

# Social Participation of Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Education

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Chapter 1

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**Student voices on social exclusion in general primary schools**

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# Student voices on social exclusion in general primary schools

R. R. de Leeuw, A. A. de Boer and A. E. M. G. Minnaert

## ABSTRACT

Advocates of inclusive education argue that the social inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) increases when they are educated with typically developing peers. However, research indicates that this is not apparent for all students with SEN. Students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) are often socially excluded. To understand the situation of these students, their voices should be heard. The aim of the current explorative study was to gain insight into: (1) the experiences of students with SEBD regarding victimisation and social exclusion, and (2) the approaches they applied and preferred resolving social problems. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 socially excluded students from grades 5 and 6, attending general ( $N = 6$ ) and segregated special ( $N = 21$ ) primary education. The participants were prompted to talk about their own experiences using hypothetical scenarios. The interviews were analysed using a multi-grounded theory approach. The results show that students preferred different approaches to resolving these social problems than the applied approaches. They would have liked to have seen their peers and teachers to show more initiative. In line with these results, the need to listen to the students' voices are emphasised.

## Introduction

The trend for more inclusive education for students with special educational needs (SEN) in general education has meant that such students can now enrol at general schools in their own neighbourhoods. For many European countries, this inclusive education trend started with the signing of agreements such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) and the UNCRRPD of 2006. These statements stress that the educational and social needs of all students should be met, which is clearly stated in Article 24 UNCRRPD (2006): 'effective individualised support measures are provided in environments that maximise academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion'. The Netherlands is one of the 174 countries which has signed and ratified the UNCRRPD, which recommends that education policies should aim to support students with SEN as appropriately as possible in regular education. The active participants in the development of inclusive education are policy-makers, school boards, teachers and parents, who therefore influence the students' everyday

lives (Woodhead and Faulkner 2000). This practice does not accord with the advice of Rose and Shevlin (2004), who advocate that implementations, interventions and future developments have a better chance of being effective if students' voices are listened to, because the needs and perspectives of the students will be included in the development of their education. This explorative study aims to gain better understanding of experiences of socially excluded primary school students with social and emotional problems and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), and to uncover which social problem-solving approaches these students use and prefer to resolve social exclusion.

Advocates of inclusive education argue that the development and potential of students with SEN improve when they are educated with typically developing (TD) peers because they are afforded more social opportunities. Inclusive education should result in more reciprocal relationships and interactions, greater acceptance and positive self-perceptions among students with SEN and their TD peers (Koster et al. 2009). However, empirical findings indicate that some students with SEN experience difficulties building positive relationships, or face rejection when trying to interact with TD peers, resulting in victimisation and social exclusion (Ladd et al. 2012; Newcomb, Bukowski, and Pattee 1993; Ruijs, Peetsma, and van der Veen 2010). In particular, students with SEBD do not automatically benefit from the social opportunities offered by inclusive education (Chamberlain, Kasari, and Rotheram-Fuller 2007; Guralnick et al. 2007; de Monchy, Pijl, and Zandberg 2004). Students with SEBD tend to report higher rates of social exclusion in terms of fewer friendships and higher rates of loneliness and victimisation (Adderley et al. 2015). Socially excluded students are at higher risk of experiencing increased negative academic and social outcomes, such as early school dropout, criminality and depression (Kauffman and Landrum 2012; Ruijs, Peetsma, and van der Veen 2010; Thompson and Morris 2016). These negative outcomes are diametrically opposed to the intended aims of inclusive education and, as a consequence, act to prevent inclusion from working efficaciously.

The classification of students as having social, emotional problems and behavioural difficulties, either from a clinical diagnosis or from receiving extra educational support, is based on a combination of student behaviours, including socially less accepted approaches to resolving social problems (American Psychiatric Association 2013; Thompson and Morris 2016). In line with the Dutch policy called 'Education that fits' (free translation), the current study used the following operational definition for SEBD: the student has received a formal diagnosis or has been indicated by teachers or the school team as having social, emotional or behavioural difficulties and is receiving extra educational support as a result (*Wet Passend Onderwijs* 2012). Both the internationally accepted classification of students as having SEBD and the Dutch definition imply that SEBD will have a negative impact on students' social inclusion because of their characteristics. This negative impact might explain the lower levels of social inclusion of students with SEBD in the West compared to their peers with SEN (Guralnick et al. 2007). Students with SEBD apply more frequently social problem-solving approaches such as physical and verbal aggression or withdrawal from social situations (Gumpel and Sutherland 2010; Kauffman and Landrum 2012; Newcomb, Bukowski, and Pattee 1993; Rose and Asher 1999). These approaches to resolving social problems are less readily accepted by their TD peers (Newcomb, Bukowski, and Pattee 1993) and are known to affect their relationships with TD peers and teachers negatively (American Psychiatric Association 2013; Cooper and Cefai 2013; Kauffman and Landrum 2012; Newcomb, Bukowski, and Pattee 1993; Thomas 2013). Little is known about what students with SEBD themselves

think about the social problem-solving approaches they apply and whether these students prefer other social problem-solving approaches.

