

The stability of social relations among adolescents with special educational needs (SEN) in regular schools in Norway

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The study focuses the stability of friendships of students with special educational needs in regular schools, compared to regular students. The sample consisted of 114 students (M age = 14.4); 22 students (19.3%) were identified by the school as SEN students. The results show that on average, SEN students had fewer stable friendships than their peers. Further, a significantly lower proportion of SEN students were members of stable groups compared to regular students. Friendship stability was positively predicted by gender (boys more stable than girls) and perceived friend support. Friendship stability was negatively predicted by special needs (special needs predicted lower friend stability) and peer acceptance.

Keywords: friendship; stability; students with special needs; regular schools

Introduction

In Norway almost all students, regardless of educational needs, attend regular schools. Less than 1% of students in elementary and lower secondary schools have some form of segregated educational provision (Markussen et al. 2007). Inclusive education is high on the political agenda (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet 2003). However, students' physical presence in regular schools does not necessarily lead to social integration. In fact, research from different countries suggests that students with special educational needs (SEN) face the risk of social isolation in regular schools (Larrivee and Horne 1991; Koster et al. 2007; Mand 2007). In Norway, Pijl, Frostad, and Flem (2008) found that SEN students in regular schools are over-represented in risk-categories for social exclusion by a factor of two to three compared to non-SEN students. Social participation of all students, regardless of educational needs, is considered to be an important goal in inclusive schools. Parents of SEN students often express that their main motive for sending their children to regular school settings is to increase the children's opportunities to develop social skills, gain friends and become part of the social network in the local community (Koster et al. 2007). Although social participation for SEN students in regular schools in Norway has been described earlier in research, we still need more knowledge on this important outcome for students in inclusive schools, in particular the development of social relationships over time.

The existing research literature on social participation of SEN students in regular schools all seems to be based on cross-section research. However, social relations are changing and adaptive processes rather than static structures (Cairns et al. 1995). The experience of social isolation over long periods of time is likely to be quite different from the experience of regularly hopping in and out of social networks. Therefore, the goal of the present study was to explore the stability of social relations among SEN students in regular schools.

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Social relations

Social relations are most often described in terms of acceptance from peers and mutual friendships (Bukowski et al. 1996). Even though peer acceptance and friendship are viewed as distinct phenomena, they are also very much connected. They both depend on the construct of liking. Peer acceptance is a unilateral construct that gives information about how a student is seen by other students. Friendship, on the other hand, is a bilateral construct and tells us about mutual liking between students (Bukowski et al. 1996). Parker and Asher (1993) found that although not all highly accepted students had friends, while certain far less accepted students had, better accepted students were generally much more likely to have friends than those less accepted. Bukowski et al. (1996) found support for the assumption that acceptance is a predictor or an antecedent to friendship.

Children of all ages have close relations with their immediate family, but at early adolescence peers become more important as sources of emotional support (Mayeux and Cillessen 2008). The importance of friendship between adolescents for their development and psychological adjustment is well established in research. Students with reciprocated friendships show better academic achievement, have a more positive school attitude, report lower levels of loneliness and internalising problems, and have a more positive self perception than students without friends (Parker and Asher 1993; Erath, Flanagan, and Bierman 2008; Rubin, Fredstrom, and Bowker 2008). In line with Bukowski et al. (1996), Nangle et al. suggest that the effect of peer acceptance on adjustment is indirect, being mediated through friendship, rather than being direct (Nangle et al. 2003).

According to Cairns et al. (1995), the focus of the analyses of social relations should extend beyond the individual. Information about the social ecology (i.e., the individual's role in the broader social network) is needed. The effect of social groups has been identified in a number of areas in an adolescent's adjustment. Peer groups have been found to influence not only prosocial (Barry and Wentzel 2006), but also delinquent behaviour (Urberg, Degirmentcioglu, and Pilgrim 1997). To clarify social relations in adolescence, analyses should include the pool of relationships in the social network (Cairns et al. 1995).

