

## Academic Self-concept among Students with Special Needs Education in Inclusive Education Settings: A Literature Review

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**ABSTRACT** Academic self-concept (ASC) gears quality learning in education. It is fundamental for acquiring skills, knowledge, experiences, and attitudes for future adulthood socioeconomic responsibilities. This literature review highlights the status of ASC among students in inclusive educational settings. Three sub-areas of academic self-concept among special educational needs (SEN) students, challenges facing ASC in inclusive education and strategies for enhancing the students' ASC guided the study. The study used Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Journal Storage (JSTOR) and Semantic Scholar to search reports and recent articles published in peer-reviewed journals. The surveyed studies indicated low ASC among SEN students. The collaborative effort is essential for promoting an inclusive learning environment and developing a positive academic self-concept among students. Enhancing ASC among students with SEN promotes academic responsibility and belongingness. The mechanisms for enhancing academic self-concept among students in inclusive settings and areas for further research have been suggested.

### INTRODUCTION

Academic self-concept (ASC) refers to one's perception of their academic ability and accomplishment in a specific subject (Shavelson et al. 1976; Marsh and Shavelson 1985). Students evaluate their academic performance in an entire subject area and compare across subjects and other students (Seaton et al. 2014; Marsh et al. 2020). Inclusive education (IE) emphasises that everyone accesses education without segregation to promote an inclusive society (Ainscow 2020). Students vary in terms of physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive, or geographic location as well as socioeconomic status, hence varying educational needs (Krischler et al. 2019; Shaeffer 2019). To develop an inclusive society, everyone should have access to high-quality education to fully participate in socioeconomic activities (Fedulova et al. 2019; Makoelle 2020).

Moreover, sustainable development is a collective responsibility of all members of society (Malik 2018; United Nations (UN) 2019). The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) underlines

the accessibility of education opportunities to every person (UNESCO 1990). The Salamanca Statement calls for providing education to individuals with disabilities in the regular schooling system (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 1994). Despite the Salamanca Statement, recent studies show that educators in educational settings have different perceptions about the inclusion of students with diverse learning needs in regular schools (Woodcock et al. 2022; Friesen et al. 2023; Lyra et al. 2023). The different perceptions among educators on the inclusion of learners with diverse needs in schools hinder the full provision of quality education for all. People with SEN in society may divert either mildly or profoundly from normal functioning and yet have talents, abilities and interests to learn, contributing to socioeconomic development (Yu et al. 2019; Paseka and Schwab 2020).

Globally, access to education by people with disabilities is limited, and only 54 percent of them are literate compared to 77 percent of people without disabilities (United Nations (UN) 2019). In addition, about 10 percent have been denied access to education due to an unsupportive environment, although the International Human Rights Conven-

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tion Article 26 stipulates that all education is a people's right (United Nations (UN) 1948). According to the Convention, education is fundamental for developing people's personality and upholding human rights and freedoms. Infrastructure and social barriers define people with special educational needs as a burden and unable to participate in social settings (Grue 2019). Yet, IE is essential to achieving the objectives of education for all, so reforming society towards inclusive socioeconomic growth (UNESCO 1990, 2020a, 2020b).

In practice, Roberts and Webster (2020) argue that unfriendly social environments such as bullying, discrimination, limited teacher support, and remarks from other students hinder the implementation of IE. The authors maintain that the quality of interaction with other people signifies IE's psychosocial environment. Shavelson and Bolus (1982) point out that families, schools and peers can nurture or hinder the development of self-concept. The authors suggest socioeconomic support, quality education and a supportive environment for the positive development of self-concept. Beld et al. (2021) and Krämer et al. (2021) stress the necessity of the psychosocial environment for developing positive ASC among SEN students.

Besides physical and psychosocial environmental challenges, studies have revealed that teachers and supporting staff in IE settings intentionally or unintentionally mistreat students with SEN (de Verdier and Ek 2014; Sánchez et al. 2019). The authors also report the existence of unfriendly practices in IE by teachers, such as paying attention to regular students and using non-participatory teaching and learning approaches. In such a scenario, it is obvious that students with SEN are likely to face academic challenges. According to the ASC's proponents, a learner's immediate environment can either favourably or negatively influence its development (Shavelson et al. 1976; Marsh and Shavelson 1985; Marsh et al. 1988).