One explanation for this knowledge gap is that the students' voices are often neglected in studies on improving their social inclusion, regardless of whether or not they have SEBD. For example, the measurement of student social inclusion is commonly conducted using teacher reports (e.g. Bauminger and Kasari 2000) or sociometric data (e.g. Frostad and Pijl 2007). Avramidis and colleagues (2017) have pointed out some methodological inconsistencies when assessing social participation. Sociometric data alone only depicts a student's social participation within the classroom, and excludes friendships outside the classroom (Avramidis et al. 2017). Another critical point is that teacher and peer reports are indirect measurements and rarely consider the perspective or voice of the excluded students. Article 12 UNCRC (UNESCO 1994) states that students have the right to express their views on every matter which affects them (Unicef 1989). Although there is an increasing trend towards listening to student voices (e.g. Herz and Haertel 2016), research specifically including students with SEBD and addressing their perspectives on social exclusion continues to be rare (Cefai and Cooper 2010; Michael and Frederickson 2013). Moreover, despite acknowledging that the views of students with SEBD are important, that they are experts on their own situation and can contribute to educational initiatives, policies and research which influence their education (Michael and Frederickson 2013; Rose and Asher 2004; Woodhead and Faulkner 2000), there is a lack of knowledge about the perspectives of primary school students with SEBD. Studies which do include the voices of young students with SEBD focus on the students' perspectives on the impact of inclusive education (Adderley et al. 2015; Mowat 2015) or on the consequences of victimisation due to bullying (Brown Hajdukova, Hornby, and Cushman 2016; Messiou 2012), but have not yet considered what the students think about how social inclusion could be realised in the classroom.

The actions and responses of the TD peers and teachers of students with SEBD should also be taken into account, in addition to the students' own characteristics and approaches to resolving social problems. Research has indicated that TD peers and teachers have generally negative attitudes towards students with SEBD (De Boer et al. 2012a). The attitudes of TD students are found to play a role in the social acceptance of students with SEBD (De Boer et al. 2012b). The teachers' negative attitudes might therefore influence how peers respond to students with SEBD (Hendrickx et al. 2016; Runions 2014). If a teacher responds negatively to the disruptive behaviour of an student with SEBD, their TD peers might make negative inferences about that student. It is therefore necessary to consider all the actors' (peers and teachers) approaches to resolving social problems when examining and improving social inclusion.

To understand the needs of students with SEBD more adequately, it is important to listen to their experiences and to understand their approaches to resolving social problems. As mentioned above, little attention has been paid to date to the students' voices, leaving a number of issues needing exploration. Neither the experiences of primary school students with SEBD who have been socially excluded, nor the approaches to social problems that are applied and preferred by students with SEBD have been examined thoroughly. The current explorative study aims to fill this knowledge gap by exploring: (1) the experiences of socially excluded primary school students with SEBD, and (2) the social problem-solving approaches are applied and preferred by these students.

## **Method**

### ***Design***

As we sought to explore and listen to the students' voices, we used semi-structured interviews. The following issues were taken into account in the design of these interviews: (1) participants must fully understand what taking part in a study means, (2) the participants themselves must provide active consent, and (3) the study design must include techniques and methods which reflect the students' mental ages, to facilitate optimal conversation and student engagement (Charlop-Christy et al. 2002; Kirk 2007; Kortessluoma, Hentinen, and Nikkonen 2003; Messiou 2012; Rose and Asher 2004).

### ***Sampling procedure***

#### ***Sampling***

The students included in this study either attended general primary education or segregated special primary education. Participant recruitment was conducted using two different convenience-based processes. All the parents or legal guardians of the participants were asked to provide their consent and to complete a background questionnaire about their child. Approval from the university ethics committee was obtained prior to data collection.

The participants attending general schools were recruited through the authors' personal networks and through a social media campaign targeting parents and teachers of students with SEBD. The following inclusion criteria were applied:

- The student's social inclusion scored low, neglected/ignored or negative, based on sociometric data (sociograms)
- The student received additional support for social, emotional or behavioural difficulties in the classroom.

Participants attending segregated special schools were recruited through a school organisation specialised in special education for students with SEBD. Different inclusion criteria were used for these participants than for the students in general education, as sociometric data was not available for the period the students attended general education schools. Instead, the following inclusion criteria were used:

- The student has previously attended general education schools
- The student was socially excluded while in general education (confirmed by parents).