The stability of social relations

Most research on social relations describes static situations. However, to understand the experience of social relations, the temporal aspect of a student's social network should be considered (Parker and Seal 1996). Instability in friendships refers to the termination of existing friendships or the formation of new ones (Chan and Poulin 2007). Research has reported that adolescents keep less than 65% of their friends over a year, and that they tend to lose more friends than they gain new ones (Berndt, Hawkins, and Hoyle 1986; Bowker 2004). Summarising the existing literature, Chan and Poulin (2007) conclude that: 'Youth's social universe represent a system that is constantly in motion in which friendship relations are formed, sustained, or split up on a regular basis' (579).

The research devoted to identifying predictors of friendship stability is scarce, and the results are inconclusive (Ellis and Zarbatany 2007). Bowker (2004) found that friendship stability was unrelated to friendship quality, while Schneider et al. (1997) found that these factors are related. Although there seems to be consensus in research about the relation between peer acceptance and friendship formation (Parker and Asher 1993; Bukowski et al. 1996), the relation between peer acceptance and friendship stability is disputed. Parker and Seal found that well-accepted children had more friends, but peer acceptance did not predict friendship stability (Parker and Seal 1996). This suggests that popular students do not always develop the most successful and stable friendships, and establishing friendships might be different from keeping them. Research on gender differences in friendship stability in adolescence consistently shows that boys have more

stable friendships than girls, possibly explained by girls' growing interest in cross-gender friendships in adolescence (Berndt and Hoyle 1985; Hardy, Bukowski, and Sippola 2002).

Although there seems to be agreement on the positive effect of friendship on psychological adjustment in a broad sense, few studies have focused on the relationship between friendship and adjustment over time (Bowker 2004). However, the existing evidence (Sawin-Williams and Berndt 1990; Furman 1996), gives reason to believe that stable friendships are more predictive of positive psychological adjustment than unstable ones (Bowker 2004).

Summary and research focus

Previous research shows that SEN students face the risk of being excluded in the regular classroom. Using sociometric techniques, Frostad and Pijl (2007) found that between 20–25% of SEN students had an isolated position, compared to about 8% of regular students. The present study focuses on the stability of social relations, operationalised as friendships and participation in a social network. In line with earlier research (Bukowski et al. 1996), peer acceptance is treated as a predictor to friendship in the analyses. Knowing that social relations change, and also keeping in mind the great emphasis the Norwegian educational system places on social participation as a goal for all students (Kunnskapsdepartementet 1998), this study assesses the question whether social relations among SEN students change during a school year.

Secondly, we focus on factors that may predict friendship stability. In line with earlier research, friendship stability is possibly predicted by gender, friendship quality and peer acceptance. Also, the effect of being identified as a SEN student (a dichotomous variable) on friendship stability will be analysed.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of students attending a regular lower secondary school in Trondheim (Norway). This can best be described as a convenience sample (McQueen and Knussen 2006). The data were collected in two waves. The participating students completed questionnaires in October 2006 (T1 – at the start of ninth grade) and October 2007 (T2 – tenth grade). In total 124 students (64 girls and 60 boys) participated at T1, and 136 students (66 girls and 70 boys) participated at T2. Because the analyses focused on the stability of reciprocated friendship choices, only students who completed the questionnaires at both waves were included in the final sample used in the analyses. This sample consisted of 114 students (57 girls; $M_{age/T1} = 14.4$, $SD/T1 = .29$ and 57 boys; $M_{age/T1} = 14.3$, $SD/T1 = .29$). Independent t-tests were performed on some relevant variables (gender, age, peer acceptance, number of friendships) to determine whether students who failed to complete the questionnaires at both waves were different from those in the final sample. These comparisons showed there was no reason to assume any systematic bias in the final sample on any of these variables (all p 's > .05).

The sample comprised both regular and SEN students. According to the Norwegian law, SEN students are understood as students who do not benefit fully from ordinary teaching (Education Act §5.1). In line with Norway's full inclusion policy, SEN students are generally not identified by applying psycho-medical criteria. Instead, identifications are based on teacher judgements. That means that there are two types of SEN students. Some students receive special education based on formal assessment procedures, while others receive special education based only on teacher judgements. The number of students with formal statements has in Norway been around 6% for the last years, but is now approaching 8%. However the number of students of compulsory school age in need of special educational services is around 20% according to teacher judgements

(Skaalvik 2000). Because schools differ in their procedures for identifying SEN students (Solli 2008), we find that the number of students in regular elementary and lower secondary schools with formal statements differ between 0% and 20% (Nordahl and Hausstatter 2009).

