

FROM INCLUSION TO SOCIAL REHABILITATION: SCHOOL PRACTICES SUPPORTING THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract: This paper examines school-based pathways that support the social rehabilitation of children with special educational needs, focusing on how educational environments can foster participation, belonging, and social functioning beyond academic attainment. The purpose of the study is to synthesize and critically evaluate the international evidence on school-based practices that promote social integration, peer relationships, and adaptive participation for learners with special educational needs. The methodology is a structured literature review that draws on peer-reviewed empirical studies and high-quality reviews published within a clearly defined time frame and identified through systematic searching of major academic databases, followed by transparent screening and thematic synthesis of findings. Results indicate that school-based interventions tend to cluster around several complementary approaches, including peer-mediated and cooperative learning practices, whole-school climate and relationship-building strategies, targeted social competence supports embedded in classroom routines, and coordinated collaboration between educators, families, and support professionals. Across the reviewed literature, positive outcomes are most consistently associated with interventions that are sustained over time, implemented with fidelity, and situated within inclusive school cultures that normalize diversity and proactively reduce stigma. However, findings also reveal recurring barriers, such as inconsistent teacher preparation, limited time and staffing resources, fragmented coordination across services, and uneven attention to student voice and family partnership. The conclusions emphasize that social rehabilitation in schools is not achieved through isolated programs alone but through integrated practices that align pedagogy, school ethos, and support systems. Recommendations highlight the need for school-wide capacity building, practice-based professional development, mechanisms that strengthen peer support and belonging, and multi-level planning that links classroom strategies with family and community resources.

Keywords: school-based support; social rehabilitation; inclusive education; special educational needs; peer relationships; school climate.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is widely positioned as a rights-based and quality imperative, yet the everyday social realities of many children with special educational needs remain fragile. International monitoring continues to show that placement in a mainstream classroom does not automatically translate into acceptance, friendship, participation, or a sense of belonging; instead, social outcomes depend heavily on how schools organize relationships, learning routines, and support systems (UNESCO, 2020). Within this agenda, school-based pathways to social rehabilitation refer to the structured, sustained and context-sensitive practices through which schools help learners rebuild or strengthen social functioning, peer connectedness, and participation in the life of the classroom and the wider school community. This emphasis is increasingly important because social exclusion at school is linked to loneliness, restricted peer networks, reduced engagement, and longer-term disadvantage, even when academic access is formally secured.

Current evidence suggests that the determinants of social inclusion are often less about school “type” and more about inclusive characteristics such as climate, norms, and relational opportunities. For example, research comparing students with special educational needs across educational contexts indicates that perceived social inclusion is better explained by the inclusiveness of the school environment than by whether a student attends a mainstream or segregated setting (Vyrastekova, 2021). This finding reinforces a practical dilemma for educators and policy-makers: improving social outcomes requires more than procedural compliance or individualized support plans; it requires school-wide and classroom-level conditions that enable authentic peer interaction, mutual recognition, and participation.

At the same time, the intervention landscape is heterogeneous. School-based programmers often target peer interaction and social participation through approaches such as peer-mediated support, cooperative learning structures, and broader ecological changes within the school environment. Recent synthesis work in autism-focused mainstream settings shows that interventions implemented at multiple levels of the school ecology can increase peer interaction, while also highlighting that increased interaction does not necessarily equal deeper social inclusion, indicating the need to evaluate outcomes beyond frequency of contact (Tsou et al., 2024). Relatedly, reviews of

peer-mediated interventions emphasise their relevance not only for students with special educational needs but also for peers without disabilities, because participation, attitudes, and reciprocal engagement are integral to sustained inclusion (Travers et al., 2022). These strands point to a central conceptual issue: social rehabilitation at school is relational and collective, not an individual attribute to be “fixed” within the child.

A further challenge concerns how “participation” is defined and operationalized. Contemporary policy and research increasingly treat participation as a multidimensional construct that exceeds physical presence and includes voice, engagement, and membership in classroom and school communities (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2024). When participation is narrowed to attendance or proximity, schools may appear inclusive while learners continue to experience social marginalization. Clarifying participation and social inclusion as outcomes is therefore essential for developing credible school-based pathways to social rehabilitation and for selecting interventions that match those outcomes (Schwab et al, 2022).