### ***Participants***

Twenty-eight students participated in this study, from grades 5 and 6 (age range 10 to 13 years). The age range is greater than expected for grades 5 and 6 because some participants were required to repeat one or two school years. As the inclusion criteria specified a low social inclusion score, we expected that all participants would be able to share some experience of social exclusion from their time in general education. During the interviews one participant indicated they had no experience of either victimisation or social exclusion, seven participants had no experience of victimisation and four participants indicated that they had not experienced social exclusion. Based on the inclusion criteria of known low

levels of social inclusion in the general classroom and therefore having experience of social exclusion, we expected that all participants could share their experiences with social exclusion in the regular classroom (Damon and Hart 1982). We excluded the interview of the participant with no experience of either type of social exclusion, as there were no answers that could be included in the analysis. Where the students had no experience of victimisation or social exclusion and could not indicate which approach they would have preferred in those situations, their answers were excluded from further analysis.

The educational distribution of the final sample ( $N = 28$ ) was: segregated special primary education ( $n = 21$ ) and general primary education ( $n = 7$ ). Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of SEBD.

### **Instrument**

*Interview protocol:* The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol designed for the current study. The interview protocol included predetermined questions and instructions, but enabled flexibility in question order and allowed for follow-up on interesting answers. To start a conversation, we began each topic (victimisation and social exclusion from play) with a hypothetical scenario (Visser et al. 2009). The participants were then invited to discuss their own experiences. To make the scenarios more comprehensive for students with indications of attention difficulties or autism spectrum disorder, we used drawings to support the hypothetical scenario (Charlop-Christy et al. 2002). Another reason to use supporting drawings is that drawings can stimulate the recollection of an experience (Salmon 2001). Our drawings were sourced from a moral development study for students attending primary education (Jansma et al. in press, Appendix 1). The scenarios and drawings reflected the gender and social-emotional difficulties experienced by the student. Each hypothetical scenario was followed by questions about the student's own experiences. The students were asked to provide details of the experience of being victimised or socially excluded, including details of how often this was done, what happened, where, and how severe they considered the victimisation or social exclusion. In addition, the students were asked which approaches they, their peers and their teachers had taken to resolve social problems, which approaches they preferred and which approach they thought to be best. Students were asked to explain who initiated the approach to resolve the problem. See Table 2 for an overview of the interview protocol.

The interview protocol was piloted with five TD students (not included in the participant sample) which resulted in the adjustment of the wording of a few of the questions (e.g. the question about the best approach vs. the most preferred or liked approach). We did not pilot the protocol using students with SEBD because of the difficulty with recruiting such students for the study. A reason for this difficulty in recruitment is that it is common for parents of

**Table 1.** Distribution SEBD.

	Special education		General education	
	Boys ( $n = 17$ )	Girls ( $n = 4$ )	Boys ( $n = 5$ )	Girls ( $n = 1$ )
AD(H)D	4	2	2	1
ASS	9	2	2	
ODD	2			
Anxiety/extreme shyness	2		1	

**Table 2.** Overview of questions from interview protocol.

	<p>Interview protocol: Friends in Class</p> <p><i>Hypothetical scenario</i></p> <p><i>Introductory story</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gender and social, emotional difficulty related to victimisation scenario</li></ul> <p><i>Example using scenario of a boy with aggressive behaviour</i></p> <p>This drawing is about bullying. The teacher is not in the classroom. Ravi is new in the class. He has a temper and when he loses it he will throw things around the classroom. Mohammed and Nick think it's funny when Ravi gets into a temper and is punished by the teacher because throwing things in the classroom is not allowed. Mohammed tries to get Ravi angry. Mohammed says with a weird voice to Ravi: 'You are the strangest one in the classroom. Nobody is stranger than you!' The whole class laughs at Mohammed's comment and Nick gives a thumbs up to Mohammed. Ravi becomes sad and tries his best not to get angry. He feels bullied.</p> <p><i>Questions on hypothetical scenario</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What could the victim do in this situation?</li><li>• What could the teacher do?</li><li>• What could the peers do in this situation?</li><li>• What would be the best solution?</li></ul> <p><i>Have you ever been victimised/excluded at school?</i></p> <p><i>Questions on experience (if answered 'yes')</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How often have you been victimised/excluded?</li><li>• Could you describe the experience; what happened and where?</li><li>• How would you rate the severity of this experience? (rating from 1 to 4)</li></ul> <p>Aim 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What did you do to resolve the situation?</li><li>• What could you have done?</li><li>• What could the teacher have done?</li><li>• What could your peers have done in this situation?</li><li>• What would be the best solution?</li></ul>
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students with SEBD to be highly protective of their children (Falkmer et al. 2015). To check whether the interview protocol was suitable for the participant group, the first five interviews involving students with SEBD in segregated special education were asked to offer feedback on the interview protocol. They said they had enjoyed participating in the study and that the questions were clearly formulated.