In addition, Ainscow (2020) argues that SEN students in inclusive schools compare themselves with others physically, socially and academically. The comparison leads to the development of either a positive or negative ASC. Through the comparison, students develop a belief in their academic aptitude in the targeted subject and across areas such as Mathematics, Science, English, or Arts (Shavelson et al. 1976; Marsh and Craven 1997). According to the preceding arguments, students

enter various levels of further education and career opportunities based on the development and adjustment of their ASC. Keeping in mind that a student's academic achievement and career objectives are based on the ASC, hence making sense of educational goals (Mthimunya et al. 2017; Burger and Naudé 2019; Hansen and Henderson 2019; Herrera et al. 2020; Paredes Valverde et al. 2020). Also, ASC reflects self-worth in academic areas, which affects one's sense of belonging and social engagement (Hagiwara et al. 2019; Douma et al. 2022). ASC should not be disregarded because it is crucial to SEN students' behavioural outcomes. Therefore, developing positive ASC among SEN students is significant for comprehensive socioeconomic reform. On this ground, this narrative literature review on ASC among SEN students in IE is pertinent.

### Objective of the Study

This review literature focused on analysing the ASC among students with special educational needs in inclusive educational settings. The paper discusses the ASC among students in inclusive settings, challenges, and strategies for promoting ASC among SEN students. The paper would contribute to the body of knowledge about ASC among SEN students in IE, ways of promoting ASC among students and policy concerns about implementing inclusive education.

### METHODOLOGY

The researchers used electronic databases such as ScienceDirect, Journal Storage (JSTOR), Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) to find relevant sources to write this paper. Inclusive education, academic self-concept, and special education were key search terms used to find papers from peer-reviewed journals, reports, and books. A total of 116 related sources were found and reviewed, including 108(93%) research articles, 6(5%) reports and 2(2%) books.

The study focused on analysing the students' ASC among students in inclusive educational settings. The ASC among SEN students, challenges facing IE, and strategies for enhancing ASC among SEN students guided the literature review.

## OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

### Academic Self-concept among Students in IE

Several studies have been conducted on ASC among students in IE settings and have come up with varying findings. For example, the quasi-experiment with primary school students in inclusive and ordinary schools in Switzerland revealed that students in well-supported IE schools showed no significant difference in academic achievement from students in regular schools (Sermier Dessemontet and Bless 2013). The study also showed no difference in ASC between inclusive and regular schools with conducive teaching and learning environments. On the other hand, the study by Alnahdi and Schwab (2021) on IE in Saudi Arabia and Germany found that SEN students had positive ASC and were eager to participate in inclusive classes. Alnahdi and Schwab found that despite the positive ASC among SEN students in inclusive educational settings, they still ranked lower than students without disabilities in both countries. The study findings imply less supportive physical, social, and psychological environments to cater for the needs of SEN students in IE schools. Likewise, the study by DeVries et al. (2021) with urban Swedish primary schools revealed lower ASC, emotional and social inclusion. In the same way, Zdoupas and Laubenstein (2023) found that students with SEN demonstrated higher ASC in special educational schools than in IE. Zdoupas and Laubenstein experienced that a conducive learning environment is essential for developing positive ASC among students in IE. According to the findings, a supportive teaching and learning environment is pivotal for the execution of IE. Moreover, the findings show that interactive environments play a role in how students perceive themselves in various academic fields and their sense of belongingness. Recent studies conclude that there is a laggy, unclear conception and practices of IE, consequently affecting SEN students' academic undertaking and personality development (Pérez-Salas et al. 2022; Gbebe 2023; Kohli and Atencio 2023; Štech and Smetáěková 2023).

Similarly, studies show that low skills and knowledge among teachers and caretakers limited the practice of IE (Fedulova et al. 2019; Islam et al. 2020). Regarding the situation, studies have revealed that students with SEN are more likely to

demonstrate low ASC than regular students in IE schools (Zakaria and Tahar 2017; Le Fanu et al. 2022; Subban et al. 2022). So, Navarro-Mateu et al. (2019) suggest the use of emotional empathy and cognitive and low social dominance for practicable IE. Also, teachers' and caretakers' positive attitudes and efficacy are essential for effective teaching and learning (Saloviita and Schaffus 2016; Kiel et al. 2020; Saloviita 2020). Franklin et al. (2017), Kisanga and Rishards (2018), and Pasco (2021) stress that teacher-student interaction triggers the development of positive ASC among students. The experimental study by Asogwa et al. (2020) support that appropriate teaching approaches and learning materials enhanced the ASC of students in IE compared to those in unaided teaching and learning environments. Asogwa et al. (2020) acknowledge the collaborative function of teachers, parents, and students to create the permissible environment for IE. The studies imply that the physical and psychosocial environments are crucial for positive ASC in IE education.

