An exploration into the extent of which children attending Special Resource Bases (SRBs) are provided opportunities to integrate mainstream peers and participate with mainstream education

Abstract

This research explores the impact integration has on social skills and peer relationships of children in Specialist Resource Base (SRB) settings have with mainstream children. Children's interactions will be observed within the SRB environment and mainstream environment, focusing on how they communicate, cooperate and manage peer relationships during structured and unstructured activities. Data will be collected through observations and questionnaires which will allow patterns of interaction and behaviours to be identified. The findings will aim to provide valuable insight into how levels of integration may shape children's social development and inform strategies to support positive peer relationships within Specialist education settings.

Key Words: peer acceptance; interactions; communicate; cooperate; integration; peer relationships.

Literature Review

Stinson and Anita (1999, p.164) suggest inclusion is not just placing children into a mainstream classroom, it is about the actual classroom accommodating all children at once. Inclusive education is based upon the principle that all children should have equal opportunities to participate fully within educational environments regardless of disability or additional learning needs. Historically, children with additional needs were not provided with an education or included in the community. Children that were given care were sent to institutions. Over time, development in inclusion moved where children being educated separately from their peers in specialist settings or SRBs. (Historic England, 2026)

A Specialist Resource Base is where a small number of pupils with additional learning needs are educated in a class that is located within a mainstream school and they should have opportunities to integrate with other children in mainstream classes through learning and play. (Caerphilly County Borough Council, ND)

Literature by Whole School Send (2024) states Inclusive education plays a vital role in shaping children's social growth. When children with learning disabilities learn alongside their peers, they gain opportunities to create strong friendships, improve communication and interaction skills, and become more confident in different social settings. These experiences contribute to their emotional well-being, confidence, and feeling of inclusion within the community. At the same time, inclusive classrooms benefit all students by encouraging kindness, respect, and open-mindedness. (Macallister and Hadjri, 2013, p.57) Children learn early on that everyone has different abilities and talents, and that these differences should be respected rather than judged. As a result, schools become more welcoming environments where discrimination and negative stereotypes surrounding learning disabilities are reduced. Supporting this view, research by Chen (2024, p. 224) suggests that relationships with peers play a vital role in developing children's social skills, and interactions with classmates significantly influence both positive and negative development. Peer interaction gives children opportunities to develop a wide range of skills, including sharing knowledge, offering emotional support, and learning through imitation, all of which contribute positively to cognitive development.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) highlights the importance of children's rights to participation, inclusion, and education. Article 23 specifically states that children with disabilities should enjoy full and active participation within society, while Article 29 highlights that education should promote the development of personality, talents, and social abilities. These principles suggest that educational settings should provide opportunities for children to develop meaningful social relationships alongside their peers. With this, research into the social experiences of children within SRBs is particularly important in seeing whether inclusive rights are being fully realised in practice.

In Wales, inclusive education is reinforced through the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code (Welsh Government, 2021). They aim to create a more inclusive educational system by promoting participation, inclusion and collaboration. The Welsh Government (2021) states that learners with ALN should be supported to participate fully in school life alongside their peers where appropriate.

Several theorists recognise the importance of integration and inclusion within educational settings.

Vygotsky realised the importance of social interaction for learning and development. Through interaction with peers, children develop communication, problem-solving, and social understanding. From this perspective, opportunities for integration with mainstream peers may contribute positively to children's social development. (Daly *et al,* 2006, p58)

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Hayes, *et al,* 2017, p 26-27) also provides insight into the role of educational environments in shaping children's experiences. Bronfenbrenner argues that children's development is influenced by interactions within multiple environmental systems, including family, school, peer groups, and wider social policies. This suggests that school layout, practitioner attitudes, and opportunities for participation all influence whether children experience genuine inclusion.

A study Knight *et al*, (2022) by examines how teachers in Wales understand and feel about inclusive education. It was found that teachers often felt inclusion was being promoted without enough practical support. Children with ALN were unsuitable for mainstream classes as they were displaying challenging behaviour that was disrupting the teaching and learning of other children and requiring extra support that they could not provide due to funding and lack of training.

Although inclusion has been widely researched, there appears to be limited literature specifically exploring whether children attending SRBs are genuinely provided opportunities to integrate meaningfully with mainstream peers. Much existing research focuses either on mainstream inclusion generally or fully specialist educational settings.

For example, Guralnick (1999) focused his research on whether inclusion leads to genuine social participation and relationships, rather than the physical placement of children in mainstream settings. Similarly, Cambra and Silvestre (2003) direct their research on children with additional learning needs that were integrated into a mainstream classroom. Another study, by Place and Hodge (2001) again focused on inclusion, but within a mainstream physical environment.