In this study 22 students (19.3%) were identified by the school as SEN students, of which two had a formal statement (one described as having learning difficulties, the other as having behaviour problems). This particular school has a policy of avoiding formal statements and chose to provide special education on teacher judgements rather than formal statements. The SEN students were not divided into subgroups in this study.

Instruments

Social relations are described as peer acceptance, friendships and participation in the social network. Data were collected using sociometric methods based on positive peer nominations. Following Pijl, Frostad, and Flem (2008), we decided to work with a maximum of five nominations, restricting the freedom of choice minimally without inviting students to report weak relations with peers. The students answered identical questions in T1 and T2. They were invited to nominate any of the students in the same grade level as themselves. The students were organised into different sized groups during a typical school day and regularly spent time with all the other students in the same grade. Thus, we decided to use this large group as the reference group for the sociometric analyses. The sociometric data were analysed with the UCINET programme (Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman 1999).

Peer acceptance, or popularity, was based on the number of nominations each student received for the question 'Who are your best friends?' There is some debate if nomination scores based on instruction to 'name your friends' as opposed to 'name peers you like' will yield different indices of peer acceptance. Hardy, Bukowski, and Sippola (2002) argue that liking is a core feature in both these types of questions, and that you would therefore expect them to be highly correlated. This assumption is supported by Pijl, Frostad and Flem (2008), who found a high degree of overlap between peer nominations on three different questions (i.e., 'name your friends', 'name students you would like to cooperate with at school' and 'name students you would like to spend your break with') and decided to work with only the first question. We therefore decided to use the same question as an index for peer acceptance and friendship.

Friendships were defined as mutual positive nominations to the question 'Who are your best friends?' (i.e., A nominated B and B nominated A). The question whether only reciprocated nominations should count as friendships is debated in literature (Berndt and McCandless 2009). Some researchers claim that nominations that are not reciprocated indicate who students would *like* to have as their friends, rather than who their friends actually *are*. This suggests that not reciprocated nominations are viewed as fanciful and unrealistic (Berndt and McCandless 2009). However, when the number of nominations is restricted not all nominations may be mutual. For instance, if a student is nominated as a friend by six of his peers, he can only nominate five of them back. Therefore some friendships that appear not to be reciprocal are in reality that. Further, it has been claimed that students' subjective experience of their social relations is the most important criterion to use when evaluating social participation (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2005). Thus, only counting mutual choices as friendships may give a too pessimistic picture of the situation.

On the other hand, in a meta-analysis of friendship quality Newcomb and Bagwell (1995) concluded that friendships defined by mutual nominations showed higher level of positive qualities than friendships defined by unilateral nominations. Thus, in the current project we chose a conservative approach and decided to work with only mutual choices as the basis for the friendship index.

Participation in the social network was operationalised as a dichotomous variable: students were classified as either members (Participants) or non-members (Isolates) in the network.

Reciprocated nominations to the question 'Who are your best friends?' were analysed using NEGOPY (Richards and Rice 1981), a network analysis programme that identifies clusters of students (subgroups) that have more contact with one another than with students in other clusters. The programme also sorts students into different role categories based on their connections with each other. Group members belong to clusters of three or more students who have more links with members of the group than with non-members, and are connected by a path to each of the group members and remain connected when up to ten percent of the group is removed (Richards 1995). Liaisons are students that have connections to group members without being a member of one particular group themselves. They act as mediators between groups. Group members and liaisons are considered to have central positions in the social network: students assigned to these roles are thus described as 'Participants' (Richards 1995). Students with few links, on the other hand, are called 'Isolates'. They can either be totally without links (Isolate 1s), have just one link (Isolate 2s or Dyads) or be remotely connected to groups (Tree Nodes). The analyses of role stability focus assignment to the two major categories – Isolates and Participants.

As an index for perceived friendship quality we used a Norwegian adaptation of the subscale Friend Support in The Social Support Appraisals Scale (Vaux et al. 1986). The original scale comprises seven items like 'My friends respect me' and 'My friends and I have done a lot for one another'. The Norwegian version had six items with reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of .85.