The objective of the present literature review is to synthesise recent evidence on school-based practices that support social rehabilitation for children with special educational needs, with a focus on pathways that strengthen social participation, peer relationships, and belonging in inclusive settings. Specifically, the review aims to (a) clarify how recent literature conceptualizes social rehabilitation-related outcomes in schools, (b) identify major categories of school-based approaches used to promote social participation and inclusion, and (c) highlight enabling conditions and recurring barriers that shape implementation and impact within everyday school practice. By concentrating on the school as the primary site of social rehabilitation, the paper seeks to inform both research and practice regarding how inclusive education can be enacted as meaningful social membership rather than mere placement.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a structured literature review of school-based pathways that support social rehabilitation for children with special educational needs. The review procedures are specified to enable replication and transparent appraisal. Methodological decisions regarding evidence identification, screening, and synthesis are aligned with contemporary evidence-synthesis guidance, including recommendations for systematic and scoping approaches where heterogeneous designs are anticipated (JBI, 2024).

Studies were eligible if they (a) focused on children or adolescents in primary or secondary school who were identified as having special educational needs or disability-related support needs; (b) examined school-based practices, interventions, or whole-school approaches intended to improve social participation, belonging, peer relationships, or social functioning within the school context; and (c) reported empirical findings (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) or high-quality systematic evidence syntheses relevant to school-based social outcomes. Studies were excluded if they (a) focused exclusively on clinical or outpatient rehabilitation without a school-based delivery component; (b) addressed academic outcomes only without explicit social participation or inclusion outcomes; (c) were not peer-reviewed (for example, opinion pieces without data); or (d) did not provide sufficient methodological detail to support appraisal and extraction

All retrieved records were exported to a reference manager and duplicates were removed. Screening proceeded in two stages: (1) title and abstract screening to remove clearly ineligible studies and (2) full-text screening against the eligibility criteria. To strengthen procedural reliability, inclusion and exclusion decisions were recorded with explicit reasons at the full-text stage, supporting transparent reporting through a flow diagram consistent with PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021a). Any borderline cases were resolved through re-checking eligibility criteria and documenting the rationale for the final decision.

Because the evidence base is expected to include diverse designs, methodological quality was appraised using design-appropriate criteria consistent with current evidence-synthesis guidance, focusing on transparency of sampling, measurement adequacy, analytic coherence, and plausibility of claims given the design (JBI, 2024).

3. RESULTS

The reviewed literature showed that school-based pathways to social rehabilitation for children with special educational needs were predominantly organized around interventions that acted on more than one layer of the school environment. Studies and reviews that examined inclusive practice in mainstream settings indicated that approaches targeting only the individual learner were less consistently associated with meaningful social inclusion than approaches that also shaped peer opportunities, staff practices, and classroom routines (Tsou et al., 2024). Across the evidence base, intervention targets clustered into four recurrent domains: (a) structured peer involvement and peer-mediated support, (b) classroom practices that increased participation opportunities during instruction and unstructured school time, (c) school and classroom climate strategies aimed at strengthening belonging and reducing stigma, and (d) coordinated support practices that aligned teachers, specialist staff, and families.

First, peer-mediated and peer-involving approaches were repeatedly associated with improved social interaction indicators. The evidence showed that when peers were intentionally positioned as active partners in learning and social routines, children with special educational needs engaged in more frequent and more sustained social exchanges, particularly in secondary contexts where social participation often becomes more difficult to secure (Travers & Carter, 2022). Importantly, the reviewed evidence also indicated that peers without disabilities were not “neutral” implementers but were themselves affected by participation, with benefits reported across multiple domains such as attitudes, empathy, confidence in interacting with diverse classmates, and willingness to sustain supportive relationships (Travers & Carter, 2022). This pattern suggested that school-based social rehabilitation operated as a reciprocal process, strengthening participation through relationship-building rather than through one-directional assistance.

Second, interventions framed within social-emotional learning were associated with positive, though typically modest, gains in social-emotional competences among students with special educational needs. The reviewed systematic evidence reported that programs implemented in school settings produced improvements that tended to be small in magnitude and varied across studies, with stronger outcomes where interventions were clearly specified, sustained over time, and supported by appropriate implementation conditions (Hassani & Schwab, 2021). This strand of findings indicated that social-emotional learning functions more reliably as a contribution to social rehabilitation when it is embedded into daily classroom practice and supported by the broader classroom ecology, rather than delivered as an isolated curriculum.

Third, classroom climate and broader inclusive classroom conditions emerged as a consistent explanatory factor for social outcomes. The reviewed theoretical and empirical syntheses highlighted that a supportive classroom climate mediated the relationship between inclusive teaching practices and inclusive outcomes, because climate shaped the quality of peer norms, safety, and the opportunities students had to participate and be recognized as members of the group (Margas, 2023). Evidence converged on the view that social rehabilitation at school was facilitated when teachers structured cooperative interaction, actively monitored participation patterns, and cultivated classroom norms that legitimized difference and discouraged exclusionary behaviors.