Within Caerphilly County Borough Council (CCBC), there are currently thirteen SRBs, ten of which support primary-aged children (CCBC, 2025) As the local authority proposes to expand specialist provision through the development of five additional SRBs within mainstream school settings (CCBC, ND), This study will examine whether the primary purpose of SRBs are being effectively performed, specifically in providing children with meaningful opportunities to participate in mainstream education. It will explore whether SRBs facilitate integration with peers, support the development of positive social relationships, and promote learners' sense of identity, belonging, and participation within the wider school community.

Methodology

Research is conducted for many different purposes. While some believe its main role is to provide explanations, others argue that valuable research can also describe situations or explore little-known phenomena. In studies involving people, researchers may also aim to promote social change and improve conditions for disadvantaged groups, giving research an emancipatory purpose. (Robson, 2014)

Researchers must make decisions about sampling during the early stages of planning a study, including whether to study the entire population or only a sample. In many cases, factors such as time, cost and accessibility make it difficult to collect data from every member of the population. As a result, researchers often gather data from a smaller subgroup that is selected to represent the wider population being studied. This smaller subgroup is known as the sample (Cohen *et al*, 2018) There are occasions where researchers can include every member of the target population in a study. This is

possible when the population is relatively small, easily accessible, and participants are willing to engage in the research. It may also occur when researchers have full access to existing records or databases, allowing comprehensive data collection from the entire population. (Wood, 2016)

There are two main approaches to sampling identified by Cohen and Holliday (1979, 1982, 1996 quoted in Cohen et al, 2018, p.262), probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Researchers must decide which method is most suitable for their study. Probability sampling aims to produce a sample that is representative of the wider population. In this approach, every member of the population has a known and often equal chance of being selected. Non-probability sampling, on the other hand, does not aim to create a fully representative sample of the population. Participants are selected based on factors such as convenience, accessibility, or their relevance to the research topic. (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p238 - 239) Probability sampling Techniques include random, systematic, stratified and cluster sampling. Non-probability sampling techniques include convenience, purposive, snowball and quota sampling. (Hassan, 2024)

This study will adopt a non-probability sampling approach because the research aims to gather rich, qualitative data rather than statistical results and qualitative research typically seeks rich, in-depth data that reflects the context of participants' experiences, as described by Geertzt (1973, quoted in Gelo *et al*, 2008) Considering the question asked of this study is related to children's social interactions, a qualitative approach aligns with the view of Queiros *et al* (2017) that qualitative research focuses on aspects of reality that cannot be measured numerically, aiming to understand and explain the nature and dynamics of social relationships.

Non-probability sampling is appropriate for qualitative research as it allows participants to be selected based on their relevance to the research topic and their ability to provide detailed insights into the topic being studied. In particular, purposive sampling will be used to select participants who have direct experience or knowledge relevant to the research topic. This approach supports the collection of in-depth qualitative data and

enables a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences. (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p37)

The sample for this research will consist of 32 children attending (SRB's) attached to mainstream settings across two separate schools, alongside teaching staff and support practitioners working within the SRBs. These participants have been specifically selected due to their direct relevance to the research topic and their ability to provide meaningful qualitative data regarding children's social development and peer relationships. The focus of the study is on obtaining a deeper understanding of participants' experiences rather than producing statistical findings

The SRB settings have been chosen due to their relevance to the research aim, particularly the availability of partial integration with mainstream peers. These environments provide an appropriate context for exploring both separate and integrated educational experiences and examine how varying levels of mainstream interaction may influence children's social skills and peer relationships. This sample is appropriate because practitioners are in a position to observe changes in children's social behaviour, so they are well positioned to comment on peer relationships and social skills. However, the sample is limited as it only represents a small group and the findings may not represent all SRB settings. The study is limited to two schools with potentially different approaches to inclusion and integration. Therefore, the experiences and interactions observed within these settings may not reflect children and practitioners in other SRB provisions.

Structured non-participant observations will be conducted to examine children's social interactions within the SRB and during any mainstream integration opportunities. Observations are chosen because they allow the researcher to capture natural behaviour in real time, rather than relying on accounts from other people. Macleod and kay (2008, p. 134) claim the use of observation is an essential and highly valuable research method in early childhood studies as it improves both our understanding of children and our professional growth. Observations are particularly useful in this context as children in SRB settings may have communication difficulties, meaning other methods would not always be appropriate. Observing allows researchers to collect data

within natural environments without relying on verbal responses. (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). The observations will focus on; the Initiation of peer interaction, participation in group activities, communication with peers and it will look for signs of inclusion or isolation all this will be observed whilst in the SRB and integration within mainstream classrooms and during outdoor play.

Despite their strengths, observations are subject to several limitations.