Moreover, one can explain the nature and function of ASC in education basing on the reciprocal effect model effect, self-enhancement, and skills enhancement model (Sewasew and Schroeders 2019).

### The Self-enhancement Model of Academic Self-concept

The model assumes that people tend to assess their desire and strive towards the set goal (McPartlan et al. 2021). The outcome of the effort to achieve the set goal is essential for developing ASC. In educational settings, the concept towards subjects is a primary motivation for academic achievement (Iyengar et al. 2021). The model maintains that students are self-motivated according to their ability in a subject area and their academic aspirations (Sewasew et al. 2018). In connection to IE, the model implies that students with different educational needs require an individualised pattern of positive feedback and encouragement from teachers, parents, or significant others to develop a positive ASC. Zarrinabadi and Khodarahmi (2023) clarify that lack of self-motivation leads to low self-efficacy and a sense of inadequacy, eventually, failure to accomplish the set goals. According to McPartlan et al. (2021), peer interaction, teacher-student connection, and positive feedback on academ-

ic achievement are essential for self-improvement to achieve academic success.

### **The Skills Development Model**

The skills development model states that ASC emerges from academic achievement in a particular subject area (Abu-Hilal 2000; Marsh et al. 2015; Sticca et al. (2023). Acquiring skills and performance in a specific academic subject promotes the development of ASC (Burns et al. 2020). In line with Burns and others, general self-concept develops during social interaction and changes according to exposure to new environments, gaining new experiences and time (Gómez Pérez et al. 2023). Likewise, ASC develops when appropriate strategies are used to instil skills, experience, and attitude (Green et al. 2006). In line with Green et al. (2006), Brackett et al. (2019) stress the importance of the collaborative effort among teachers and students to create less emotional challenging and a stress-free environment for learning, hence developing positive ASC. This suggests that supportive and fruitful learning settings are necessary for the development of positive ASC in IE.

### **The Reciprocal Effect Model (REM)**

The model advocates for the mutual relationship between ASC and academic achievement (Marsh 1990; Guo et al. 2022). The ASC and academic achievement reinforce each other, and negative academic achievement results in developing a negative self-concept about the subject. A positive self-concept about the subject motivates learning and, eventually, high academic performance. In its simplicity, the academic achievement of an individual in the subject motivates the development of positive ASC and vice versa (Marsh et al. 2005; Marsh and Martin 2011). The model centres on motivational cause-effect patterns, the prior self-concept about the subject and the subject's achievement have mutual reinforcement (Sewasew and Schroeders 2019).

In an education context, the three models explaining ASC work best in relevant teaching and learning environments, such as timely positive feedback on academic progress. In the same way, IE requires constructive teaching and learning, constructive feedback, and recommendations by teachers to enhance ASC. Besides the explained

models, other factors, including self-esteem and self-perceptions, also affect the development of ASC (Lohbeck 2020). Self-esteem is concerned with a person's self-evaluation. At the same time, self-perception is the evaluation of one's internal characteristics, which are then overtly expressed through behavioural actions (Santrock 2016: 136, 2018: 92). The findings show that the school environment not only can affect the development of ASC but also the total growth of a learner. In the same way, students with SEN require a nurturing atmosphere to foster the growth of their positive ASC and physical, psychological, and social development to be productive in society.

