare providers, and families, which can be challenging to coordinate and implement effectively.

**Inadequate Collaboration and Communication:** Lack of coordination between educators, parents, therapists, and support staff can result in fragmented services, inconsistent support, and gaps in care for children with special needs.

**Cultural and Linguistic Barriers:** Cultural norms, beliefs, and practices may influence perceptions of disability and attitudes towards seeking support, impacting the implementation of support initiatives.

**Policy and Systemic Challenges:** Policy barriers, regulatory constraints, and systemic issues within educational and healthcare systems can impede the effective implementation of socio-emotional support initiatives for children with special needs. Inadequate policies, funding mechanisms, and service delivery models may limit access to timely and appropriate support services.

In conclusion, socio-emotional support is paramount for the holistic development of students with special needs in India. By integrating theoretical frameworks with practical strategies and real-life examples, educators, caregivers, and policymakers can create

inclusive environments that empower these students to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. Investing in socio-emotional support enhances the quality of education and fosters a more inclusive and compassionate society.

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