The Hawthorne Effect: According to Oswald et al (2014, quoted in Dicks, 2026) the Hawthorne effect occurs when individuals alter their usual behaviour because they are aware they are being observed or studied. The attention given by researchers can influence participants' actions, which may distort results and reduce the authenticity of natural behaviour. This remains a continuing challenge in social research.

The Halo Effect: As described by Gabrieli et al (2021) refers to the tendency to form broad assumptions about someone because of one specific quality or feature. For example, an attractive person may be perceived as more intelligent and trustworthy than someone who is not deemed attractive. The halo effect can influence judgement in both positive and negative ways (Noor, et al, 2023, p.1118) To minimise these limitations, observations will be conducted over multiple sessions to allow children to become familiar with the researcher's presence and to help prevent the researcher forming bias.

Questionnaires will be distributed to SRB practitioners to gather data on their perceptions of children's social skills and peer relationships. The purpose of these questionnaires is to gather practitioner perspectives regarding how and when the children in the SRBs are being integrated with their mainstream peers. A questionnaire method is selected because it allows for efficient data collection from multiple staff members and reduced time pressure on participants. The questionnaire will have a mix of closed and open-ended questions to balance measurable responses with more detailed qualitative insights. A further advantage of questionnaires is that they provide a degree of anonymity, which may reduce pressure on participants and encourage greater honesty when discussing potentially sensitive topics relating to inclusion and social development. However, questionnaires also present limitations. Responses may lack

depth compared to interviews, practitioners may provide socially desirable answers rather than fully honest responses and there is limited opportunity for analysis or clarification of responses.

Semi-structured interviews were considered but not selected due to practical constraints such as time limitations and practitioner availability. Although interviews could have provided richer and more detailed data, as the researcher can critically analyse the response quality and detect any misunderstanding of the question, (Walliman, 2011, p100) they require considerable time commitment and scheduling flexibility, which may not be achievable within the study timeframe. Questionnaires were therefore chosen as a more efficient alternative while still allowing for meaningful data collection.

Focus groups were also considered but rejected due to the potential for dominant voices to influence group discussion, particularly in school environments where some practitioners may feel less confident expressing views that differ from their colleagues. Additionally, arranging group sessions within a school setting would be challenging, making them again not suitable.

Triangulation involves combining two or more research methods within a single study. It is used in research to improve the validity of the results. Comparing the results helps to reduce bias, overcome the weaknesses of relying on only one method and provide a complete understanding of the subject being studied. (Thurmond, 2001, p. 253) In this research, triangulation will be achieved through the combination of observations and practitioner questionnaires. The purpose of triangulation is to compare findings gathered through different methods in order to identify similarities, differences, or inconsistencies within the data. (Heale and Forbes, 2013) For example, observational findings relating to children's peer interactions can be compared with practitioner perceptions collected through questionnaires. This process helps strengthen the credibility of the research by reducing reliance on a single source of data. However, the study remains limited by the size of the sample.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical practice is an important component of educational research, especially when research involves children and vulnerable groups within an SRB setting. According to the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024), researchers carrying out studies have a responsibility to ensure that participants involved in or inadvertently impacted by the study, including themselves are protected from harm, treated with respect, and fully informed about the purpose and processes of the study. As the research will be carried out under the UWTSD, the researcher must follow the university's Research Ethics and Integrity Policy (2025). It states that when conducting research, researchers must maintain a high standard of accuracy and integrity throughout the length of the study. The research must be worthwhile and should not cause unnecessary risk or harm to participants. The conduct should be ethically appropriate and legal whilst promoting transparency, data protection and fairness.

As the study involves observations of children and questionnaires completed by practitioners, several ethical considerations must be addressed, including informed consent, confidentiality, safeguarding, data protection, and minimising risk to participants, the researcher, and the university.

One of the key ethical principles in educational research is obtaining voluntary informed consent. Informed consent ensures that participants understand the purpose of the study, what participation involves, and their rights throughout the research process (BERA, 2024). In this study, consent will be required from multiple people due to the involvement of children within educational settings. Permission will first be sought from the headteachers. Informed consent will be obtained from practitioners participating in questionnaires and from the parents or carers of children involved in the observations. As children may not fully understand research procedures, assent will also be obtained from the children themselves using age-appropriate language. Alderson and Morrow (2020) argue that children should be viewed as active participants in research rather than inactive subjects. Therefore, the researcher will explain the observations in simple and understandable language, ensuring children understand that participation is voluntary. Children's verbal and non-verbal behaviours will also be monitored to identify any signs of worry or reluctance to participate. For example, if a child becomes

distressed, withdrawn, or actively avoids the researcher, observations involving that child will cease immediately. This is particularly important within SRB settings where some children may communicate discomfort non-verbally. Participants will also be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without negative consequences. Practitioners will be able to withdraw their questionnaire responses prior to data analysis, and parents will be informed that they may withdraw consent for their child's observations at any time during the study. Providing participants with the freedom to withdraw helps ensure that participation remains voluntary rather than coerced.