### ***Interview procedure***

All interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis by the first author and six trained Master's students (the research team), except for one interview. At the request of the student, this interview was conducted in the presence of a teaching assistant. The interviewers were all trained in the use of the interview protocol and kept a log of each interview, allowing later reference to unexpected responses. Most interviews were carried out in a small, quiet room at the school. One interview was conducted at the participant's home to account for personal circumstances. All participants were rewarded with a small token of appreciation after the interview. The interviews were held between February 2015 and January 2016 and varied in length between 20 and 45 min.

Each interview started with an overview of the interview procedure and an explanation of the students' rights, their options for participation, anonymity, the possibility of stopping the interview on request and the confidentiality of their responses. All students actively consented to participating and to the interviews being recorded with a digital voice recorder. To leave the students with a positive note, each interview ended with a conversation about the meaning of friendship and why it is nice to play together. During the interviews one student indicated that he did not want to talk about being victimised because his experiences were too upsetting. However, he was determined to complete the interview and talked about his experiences of social exclusion. On this occasion, the interviewer (first author) adjusted the protocol and ended the interview with light conversation about the student's hobbies to ensure the student would leave the interview feeling positive. The taped interviews were later transcribed by the research team using the F4 software (version 6.0.3). The first author checked the transcripts for accuracy.

### ***Coding procedure and interrater reliability***

The coding of the transcripts was conducted by the first two authors using ATLAS.ti version 7.10 (Friese 2012). A multi-grounded theory approach was applied, allowing the use of a synthesis of deductive (data-driven) and inductive (theory-driven) coding (Goldkuhl and Cronholm 2010).

Two separate coding procedures were conducted to address both the study's aims. With respect to the first aim, the descriptions of the experiences were inductively coded. This inductive coding process was conducted by identifying specific units of text in the transcripts. These units of text were labelled according to information categories: what and where, and the severity and frequency of the experiences, and included a label identifying the type of experience (victimisation or social exclusion). The aspects coded were: what occurred, where it occurred, the perceived severity of the experience, and how often it occurred.

Regarding the second aim, deductive coding categories were selected and given operational definitions based on five widely accepted coping categories: (1) problem-solving



approach, (2) seeking social support, (3) withdrawing from the situation, (4) externalising behaviour, and (5) internalising behaviour (Causey and Dubow 1992; Skinner et al. 2003). In line with Causey and Dubow (1992) we acknowledge that emotions directed outwards differ from emotions directed inwards and should not be clustered into one category of emotional reaction. The five coding categories, including operational definitions, formed the initial codebook used by the first author to use the deductive codebook to code the applied and preferred social problem-solving approaches found in the transcripts. During the coding, new inductive codes were generated and added to the existing categories (e.g. codes which did not occur in the deductive codebook). In addition, as part of the inductive coding process, existing codes and descriptions within the deductive categories were amended to fit the wording of the participants.

During coding the point of saturation was reached after coding the first 17 transcripts. These were the transcripts of the students from the segregated special primary education.

The interrater reliability (IRR) of the final codebook (the combination of deductive and inductive coding) was tested on a random selection of five interviews which were independently coded by the second author and resulted in a Cohen's Kappa ( $\kappa$ ). The first  $\kappa$  was  $<0.50$ , which is not acceptable (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002). Based on iterations between the first two authors and the coded data, the codebook was restructured. For example, separate codes were given for the actor and solutions. With this revised codebook, another random selection of five interviews was then independently coded by the first two authors. The IRR was now  $\kappa = 0.92$ , which is sufficient (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002). All interviews were recoded using the renewed and final codebook by the first author.