Analyses

The first phase of data analysis focused on the stability of dyadic friendships. Two types of change might occur in friendships: friendship formation and friendship loss. The number of friendships will increase when more friends are gained than lost from T1 to T2. However, a stable number of friends does not necessarily imply absence of change. When new friendships replace lost friends, the entire composition of a group can change without affecting the size. To control for changes in friendships thus means controlling both of these aspects: the number of friends and the composition of friendship groups.

Students with and without special needs were compared with regard to the number of dyadic friendships at T1 and T2, as well as the number of stable dyadic friendships from T1 to T2, using t-tests. The proportions of students in the two groups without friends and without stable friends were compared with non-parametric statistics. To control for the number of friendships at T1, and following Ellis and Zabatany (2007), we calculated a proportion score (i.e., the number of stable friends at T2 divided by the number of friends at T1) as a friendship stability index (FSI). The friendship stability index can vary between 0 and 1, and can be interpreted as a percentage of friends that are kept.

The second phase of data analysis focused on stability of participation in the social network. In this section we first addressed the stability of the two main role categories: Participants and Isolates. The proportions of students with and without special needs classified as Participants and Isolates at T1 and T2 were compared with non-parametric statistics.

Secondly, we addressed the stability of memberships in stable groups. The analysis of membership status in stable groups in the current study was a two-step process. First a continuous group stability index (GSI) of the groups identified at T2 was calculated. Then each of the group members at T1 who remained in the group at T2, received the group's level of stability. Following Degirmencioglu et al. (1998), GSI was calculated as the proportion of students in the group at T1 that remained at T2 (see Figure 1). This is a group of six girls at T1 of whom five still stayed together at T2. This group's stability index (GSI) is thus .833 (five divided by six). The five students that remained in the group at T2 were then assigned this stability index. Student 31 received a stability index of 0.

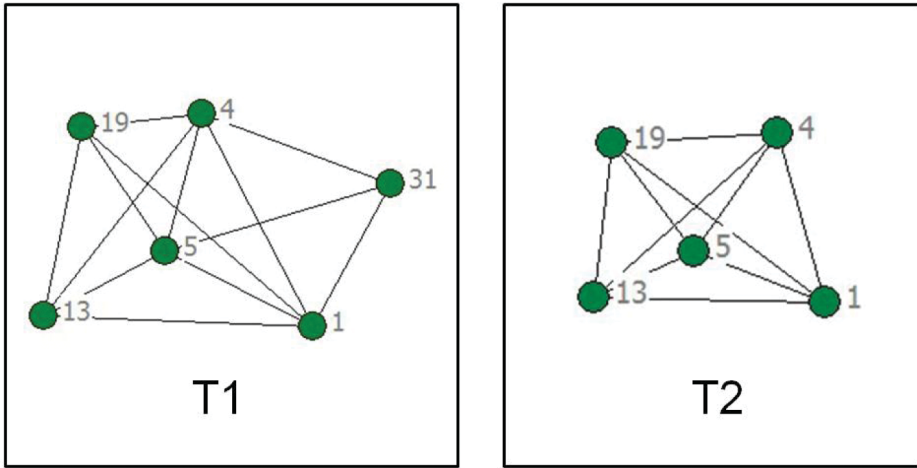


Figure 1. A group with stability index .833.

Students that didn't belong to a group at T1 also received a stability index of 0. Group stability indexes equal to or larger than .5 were interpreted as stable groups, and students assigned a GSI equal to or bigger than .5 were classified as members of a stable group (Cairns et al. 1995).

The analysis focused on the number of SEN students that belonged to stable groups compared to students without special needs.

The third phase of the analyses focused on factors that predict friendship stability. Only students with a least one mutual friendship at T1 were included in this regression analysis (n = 101), with the friendship stability index (FSI) as the dependent variable, and gender, being labelled as SEN student, peer acceptance at T1 and perceived friend support at T1 as the independent variables. Based on earlier research findings, friendship stability was hypothesised to be positively predicted by gender (boys have more stable friendships than girls) and friend support. Earlier research evidence suggests that friendship stability and peer acceptance are weakly connected, although this evidence is inconclusive (Parker and Seal 1996). According to our knowledge, the effect of being labelled as SEN student on friendship stability (FSI) has not been earlier described in research.