Certainly, the environment in which a student constantly and continually interacts can either nurture or limit their academic and psychological well-being (Goldan et al. 2021). The study with Swedish grade eight girls in special education schools demonstrated low emotions and ASC (DeVries et al. 2021). DeVries et al. (2021) claim that SEN students with self-identified difficulties feel socially excluded. For example, in Australia, students with vision impairment in IE showed moderate ASC (Datta and Talukdar 2015). The findings also revealed limited interventional roles of parents, teachers, and peers in enhancing students' ASC. However, the severity of disability affects participation in IE and the development of positive perceptions about the self and academic undertakings (Wei and Marder 2012). Also, Wei and Marder (2012) found that students with emotional problems and autism demonstrated lower ASC than their counterparts in the United States. Similarly, studies have found that teachers' training does not sufficiently address the diverse needs of students in IE, consequently superficial inclusion (Ginja and Chen 2021; Aalatawi 2023). The findings suggest that IE does not entail putting SEN children in ordinary classes but rather assisting them in learning effectively.

### **Challenges of Academic Self-concept in IE**

The well-being of SENs is prime for their successful learning in IE and navigation to socioeconomic activities (Kazmi et al. 2023). Studies have revealed that low academic self-concept among students with SENs is due to unsupportive environments. However, home and school environments are essential for gaining happiness, confi-

dence, and emotional bond with other people (Almahrag 2022). In addition, the implementation of IE requires relevant infrastructure, human resources, and lower awareness of people with special educational needs among teachers and students (Neves et al. 2023). McKenzie et al. (2023), Larios and Zetlin (2023), Paulsrud and Nilholm (2023) report that teachers' teaching approaches, negative attitudes, low preparedness, and efficacy hamper the quality of teaching and learning in IE. Merrigan and Senior (2023) are concerned about the educational policy reforms to reflect the outcomes of IE. Merrigan and Senior further experienced that educators and parents have misconceptions about IE as students are mainstreamed in schools without individualized assistance. The findings connote that students with SENs are not adequately supported to access quality education and eventually are marginalized in the learning process.

Further, several studies have reported the challenges of ASC among students in IE, including inadequate resources, awareness among teachers, curriculum structure, and teachers' efficacy (Collins et al. 2018; Juvonen et al. 2019). Albash (2023) clarifies that inadequate resources in IE constrain learning and progression to higher levels of education and training, consequently lag of people with SEN in access to quality education and the employment market. Similarly, the qualitative studies by Alsawalem et al. (2023) and Van Mieghem et al. (2023) revealed that curriculum structure and low teachers' efficacy in dealing with students with diverse educational needs compromise the IE practice. Adverse psychosocial environments, such as negative remarks and bullying from other students, have been reported among students in IE settings (Talafha 2023). Given the importance of the family and the home environment as a socialising factor, parents play a crucial role in assisting children with SEN to shape their self-perceptions and interactions with others from a young age. On the same ground, the study by Calero et al. (2014) with adolescents in Finnish schools revealed that maternal expectations and motivation enhanced the mathematics self-concept. However, the student's self-concept in Mathematics improved according to their ability and achievement. The studies show that the student's perception of the school environments and social interactions are essential for developing ASC.

In addition, the type of schools affects the ASC and the well-being of students with SENs. The study by Pozas et al. (2023) found that students

with SENs in private schools in Mexico demonstrated low ASC and emotional well-being compared to their counterparts in government schools. On the contrary, the study by Finnvoold and Dokken (2023) with Norwegian physically impaired school pupils showed students in special education demonstrated low ASC compared to those from IE settings. Yet, Finnvoold and Dokken suggest that creativity and commitment by teachers to whole class teaching are crucial for meaningful IE. Spong et al. (2023) and Subban et al. (2023) support that collective social responsibility promotes the feasibility of IE. Spong and colleagues clarify that barriers to the implementation of IE define disability in society.

Furthermore, Pesu et al. (2018) point out that time and teacher changes from year to year affect the student's academic self-concept. In practice, students develop an emotional and social attachment with their teachers, hence affecting their ASC. Also, technological teaching and learning methods do not adequately cater for the learning needs of students with SEN in IE (Moriña 2017). Paulsrud and Nilholm (2023) report that technological teaching and learning methods, such as online classes, limit the full participation of students with diverse learning needs. Besides the technological teaching approaches, Lyons et al. (2016) claim that the negative attitude of teachers and students towards inclusion is a complex phenomenon, as it demands multiple skills, knowledge, and experiences to successfully deal with students in IE. Lyons et al. (2016) also highlight the stigmatisation of students with SEN by their peers in the class. According to Lyons and colleagues, the behaviour impairs social inclusion and the development of ASC. Moreover, the study by Kazmi et al. (2023) with primary school teachers in Pakistan showed teachers were prepared to deal SEN students with mild deviation from normal functioning; consequently, individuals with severe disabilities are left behind. The findings imply that special attention must be paid to teacher education and training for effective teaching and learning in IE schools.