## **Results**

### **Codebook**

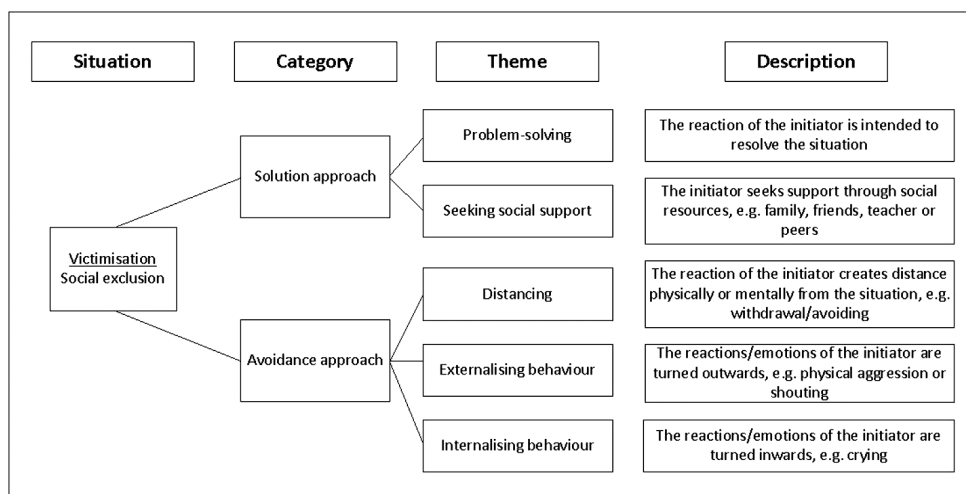
The codebook was the result of a multi-grounded theory approach (Goldkuhl and Cronholm 2010). The codebook consisted of diverse descriptive codes used to code the students' experiences (what, where, perceived severity and frequency), the initiator (teacher, peers, parent or student) and the approaches to resolve social problems. Figure 1 provides a schematic overview of the codebook used to code the applied and preferred approaches to resolve social problems. The five coping categories are hierarchically clustered into two main types: solution approaches, including problem-solving and seeking social support, and avoidance approaches including distancing and emotional reaction, separated into internalising and externalising behaviour.

### ***Research aim 1: experiences with victimisation and social exclusion***

Following analysis of the interviews, an overview emerged of the participants' experiences of victimisation and social exclusion at the general education school, including the applied and preferred approaches by the students.

#### ***Experiences of victimisation by students with SEBD***

***What occurred.*** Frequently mentioned examples of victimisation were goading the student into a fight, name calling and berating. Other experiences that the students mentioned were



**Figure 1.** Schematic overview of the hierarchical structure of the 'Social problem-solving approaches' codebook.

being laughed at, having their lunch taken away, and bullies blocking the way to or from school. Three participants said that they had experienced being victimised, but could not provide examples. One student found it too upsetting to give details about the experience.

I got bullied a lot, especially during gym time in the changing room. My classmates would get my stuff and throw it around, throwing my bag at me until I cried. (Boy, 11 year old, ADHD, general education)

**Where.** Students' experiences of victimisation occurred mostly outside the classroom and in the playground, either during the break or before or after school. On most occasions an adult was nearby, such as a school guard or teacher. This was not always the student's teacher.

**Severity.** Half the participants said that they found being victimised either seriously or very seriously unpleasant. The other half of the group said that they found the experience rather unpleasant but understood that it was in the past, or that they had accepted that it was not that severe.

I was young when I was bullied, back then I found it really painful. (Girl, 11 year old, ADHD, segregated special education)

**Occurrence.** The occurrence of victimisation varied between the participants, from 'just sometimes' to 'every week' (see Table 3 for an overview).

**Table 3.** Overview of occurrence of victimisation and social exclusion.

Occurrence	Victimising ( $n_{\text{participants}} = 20$ )	Social exclusion ( $n_{\text{participants}} = 23$ )
Sometimes	6	8
Once a week	2	1
Often	2	1
Always	5	1
Does not remember	3	6

### ***Experiences of social exclusion by students with SEBD***

***What occurred.*** Almost every example of social exclusion was linked to exclusion from play. Two participants reported that they did not have any experience of exclusion because they always played by themselves.

I have no experiences of not being able to play along. If there is another ball, I play alone with the ball next to my friends. (Girl, 12 years old, extreme shyness, segregated special education)

***Where.*** Half the participants did not go into detail about where their experiences of social exclusion occurred. For those who did, almost every experience occurred outside the classroom.

***Severity.*** In general, the participants indicated that they found the exclusion mildly unpleasant and explained that in most situations there was a legitimate reason for not joining the game. Only four participants said that they found being excluded quite severely unpleasant.

It is not so bad now, because I know now that if someone does not want to play with you, they do not want to. And if they cannot understand that by excluding someone, you hurt that person, then I do not want to play with those children. (Boy, 12 year old, autism spectrum disorder, segregated special education)

***Occurrence.*** Most participants indicated that they were sometimes excluded (see Table 3).

### ***Research aim 2: approaches to resolving social problems***

The participants were asked which approaches were applied and which approaches they preferred to resolve situations of victimisation and social exclusion. Below, the outcomes are elaborated per situation separately for the applied and preferred approaches, followed by a comparison of the applied and preferred approaches.