Results

Stability of friendships

Table 1 presents data on the number of dyadic friendships. Regular students had, on average, significantly more reciprocated friendships at both waves than SEN students (T1: $t = 2.56$, $df =$

Table 1. Number of friendships (reciprocal choices).

Wave	Group	n	Mean number of friends	No friends at all (%)	≤ 1 friend (%)
T1	Non-SEN	92	2.5	10.9	28.3
	SEN	22	1.6*	13.6	31.8
T2	Non-SEN	92	2.7	8.7	19.6
	SEN	22	1.5**	18.2	50.0

Notes. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Number of stable friendships (reciprocal choices).

Group	n	Mean number of stable friends	No stable friends at all (%)	≤ 1 stable friend (%)
Non-SEN	82	1.4	23.2	58.5
SEN	19	0.7*	47.4	84.2

Note. * $p < .05$.

112, $p = .012$; T2: $t = 3.71$, $df = 112$, $p = .000$). Neither of the groups had a statistically significant change in mean number of friends from T1 to T2. The proportions of students without friends or with only one friend were quite similar for the two groups at T1. But while the proportion of regular students in this category decreased over a year, SEN students had an opposite development. Thus, at T2, the difference between the groups was statistically significant: 50% of SEN students had either one friend or no friends at all, compared to 19.6% of their peers ($\chi^2 = 8.67$, $df = 1$, $p = .003$).

Next to the stability of the number of friendships at each time, we calculated the number of friends that were maintained over a period of a year: Thirteen students were omitted from this analysis because they had no friends at T1. The total number of stable friends ranged from 0 ($n = 28$) to 4 ($n = 5$) for the total sample. From Table 2 we see that, on average, SEN students had fewer stable friendships than their peers ($t = 2.63$, $df = 99$, $p = .010$). Also a greater number of them had just one stable friend or no stable friends at all: 84.2% versus 58.5% for the regular students ($\chi^2 = 4.38$, $df = 1$, $p = .036$).

The friendship stability index (FSI), which is a measure of friendship stability adjusted for the number of friends at T1 (Ellis et al. 2007, see the analyses section), varied from 0 to 1 ($M = .48$, $SD = .38$) in the total sample. On average students with special needs had a lower stability index than regular students (.33 vs. .52), but the difference was not statistically significant.

Stability of participation in the social network

At T1, 35% of regular students and 46% of SEN students were assigned to the major category 'Isolate' (no significant difference). Isolates (i.e., Tree Nodes, Dyads, Isolate 1s and Isolate 2s) had a peripheral position in the social network structure, although only Isolate 1s were totally without ties to their classmates.

Between T1 and T2 the number of regular students assigned to the Isolate main category decreased, while the opposite development was true of SEN students, which resulted in a statistically significant difference at T2 ($\chi^2 = 16.90$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$). In the last year 68% of SEN students were assigned to this category, compared to 23% of regular students.

Table 3. Network roles – major categories.

Wave	Group	n	Isolate (%)	Participant (%)
T1	Non-SEN	92	35	65
	SEN	22	45	55
T2	Non-SEN	92	23	77
	SEN	22	68	32

Membership in stable groups

The NEGOPY programme identified 12 cohesive subgroups in the social network at T1, and 17 cohesive subgroups at T2, according to the criteria mentioned in the ‘Method’ section. Sociograms based on reciprocated ties indicated that NEGOPY accurately identified coherent subgroups in the network. However, in two cases we modified the group structure in order to get a more authentic picture of the realistic group structure at T1 as an input for the group stability analysis (following a similar procedure used by Degirmencioglu et al. 1998). Figure 2 illustrates one of these modifications. At T1, NEGOPY identified all seven students (all boys: 2, 3, 15, 24, 26, 28 and 42) as belonging to the same group. At T2, student 28 chose differently, while the rest of the friendship structure remained stable. At T2 NEGOPY identified two distinct groups consisting of the same students. In this case we found it to be more in accordance with what we presumed could be a sense of continuity to treat this group as two separate groups at T1 in the stability analysis. A similar modification was done in the case of one large group identified by NEGOPY at T1 (n = 13). Two subgroups (with seven and six members) in this large group were identified as a basis for the stability analysis.