### **Strategies for Enhancing ASC among Students in IE**

The students with SEN in educational settings primarily have low ASC, social, and emotional levels (Alnahdi et al. 2022). A few studies have sug-

gested strategies for enhancing ASC for students in IE, including appropriate pedagogical support, remedial classes for students with SEN, appropriate feedback, heterogeneity in grouping students for academic tasks, and varying academic tasks (Savolainen et al. 2018; Sándor et al. 2023). Pozas et al. (2021) suggest assessing students' learning needs in IE settings, helping students develop social self-concept to maintain social skills for successful social inclusion. Also, using coping strategies among students with disabilities helps to develop their social and ASC (Cosmas and Possi 2021). Cosmas and Possi further clarify that the coping strategies include seeking peer, teacher, and counsellor assistance. The findings indicate that appropriate teaching approaches are crucial for students with SEN to develop positive ASC, confidence, social skills, and emotional attachment, consequently, academic achievement and healthy personality.

On the other hand, monitoring the "Big Fish Little Pond Effect" (BFLPE) among students in IE schools is essential. The key idea of BFLPE is that students compare their academic ability with their peers and general class academic performance, which in turn affects their academic achievement and social acceptance (Yu 2020; Stockus and Zell 2023). Accordingly, when the academic performance of their peers is higher than their own, a student develops a negative ASC (Marsh et al. 2014; Szumski and Karwowski 2015). Two aspects are happening in the BFLPE model. Firstly, when the self-evaluation about ASC is positive, then convergence in academic practices, and second, while negative academic results lead to divergence from the individual's academic goal (Wouters et al. 2013). In IE settings, learners differ in learning pace and academic achievement, and therefore, educators should help students minimise the effect of BFLPE.

Moreover, Chan and Lo (2016) suggest adopting the social model. The model states that a learning disability is not with an individual, but instead, is contextual. The model calls for teachers, parents, and school administration to create an inclusive teaching and learning environment, such as providing furniture and seating arrangements in classes. Also, it is essential to maintain a good classroom climate, such as unconditional positive regard by teachers. Good teacher-student relations strengthen emotional, social, and ASC (Majorano et al. 2017). In line with Majorano et al. cited from Zajda (2023) argues that well facilitated learning

environment underlies the students' identity development, motivation to learn, and education outcomes. The author considers identity formation among students in IE as fundamental for effective learning, social inclusion, and emotional stability. In the same way, for the sake of education for all to effect inclusive socioeconomic development, the question about to what extent one is ready for quality IE is pertinent. Addressing the question would reflect the educational saying, "Leave no one behind" (Elson 2018). The notion centres on equivalence access to quality education among students in IE schools, or else disability in society would continue, leading to socioeconomic divide and marginalisation among people. Inadequate teaching and learning resources, negative attitudes and the environment have repeatedly been reported to limit the positive development of the ASC among SEN students in IE.

## CONCLUSION

ASC is the principal dimension in the teaching and learning process from which students acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes to fully function in society. However, the studies have shown low ASC among students in IE, which mainly has been attributed to limited psychological, physical, social, and technical teaching and learning environments. The quality of IE is central to collective responsibility in socioeconomic development. Therefore, strategies such as training teachers, availing resources, providing psychological support to students, and interventional programs for enhancing ASC are key policy concerns for implementing IE.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Students' perception of different academic domains is fundamental for academic achievement and future educational and career advancement. Studies have indicated low ASC among SEN students in IE settings due to psychological, social, and physical challenges they experience. The study recommends educating society about educational rights to all people without barriers, training teachers on IE pedagogies, educating students about diverse groups of students in schools for maintaining human dignity and educational justice, government, and community to build friendly infrastructure in IE educational settings, curriculum

developers to consider inclusivity for fair learning, assessment, and evaluation. Finally, the study recommends further studies on the ASC among students in IE and the associated factors to improve inclusion in educational settings.

#### SUBMISSION DECLARATION AND VERIFICATION

This paper is the authors' original work, and neither has been previously published nor under consideration for publication elsewhere in any form.

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