

‘Can we tell that you are gonna be friends (...)?’ – seeking factors important for friendships between children with and without disabilities

The aim of the study is to look for personal predictors (moral behaviours, theory of mind) of starting and maintaining close relationships with peers with disabilities by their colleagues without disabilities, who are learning in the same classroom, taking into account attitudes toward people with disabilities, social skills and empathy level. The study is important not only from a theoretical, but also from a practical point of view. Despite there being dozens of studies on children’s relationships and on social relations within inclusive classrooms among students with and without disabilities, very little is known about the characteristics of children, which predestine them to start and to maintain close relationships with peers with disabilities. That kind of data would support our knowledge about peer relationships with students with disabilities; it would be helpful for preventing rejection and inequalities in access to education in regular schools for students with disabilities.

Currently, we know of many factors which are responsible for the lower social position of students with disabilities in the classroom, e.g. lower social skills than in a typically developing population, which lead to fewer interactions with peers, and fewer interactions bring fewer chances for exercising social skills: this is a reciprocal effect. However, despite the general low number of interactions between students with and without disabilities, there are students without disabilities whose personal features enable them to start and to maintain close relationships with peers with disabilities. What those personal features are is an open question. However, it is possible to hypothesise about what some of them may be – that is, high social skills and prosocial behaviours may make children open to others and others’ needs. On the other hand, personality traits, such as high openness and agreeableness, help to make and keep friendships. Therefore, our aim is of high practical value: it can help to compose inclusive classes so that they are socially effective and friendly for students with disabilities.

In the study we hypothesise that:

- 1) The moral behaviours of students without disabilities are important for starting close relationships between peers with and without disabilities,
- 2) A better understanding of others helps students without disabilities to maintain close relationships of high quality with peers with disabilities.

We assume that moral behaviours are predictive for starting close relationships, and for the quality of these relationships, theory of mind, social skills, empathy level, and attitudes toward people with disabilities are important.

We plan to conduct longitudinal research in three waves, during first three years of school education (with 6-8-month breaks). We will identify friendships (mutual choices) and peer relationships (the more choices of being liked the better the social position of a child) using social networks. Moreover, we plan to analyse the consistency of the close relationships of students with and without disabilities over time (between the ages of 7/8 to 9/10 years, we will check how long the relationship last and treat it as long-lasting when it lasts at least through 2 waves of the study), taking into account information from tests, questionnaires, and observations of interactions between peers.

We plan to invite a max of 38 inclusive classes from all over the country with an average number of 20 students.

We will gather information from children (moral behaviours, theory of mind, empathy, attitudes toward people with disabilities, quality of friendship, social networks, observations of children’s interactions with peers), teachers (social skills and empathy of children, classes’ characteristics, information about children’s friendships), and parents (social skills and empathy of children, demographic characteristics of families).

The project assumes the use of several advanced analytical methods.

We plan to prepare three manuscripts, which we hope to publish in journals on the JCR list.