#### ***Victimisation***

***Approaches adopted to resolve social problems.*** Social problems were frequently resolved through 'externalising behaviour', with the student as initiator (see Table 4). Examples of 'externalising behaviour' are 'verbal or physical aggression' and 'retaliation'. 'Problem-solving' approaches were also frequently applied, with either the student or the teacher as the initiator. For example, 'I went to the teacher for support', 'the teacher confronted the bully/bullies' and 'I stood up for myself'.

***Preferred approaches to resolving social problems.*** Overall, the most preferred approaches to resolving victimisation were 'problem-solving' approaches and very diverse in nature (see Table 4). Students said that they preferred their peers to be the initiators in resolving the problem of victimisation. Examples of these preferred approaches were, 'my peers should not bully or bully less' and 'a peer/the class should stand up for me'. In terms of 'seeking social support', students see themselves as the initiator. For example, 'I should go to the teacher and ask him/her for help' and 'I should tell my mum about the bullying'. Regarding 'distancing', different examples were given in relation to dealing with victimisation. Students mentioned examples such as, 'I could walk away from the situation' and 'I should ignore the name calling,

**Table 4.** Number of applied and preferred approaches per actor, victimisation.

Initiating actor	Applied approach					Preferred approach				
	Student	Peer	Teacher	Parent	Total	Student	Peer	Teacher	Parent	Total
Problem-solving	13	6	12	5	36	4	7	4		15
Seeking social support	10		1	3	14	3	1		1	4
Distancing	10		4		14	4	1			5
Externalising	20		1	1	22	1				1
Internalising										
Total	53	6	18	9		11	9	4		

instead of calling them names or kicking them'. Although 'internalising behaviours' are some of the approaches used to resolve social problems, this was not found to be a preferred approach to resolve victimisation (see Table 4).

### ***Social exclusion***

***Applied approaches to resolve social problems.*** In relation to applied approaches, there are slight degrees of variation based on emotional responses, externalising and internalising behaviours (see Table 5). 'Problem-solving' approaches were frequently mentioned as an approach to social problems, in most cases with the teacher as initiator (e.g. 'the teacher explained in the classroom that everybody should play together' or 'the teacher said that I could also play with the ball'). Overall, however, the students themselves were the main initiators, for example, 'I go and do something else alone or with someone else' (distancing approach) and 'I asked why I could not join in' (problem-solving approach).

During the interviews, four students said that they had no experience of social exclusion. Three of the participants elaborated that this was because they chose to play alone. These responses were coded under the 'distancing' category, because the decision to play alone is also one way to prevent a social problem by avoiding the unwanted situation.

***Preferred approaches to resolving social problems.*** The most preferred approaches to resolving social exclusion involved 'distancing' and were initiated by the students. A frequently mentioned example of distancing was, 'I would go away and play somewhere else by myself'. A combination of 'distancing' and 'seeking social support' was also mentioned a couple of times, for example, 'I would go somewhere else and ask someone to play with me'. Another preferred approach to resolving social exclusion was 'problem-solving' with a peer as initiator: 'a peer stands up for me and says that everybody can play together'.

### ***Applied versus preferred approaches to resolving social problems***

#### ***Victimisation***

Table 4 shows differences between the applied and preferred approaches for situations of victimisation. Students applied multiple approaches to resolve these situations, with the students taking the main role as initiator and mostly applying externalising approaches.

There were two boys who would call me names and say that I looked like a girl. That hurt me so much that I would see a red haze and I would punch and kick them. (Boy, 13 year old, autism spectrum disorder, segregated special education)

In comparison with the preferred approaches to resolving victimisation situations, students tended to prefer their peers to play a larger role as initiators to stop the victimisation. Only one student said that he preferred to use physical aggression because this response made him feel good when he was being victimised. Other students who had displayed externalising behaviours when being victimised preferred different approaches. Some elaborated that they now know how to control themselves better, although it still sometimes goes wrong.

I know it is not good, but I prefer to hit people. A few weeks later I will think that it was bad, but at that time it is good. (Boy, 12 year old, ADHD, segregated special education)

**Table 5.** Number of applied and preferred approaches per actor, social exclusion.

Initiating actor	Applied approach					Preferred approach				
	Student	Peer	Teacher	Parent	Total	Student	Peer	Teacher	Parent	Total
Problem-solving	5	2	8	1	16	2	6	1		9
Seeking social support	2				2	5				5
Distancing	14	1			15	11				11
Externalising	1				1	1				1
Internalising	3				3					
Total	25	3	8	1		20	6	1		

Eight students mentioned that they preferred to seek social support from their teachers to resolve social problems, but that they would not do so for various reasons. Students explained that they lacked trust in their teacher's skills or that they believed they would be or had been punished after going to the teacher and asking for support.

