

ESRI Research Bulletin

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Educational engagement among children with special needs in mainstream schools

* Joanne Banks and Selina McCoy

In Ireland there have been dramatic changes in special educational needs policy over the last ten years. The introduction of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act in 2004 made a commitment to inclusive education and has led to greater numbers of children being educated in mainstream settings. This trend reflected an increasing policy emphasis on inclusive education internationally. Concerns have been raised, however, about the practical implications of mainstreaming for student wellbeing, educational engagement and successful learning.

The current budget for special education is €1.3 billion and accounts for approximately 15% of the entire budget of the Department of Education and Skills. Since 2004, significant changes have taken place in special needs provision, including an increase in the number of students with special needs attending mainstream schools, the trebling in the numbers of special needs assistants and the introduction of a new special education funding model to schools. Despite significant investment, little is known about the effectiveness of mainstreaming policy in terms of students' social integration and their wider engagement in school. Recent research by Selina McCoy and Joanne Banks uses *Growing Up in Ireland* data on nine-year-old children to examine the academic and social experiences for children with special needs in mainstream education. The research is based on a sample of 8,578 nine-year-old children, 14% of whom were identified by their teachers as having one or more category of special need (including physical or sensory disability; speech impairment, learning disability (e.g. mild general learning disability, specific learning disability), an emotional behavioural difficulty (EBD, e.g. attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, attention deficit disorder), or multiple disabilities). This unique data source provides, for the first time, a comparison between children with special needs in mainstream and their non-disabled peers.

Overall the research shows that children with and without special needs are broadly positive about school. The findings, however, highlight emerging differences between the two groups in that children with special needs like school less than their peers without special needs. Just 7% of Irish 9-year-olds report that they 'never like school' compared to almost 12% of children identified with some

type of special need and these differences remain strong when other relevant factors such as social background are held constant. School experiences vary, however, according to the type of need or disability that students have. The proportion reporting that they never like school is higher among children with learning difficulties (13%) those with EBD (14%) and those with multiple needs (13%). Children with physical or sensory disabilities or those with speech impairments, however, are no more likely to dislike school than children with no reported special need. This suggests that children with learning disabilities face an additional barrier in integrating into school life. In line with previous research on boys in school more generally, findings show that boys with special needs are more likely than girls with special needs to dislike school. Moreover, children with special needs from semi- and unskilled social class backgrounds are also more likely to be disengaged from school.

The research sought to understand why children with special needs had more negative attitudes towards school and found that it is closely associated with academic engagement and interactions with teachers and peers. Academic engagement is measured by teachers' reports of how often the child does not complete homework and the children's own reports of whether they liked two core subjects – maths and reading. Children who regularly do not complete their homework and report never liking maths and never liking reading are much more likely to dislike school. Positive relations with teachers and peers are found to enhance children's enjoyment of school; children who report always liking their teacher and those who see themselves as popular with their classmates are much more likely to report liking school.

For students with special needs, it was found that low levels of academic engagement and poorer teacher and peer relations play a central role in explaining their low levels of school engagement. Once these factors were taken into account there was no further difference between children with and without SEN in school engagement. The findings highlight some of the practical implications of inclusive education strategies such as those outlined in EPSEN (2004) and emphasise how inclusion cannot simply be a change in location from special to mainstream schools but something which involves a broader examination of the current school curriculum, methods of teaching and school climate. In policy terms, this research shows that despite the inclusive education strategy incorporated within the primary curriculum, its academic orientation plays a central role in shaping how children with special needs experience school.

McCoy, S. and J. Banks, 2012. "Simply academic? Why children special educational needs don't like school", *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 81-97. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2011.640487>