Based on the modified group structure, all students were assigned a GSI score. Students with GSI scores greater than .5 were classified as member of stable groups. As can be seen from Table 4 a significantly lower proportion of SEN students were members of stable groups compared to regular students ($\chi^2 = 5.98, df = 1, p = .014$).

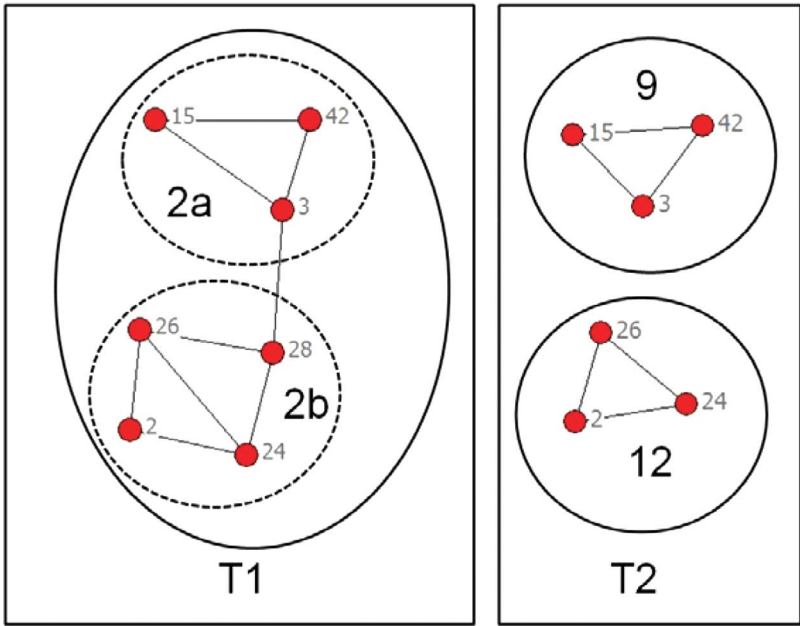


Figure 2. Example of NEGOPY groups with modification at T1 and T2.

Table 4. Proportion of students in stable groups.

Group	n	In stable groups (%)	Not in stable groups (%)
Non-SEN	92	36	64
SEN	22	9	91

Table 5. Factors predicting friend stability (FSI).

Variable	B	SEB	β
Gender	.19	.08	.25*
Special needs	-.30	.09	-.30**
Perceived support from peers	.04	.01	.37**
Peer acceptance score	-.04	.02	-.21*

Note. $R^2 = .19$ ($n = 98$, $p < .01$); * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Predicting friendship stability

The regression analysis with the friendship stability index (FSI) as the dependent variable, and gender, being labelled an SEN student, peer acceptance and perceived friend support as independent variables is summarised in Table 5. Friendship stability was positively predicted by gender (boys more stable than girls) and perceived friend support, and negatively predicted by special needs (special needs predicted lower friend stability) and peer acceptance. The final sample for this analysis consisted of 98 students (SEN: $n = 17$; non SEN: $n = 81$), three students failed to complete the friend support scale and were therefore omitted from the analysis.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study we firstly addressed the temporal aspect of the social relations of adolescent students with special educational needs in regular school. A point of departure were research findings from several countries that suggest SEN students in regular schools have weaker social relations compared to their peers (Scheepstra, Nakken, and Pijl 1999; Koster et al. 2007; Mand 2007; Pijl, Frostad, and Flem 2008). The present study confirms these findings. Regarding the temporal aspects, we found that SEN students have either a stable position or a negative development on the main indicators we used to describe social relations. A greater number of SEN students were without any friends, or with just one friend, at T2 compared to T1, and their positions in the social network were more peripheral the second year compared to the first. Contrary to this, regular students had a positive development on all the indexes. Interpreting the indexes as an operationalisation of social participation, one general conclusion from the data in the current project is that adolescent students with special needs were less socially included at school compared to regular students, and that over the course of one school year there was a negative development. So even though almost all students, regardless of educational needs, are integrated in a regular school, social participation for all – one of the most important aims of inclusive schooling – is still not achieved. Although the sample in the study is by no means a random sample, restricting the possibility to generalise the findings, this result is worrying. A number of studies have shown that children's and adolescents' psychological development is closely related to their friendship status and group membership (Vitaro, Boivin, and Bukowski 2009). In particular, research finds a predictive association between friendship participation and emotional well-being (Vitaro, Boivin, and Bukowski 2009). In the present study we found that almost 20% of SEN students had no best friend at T2, and that 50% of them had only one best friend. Thus, these students are in a very vulnerable position and face the risk of developing feelings of loneliness and depression if the situation does not change for the better (Pelkonen, Marttunen, and Aro 2003).