I would like to go tell the teacher that they (the peers) would not let me play with them, but I do not. Because last time I was the one who was sent to the headmaster. (Boy, 10 year old, ADHD, segregated special education)

### ***Social exclusion***

When comparing the applied and preferred approaches to resolving social exclusion a few differences were found, see Table 5. Although some students applied 'distancing' approaches (e.g. 'I went to play alone' and 'I went somewhere else'), these students preferred their peers to be the initiators in resolving the problem ('problem-solving' approach), by 'standing up for them and inviting them to play along'.

If social exclusion was a frequent issue, students preferred to seek social support from their teacher. However, some students mentioned that this would not be a successful solution because it is no fun playing with others when it is enforced by the teacher.

It is no fun playing with the rest if the teacher has forced them to let you join the game. You know that it would not be fun anymore. (Boy, 12 year old, fear, segregated special education)

### **Conclusion**

To date, little attention has been paid to the voices of students with SEBD. This explorative study sought a better understanding of the experiences of socially excluded primary school students with SEBD in inclusive classes, and the approaches these students apply and prefer to resolve social problems such as victimisation and social exclusion.

Regarding the study's first aim, we conclude that the students' experiences of victimisation are varied, ranging from fighting to name calling, and usually occur outside the classroom in the playground. Moreover, in most cases an adult is nearby. The social exclusion experiences also usually occurred in the playground but were not as diverse as those of victimisation.

Regarding the second aim of the study, three conclusions can be drawn from the applied and preferred approaches to social problem-solving. First, in victimisation situations the participants usually resort to externalising behaviours, such as verbal or physical aggression and retaliation. Second, some students applied and preferred distancing approaches, such as playing alone as a form of self-protection to avoid situations where they might be socially excluded. Third, there is a difference between the applied and preferred social problem-solving approaches. Students are often the initiators in the approaches applied, but would prefer to see other actors, usually peers, take initiative more.

### **Discussion**

The results indicate that victimisation and social exclusion usually occurred in the playground. One explanation could be that students with SEBD do not know how to play, engage and interact with peers, leading peers to victimise or exclude these students. As a preventive

or coping mechanism, students apply 'distancing' approaches (e.g. they want to be alone or play by themselves). This is in line with a study by Kasari et al. (2011), where students with autism spectrum conditions preferred to isolate themselves or were ignored by their peers. The social inclusion of students with SEBD could thus benefit from support in learning how to play with peers during breaks. In addition, identification of victimisation and social exclusion hot spots are needed with instructions for teachers and playground supervisors to monitor these hot spots and intervene when needed (Ttofi and Farrington 2011).

A remarkable finding was that several participants said they had no experience of being victimised or socially excluded. On the basis that a low or neglected score on the sociograms was a criteria for inclusion in the study, and parents, carers and teachers confirmed a history of victimisation and social exclusion in general education classes, it was expected that all participants would have experiences to share about victimisation and social exclusion from their time attending inclusive classes. However, one participant said they had no experience of either victimisation or social exclusion, seven participants had no experiences with victimisation and four participants indicated that they did not have experiences with social exclusion. There can be a number of explanations for this phenomenon. Students may not have felt safe enough to talk about traumatic situations such as victimisation. The experiences may be less extreme than indicated by their parents and teachers (Oldenburg, Bosman, and Veenstra 2016). Their perceptions may have changed over time and therefore have changed their conception of the experience (Kirk 2007). Perhaps the students diminished the severity of their experiences as a coping strategy. In studying the transcripts we found that despite efforts by the interviewers to provide examples of victimisation and social exclusion that were different to the hypothetical situation used in the interview, the students did not change their original statements. The transcripts did not indicate signs of trust issues, and in fact the participants indulged in a lot of small talk during the interviews.

Research indicated a correlation between the type of approach applied to resolving a social problem and the social inclusion of students (Gumpel and Sutherland 2010; Kauffman and Landrum 2012; Newcomb, Bukowski, and Pattee 1993; Rose and Asher 1999). Externalising behaviour approaches to resolving social problems are less acceptable and more likely to negatively affect the individual's social position, whereas behaviours which focus on actual problem-solving are positively correlated with a positive social position (Newcomb, Bukowski, and Pattee 1993). The participants in the current study mostly applied 'distancing' approaches and 'externalising behaviours' to resolving social problems, such as victimisation and social exclusion. However, they preferred 'problem-solving' approaches. This implies that research is needed on how to help students with SEBD apply their preferred approach, the socially acceptable approach.