Finally, the evidence base underscored an outcome-pattern distinction between increased interaction and deeper inclusion. School-based interventions often increased observable peer interactions, yet the available evidence did not always demonstrate parallel improvements in broader indicators of social inclusion such as belonging, friendship quality, or perceived acceptance (Tsou et al., 2024). This finding suggested that programs could succeed at creating contact without necessarily shifting relational status, peer group dynamics, or the student’s subjective experience of membership. Overall, results indicated that the most promising pathways to social rehabilitation combined structured peer participation, climate-sensitive classroom practices, and whole-school alignment that sustained participation opportunities across contexts and over time.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The evidence reviewed indicated that school-based social rehabilitation for children with special educational needs was most convincingly supported when intervention logic moved beyond individual skill remediation and addressed relational and ecological conditions within schools. In practice, this meant that approaches which deliberately structured peer opportunities, strengthened classroom norms, and aligned adult practices across settings appeared better positioned to produce socially meaningful outcomes than approaches implemented as isolated add-on programmes. This pattern mattered because it suggested that social rehabilitation in school functioned less like a discrete “treatment” and more like an ongoing institutional practice: it depended on how everyday routines enabled or constrained participation, recognition, and peer membership.

A central interpretive implication was the distinction between *increased interaction* and *social inclusion*. Several strands of evidence showed that school-based initiatives often increased the quantity of peer contact and participation opportunities, yet more durable indicators—such as belonging, friendship quality, or perceived acceptance—were not consistently strengthened to the same degree. This divergence implied that contact alone did not guarantee status change within peer groups or improved subjective experience of membership. Consequently, the reviewed findings pointed toward the importance of targeting peer norms and classroom climate, not merely arranging proximity or interaction. Theoretically, this supported the view that inclusion is mediated by social meaning: peers interpret, evaluate, and stabilise social roles over time, and interventions that ignore these dynamics risk producing compliance-based interaction rather than authentic affiliation.

The findings also suggested that peer-mediated approaches were influential because they redistributed social responsibility across the classroom community. When peers were engaged as partners in learning and social routines, the intervention focus shifted from “supporting the child” to “building relationships,” which is more consistent with inclusive education’s emphasis on participation and membership. At the same time, the evidence

implied that peer involvement required careful design. Without explicit attention to reciprocity, autonomy, and dignity, peer support could drift toward a helper–helped hierarchy that unintentionally reinforced stigma. This interpretation underscored the need to define success in relational terms—mutual participation, shared activities, and sustained connection—rather than solely in behavioral metrics.

Implementation conditions emerged as a decisive factor shaping whether school-based pathways translated into socially meaningful change. The reviewed evidence implied that staff preparation, consistency over time, and whole-school alignment were not peripheral issues but core determinants of impact. In other words, the same intervention “type” could yield different outcomes depending on whether teachers had practical training, whether participation routines were embedded in everyday instruction, and whether school norms actively protected belonging. This highlighted a pragmatic conclusion: social rehabilitation outcomes were unlikely to be sustained where inclusion depended on individual teacher goodwill rather than on institutional routines and shared expectations.

Taken together, the significance of the review lay in reframing social rehabilitation as a school capacity issue rather than a student deficit issue. The findings suggested that the most credible pathway involved integrating structured peer participation, climate-sensitive classroom practices, and coordinated supports into the normal functioning of inclusive schools. This interpretation aligned with recent syntheses emphasizing multi-level school ecology targets for social inclusion interventions (Tsou et al., 2024) and with theoretical work positioning classroom climate as a cornerstone for inclusive school development (Margas, 2023). Practically, the discussion implied that future work should prioritize outcomes that capture both objective participation and subjective membership, alongside stronger reporting on implementation fidelity and contextual constraints, so that evidence can guide scalable, school-realistic designs.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This literature review indicated that school-based pathways to social rehabilitation for children with special educational needs were most effective when they addressed the social ecology of schooling rather than focusing only on individual skill change. Interventions that deliberately structured peer participation, supported cooperative interaction in everyday classroom routines, and promoted a positive classroom and school climate were more consistently linked to improvements in social participation than isolated, short-term programs.

The findings also suggested a meaningful gap between increasing observable peer interaction and achieving deeper social inclusion. While many approaches appeared to expand opportunities for contact and engagement, stronger outcomes related to belonging, reciprocal friendships, and perceived acceptance required sustained implementation and attention to peer norms and stigma reduction. In practical terms, social rehabilitation in schools emerged as an institutional capacity: it depends on teacher preparation, consistent routines, coordinated support, and a shared commitment to participation and membership across the school day.

Overall, the review implied that inclusive schooling can function as a powerful context for social rehabilitation when participation is treated as a core educational outcome, monitored over time, and embedded in the ordinary organization of teaching, relationships, and support systems.

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