This raises the questions if we in fact face an 'inclusion paradox' in Norwegian elementary and lower secondary schools. An important educational goal in regular school setting is to

promote all students with opportunities to develop social relations with their peers. Segregated provisions are avoided because they are assumed to lead to isolation, stigmatisation and loneliness. The results from the current project indicate, contrary to the intention; that many SEN students have an isolated position in regular school. Thus, individual SEN students may experience what policy makers like to call 'inclusive schools' quite differently. This suggests that schools should pay more attention to these students' experiences, and should be willing to adapt to their individual needs. Some students may for instance benefit from spending part of the school day in smaller homogenous subgroups. The results from the study show that the social position held by SEN students does not automatically improve over time, so schools will need to take action to improve social participation for special needs students. What kind of support would be most effective is as yet unclear (Pijl, Frostad, and Flem 2008). During the last decades a vast amount of social skills training (SST) programmes have been developed to promote positive peer relations for at-risk students (Bierman and Powers 2009). Intervention models aimed at improving social position by improving students' social skills and behaviour have proved to have limited effect (Bierman and Powers 2009). More recently SST programmes have included factors at classroom level, cooperative activities as well as teacher- and parent-focused interventions, but the results are inconclusive (Bierman and Powers 2009). Positive social evaluations from peers depend to some extent on the cultural belief system at school (Chen, Chung, and Hsiao 2009). How to change the negative social evaluation of peers towards SEN students thus seems to be an important question. For instance, schools can organise activities where SEN students are given the possibility to participate in activities where they most probably will succeed, to show classmates their strong sides. This could be in classroom activities as well as in activities outside the classroom. Such experiences may strengthen self-esteem among SEN students as well as develop more positive attitudes towards them from regular students.

The regression analysis in the current project showed that the dependent variable friendship stability was negatively predicted by the two independent variables being labelled as SEN student and peer acceptance. The relationship between special needs and stability has to our knowledge not been described earlier in the literature. That friendship stability was negatively connected to peer acceptance confirmed the findings of Parker and Seal (1996). At the same time, and in line with earlier research (Bukowski et al. 1996), we found strong positive correlations between peer acceptance scores and number of friendships both at T1 and T2 ($r = 0.73$ at both waves). To gain friends and to keep friends is thus connected to different factors. Peer acceptance is very important in order to gain friends, but is in itself insufficient for keeping them. Of the factors under study in the current project, friendship stability was positively connected to perceived friend support and to the level of stability of the broader friendship group. Perceived friend support was operationalised in this project as a mix of positive behaviour and positive attitude towards friends. Friends considered supportive are those more likely to be kept than those not considered supportive. We did not collect data for each nominated friend in this project, and can therefore not decide how supportive SEN students are perceived compared to their peers. However, from the fact that friendship stability is lower for students with special needs, one possible strategy in improving their friendship stability might be guiding them in supportive behaviour towards friends.

Some critical considerations can be made on the research described here. As already mentioned, our small convenience sample limits the possibility to draw general conclusions from the research. However, our results are in line with earlier research, which supports the outcomes. Further, the SEN students are described as a homogenous group due to the identification practise in many Norwegian schools. However, research suggests that dividing the group into sub-groups according to problem type might change the picture (Frostad and Pijl 2007). Finally, to gain a more realistic picture of the connection between friend stability and perceived friend support, data on perceived support for each nominated friend should be collected.

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