The reluctance of students to seek social support from their teachers raises several questions. Students indicated that they would have preferred to go to their teacher for support. However, they reported that they would not do so due to a lack of trust in the teacher-student relationship or from fear of being punished themselves. As a consequence, the students applied externalising or distancing approaches, such as physical aggression or ignoring bullies. Other studies have also found that victims do not share their experiences with their teachers (Novick and Isaacs 2010). However, the reasons given by students in those studies differed from the current study. Students felt ashamed or feared that the teacher would dismiss their story as not credible in those studies. A study by Zee, de Jong, and Koomen (2017) found that the perception of the teacher-student relationship, especially with regard



to conflicts, is most likely the result of their own behaviour and characteristics rather than the attitude of the teachers. Zee et al. (ibid) also found that the teachers' perceptions are formed from teacher and student characteristics, especially for boys and students showing externalising behaviours. This confirms the image typically held by general education primary teachers that students with SEBD are difficult to handle, based on the students' disruptive behaviour (Goei and Kleijnen 2009). This in turn often results in a vicious circle and a poor teacher-student relationship (Zee, de Jong, and Koomen 2017). Another possibility regarding teacher-student trust issues could be that the teacher does not see the student as a victim but rather as a bully (Novick and Isaacs 2010; Oldenburg, Bosman, and Veenstra 2016). What exactly leads to the lack of trust on the part of the students remains unanswered in the current study and could be a focus for future research.

## Limitations

The current study has several limitations which should be considered when interpreting the results. This study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with students attending primary schools. During the selection of participants it was found that some students had repeated one or two school years. Within the current study we did not exclude these students, as the reason for repeating a year could be explained by difficulties adapting to the school transfer. Another explanation could be some students experiencing cognitive disabilities alongside social and emotional problems and behavioural difficulties.

The design of the study and the sample (students varied in age, type of SEBD, and gender and were from both special and general schools) invites the argument that the results cannot be applied generally to the experiences of all students with SEBD. We acknowledge the limitations regarding the heterogeneity of the sample and that the results should be interpreted with some caution. It is questionable whether the same results would be found with a more homogeneous sample, therefore, a study with a larger and more homogenous sample is recommended. However, caution is also needed with a larger, homogeneous sample. A saturation point for codes was reached during the coding process in the current study. No new codes were added to the codebook after the first 17 transcripts. This indicates that enlarging the sample would probably not lead to new or different findings (Corbin, Strauss, and Strauss 2014). In addition, a homogeneous group of participants would not represent the reality of the classroom and would require focus on specific types of SEBD. Despite limitations in the heterogeneity of the sample, this study provides an overview of the experiences shared by participants during the interviews and insight into the range of needs and perceptions of students in order better to understand social inclusion and to allow students' voices to be heard.

This study used peer-nomination data to determine whether students in general education had a low or rejected social status. We also argued that students' perceptions of their own social inclusion should be given sufficient consideration when using sociometric data such as peer nominations or teacher reports (Avramidis et al. 2017; Bauminger and Kasari 2000; Frostad and Pijl 2007). The data in our study supports this argument. Although the sociometric data indicates a low level of social inclusion, the students themselves indicated having little to no experience of victimisation or social exclusion. Future research should first control for the students' own perception of social inclusion before interviewing them about their experiences of social exclusion.

## Future research

The current study interviewed students aged 10–13 years. It has been argued that interventions should be implemented as early as possible (Greer et al. 2015; Guralnick et al. 2007) to prevent long-term negative consequences. Therefore, it is imperative to know which approaches are preferred by younger students in primary schools. We suggest future research with younger students with SEBD which might capture from the outset their perceptions and preferences for approaches to resolving social problems.

The explorative nature of the current study allows us to make generalisations about the field of practice and students with SEBD. Considering the limitations of the study and the critique of sociometric data, we recommend that the current study be reconstructed on a larger scale using a sample which reflects students with SEBD in inclusive classes in terms of age, gender, type of SEBD and level of social participation (Avramidis et al. 2017). The study should also address questions arising from students with a history of social exclusion who choose to report 'no experiences' and 'trust issues' with teachers, including interviewing teachers or measuring their attitudes.

Overall, it can be concluded that the students with SEBD in this study preferred to be in classes where every actor (i.e. their peers, teachers and the students themselves) takes responsibility for their social inclusion. However, there is no preferred one-size-fits-all approach or solution to victimisation and social exclusion. This study's results indicate that students with SEBD had different experiences and preferred different approaches to resolving social problems. Therefore, it is self-evident that the students' voices (e.g. their needs and preferences) should be heard when teachers, researchers or intervention designers attempt to understand the social inclusion of students. Students have the right to be heard in situations which concern them (Unicef 1989) and we should listen to them more often to gain a better understanding of their views. Only then will we be able to understand their needs adequately.

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## Appendix 1

Example of a hypothetical victimisation scenario for boys.



Drawing by Emma Wilson (artist), sourced from the moral development study of Jansma et al. (Used with permission).