BERA (2024) emphasises the importance of openness and honesty throughout the research process. To ensure transparency, all participants will receive an information sheet clearly outlining the purpose and aims of the study, the methods being used, and how the findings will be used. The information sheet will include details regarding what participation involves, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity procedures, how data will be collected, stored, and destroyed, potential risks and benefits of participation, contact details for the researcher and university supervisor. There will also be information regarding disclosure, and the appropriate steps the researcher will take if there are circumstances that they will legally have to break confidentiality.

Providing clear and accessible information allows participants to make informed decisions regarding participation. For parents and carers, the information sheet will be written in straightforward language to avoid unnecessary academic terminology. Practitioners will also be informed that questionnaire responses are anonymous and will not be shared with school management in identifiable form. This may encourage more honest and responses regarding inclusion practices within SRB settings.

Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity is essential in protecting participants' identities and privacy. Due to the relatively small number of SRB settings within schools, there is an increased risk that participants or schools could be indirectly identified through descriptions of the setting or participant roles. To minimise this risk, pseudonyms will be used for all schools, practitioners, and children throughout the study, and no locations will be included in any notes. Confidentiality is particularly important within educational

settings, as disclosure of sensitive information could potentially affect professional relationships or reputations.

However, confidentiality has its limitations where safeguarding concerns arise. Participants will be informed that if observations or disclosures raise concerns regarding the safety or wellbeing of a child, the researcher has a professional duty to report these concerns to the designated safeguarding lead within the school, in line with safeguarding legislation and school policies. (Children' Bureau 2002, cited in Roberts-Holmes, 2014) This ensures that ethical responsibilities towards child protection take precedence over confidentiality where necessary.

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to minimise physical, emotional, and psychological harm to participants (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Although this study presents low levels of risk, several potential issues must still be considered.

One potential risk to children is emotional discomfort caused by being observed. Some children may become anxious or self-conscious due to the researcher's presence, particularly within SRB settings where children may already experience social communication difficulties. To minimise this, observations will take place within familiar classroom environments during normal school activities to reduce disruption. The researcher will adopt a non-intrusive role and spend time within the setting prior to formal observations so that children become familiar with their presence.

Another potential issue is the Hawthorne effect, where participants alter their behaviour because they know they are being observed (Adair, 1984). This may affect the authenticity of social interactions observed during the study. To reduce this effect, observations will be conducted over multiple sessions, allowing children and staff to become accustomed to the researcher's presence and behave more naturally over time.

Practitioners participating in questionnaires may also experience concerns regarding judgement or criticism of their professional practice. To reduce this risk, questionnaires will remain anonymous, and participants will be reassured that their practice is not part of the study. Questions will be phrased sensitively and professionally to avoid feelings of blame or discomfort.

Educational research also requires consideration of risks to the researcher. Conducting research within school settings may expose the researcher to safeguarding disclosures, emotional stress, or professional boundary issues. To minimise these risks, the researcher will follow all school safeguarding procedures and report any concerns directly to the designated safeguarding lead rather than attempting to manage situations independently.

There is also a risk of researcher bias influencing interpretation of observations. The halo effect may occur where the researcher's prior impressions of a child influence interpretations of behaviour. To reduce subjectivity, structured observation criteria will be used consistently across all observations. Reflexive practice will also be adopted, with the researcher maintaining awareness of personal assumptions and potential bias throughout data collection and analysis.

The university also carries reputational and legal responsibilities regarding student research. Failure to conduct ethical research could damage the university's reputation or result in breaches of legislation. Therefore, ethical approval will be sought from the university ethics committee before data collection begins. The study will also follow the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) Research Integrity and Code of Practice alongside BERA (2024) ethical guidelines.

Another potential risk to the university involves breaches of confidentiality or data protection legislation. To minimise this risk, all data will be securely stored using password-protected devices and encrypted university-approved systems. Paper-based documents, such as signed consent forms, will be stored securely in locked storage.

Data protection is an essential ethical consideration when conducting educational research. This study will comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. These legislations exist to protect individuals' personal information and ensure that data is processed lawfully, fairly, and transparently.

Observation notes and questionnaire responses will be anonymised immediately after collection. Digital data will be stored on password-protected devices, while paper records will be kept in locked storage accessible only to the researcher. Data will not be

shared with unauthorised individuals or organisations. Participants also have legal rights regarding their data under GDPR (2018). For example, participants have the right to access the information held about them, request corrections to inaccurate data, and withdraw consent for data use before anonymisation occurs. These rights will be explained clearly within the participant information sheet.

Data will only be retained for the period required by university policy before being securely destroyed. Secure handling of data is essential not only for legal compliance but also for maintaining trust between the researcher and participants.