

Understanding Socio-Emotional Competence Through the Lens of Special Education & Educators: A Review

Arnisha Aman^{1*}

ABSTRACT

In a school setting, when a child has been under the protection, guidance, and supervision of their primary attachment figure at home, a novel setting with unfamiliar faces, rules, and regulations can be very daunting. The role that classroom settings play in shaping the child's adjustment in the future developmental trajectory, as well as the importance and need to understand it, is of priority. Teachers are important contributors in classroom scenarios, and they are deemed to be the immediate caregivers for children in the classroom. Therefore, it becomes crucial to know the contributions they primarily play in guiding a child academically, emotionally, socially and mentally. The paper aims to describe that the needs and the way in which a special child would characterise their belongingness are very different from other children. In this regard, if teachers who are supposed to cater to their personalised needs are bound to use punitive measures, then the ability of the special child to understand and interpret it is very different and can be a tainting element in their life. With papers focusing on the importance of teachers' training programs, especially with regard to socio-emotional competence, this paper aims to highlight the same in the context of special schools by providing instances from the made observations and associating them in a narrative way, improvising on the future recommendations and its implications.

Keywords: *Special School, Socio-Emotional Competence, Special Children*

A way from the traditional and closed-mind perspective of looking at children and their parents catering for their special needs, in recent times, the importance of special education has been noticeable across the world, wherein there is a growing emphasis on understanding the needs of exceptional children not through a generalised approach of how global definitions define them but more along the lines of comprehending their specific need structures based on the kind of environment they interact with daily (Acle-Tomasini, 2006). The purpose of special schools would be to cater to these individual needs, wherein the aim is to provide normal experience to these children coming from different backgrounds yet encountering challenges of whether the ideology of inclusive education will be beneficial concerning how the varied contextual factors of the child's environmental background will play a role in determining the direction of fostering positive development and adjustment for the child.

¹MSc Clinical Psychology Student at Kristu Jayanti College, Bengaluru

*Corresponding Author

Received: July 07, 2025; Revision Received: September 03, 2025; Accepted: September 07, 2025

Understanding Socio-Emotional Competence Through the Lens of Special Education & Educators: A Review

In this essence, if we are to compare such a stance with the chosen case of this paper, it was observed during the internship period that although the aims, objectives and intention of the special school were appropriate in every alignment but at the outset, the execution was far-fetched. This is because, from the very element of curriculum design, the school gave significantly less emphasis on how a child might differ based on the particular neurodevelopmental disorder, especially with respect to their specific needs. For instance, a child with autism, very sensitive to environmental stimuli, is unable to respond to what is being expected from the environment concerning delayed speech and physical dexterity. In this regard, if this child was expected to attain a particular academic milestone of writing alphabets without catered assistance, then such expectation will not be fruitful due to various biological factors, but if we are to look at their socio-contextual factors and as Fraser (2004) have suggested that the way a child will benefit from an all-inclusive special school programme will depend greatly if the transactional task is being carried out in the school which implies if the different people engaged in this medium of inclusive education will owe to direct their experiences and strategies in similar attitude and outlooks. The absence of this socio-contextual factor was observed in the school wherein the primary outcome with which the teachers had modelled their goals for the children was outcome-based, in which the school almost always presented an atmosphere of a challenging environment to cater to the specific children's needs and for them towards this challenge was comprehended through utilising interim solutions on a daily basis, focusing only on the present circumstances rather than future orientation. Although the solutions used in this regard will call for critiqued attention, however, the aim of the paper is to draw emphasis along these lines on how the ecology to which the child is frequently exposed to can have an impact on the already challenging adjustment levels of the children and how in this aspect teachers can act as a catalyst towards imbuing a positive or a negative source of reinforcement for a child.

The clinical term for the heterogeneous group of disorders known to affect social interaction and communication and result in the sense of repetitive and constrictive behavioural patterns and interests are deemed as neurodevelopmental disorders. The initial manifestation of the neurodevelopmental disorder most often begins in childhood, wherein the major identifying factors are the child's inability to cater to responses made in their environment, inability to maintain eye contact and delayed speech development (Courchesne et al., 2020). At the outset of the internship, it was observed that the teachers in the school had an understanding of the distinct neurodevelopmental disorders and were also well-versed with the specific difficulties that each child experienced in the school. However, these understandings reflected a kind of contradictory behaviour from them wherein reprimanding a child who did not necessarily abide by the instructions or expressed deviant behaviours was a common recurring theme in the school and was very normalised. When decoding this normalised attitude towards punitive measures, an element of justification that emerged was that initiating a response of fear amongst the children is the only pathway through which they will understand their environmental cues, and when the deviation of such cues occurs, it is the punitive measures which will act as a source of reminder for the children. In this very essence, the goals and principles for this special school reflected a great deal of lacking in awareness of the behavioural and emotional functioning of these children, and most importantly, there emerged a need to revamp the structure of the school policy setting because although there were children whose parents have entrusted a belief for the progress of their children, the experience, strength, uniformity and integrity from the managerial end posited a need for an immediate change.

DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION

In this pursuit of achieving an all-inclusive environment, Kauffman (1995) postulates the role ecological principles are bound to play with respect to special education and specifies how a special educator who is known to hold a niche position in the child's everyday life will have an impact in altering their particular ecosystem. This is an essential implication in special education because as every child is likely to portray differences in the way they perceive their environment, it becomes important to understand how the school in itself will imbibe this dynamic culture of changing needs. A landmark contribution to comprehending the impact of ecology in special education is Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems theory, wherein the focal point deliberates the interactions that an individual will have with their wider social context and explains its influence across five different levels of the individual's environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, pp. 793-828). The most significant of these five levels which Bronfenbrenner has associated with the school is that of microsystem, which describes the school environment as a learning ground for students to develop relationships with their peers and teachers contributing to their academic, social and cognitive development (Anderson et al., 2014; Hayes et al., 2017). Although the social and physical elements (Petrogiannis et al., 2003) of the school environment are of particular importance, teachers who serve as the immediate bridge between the needs of the students define in elaborate terms the specificity of these two elements and which is often known to vary across schools. As we have established that the functioning policies of a special school are expected to be different, a special educator who has an insight into the suitable learning pathways a special child would have and yet adopts an attitude and perception of low expectations such that they are being projected in the way they would address a child or make it evident in the classroom setting for other children to observe and notice the same behaviour, in turn, inhibits the academic journey for the child. In this stance, while observing the everyday functioning of the special school during an internship, it was seen that children who were diagnosed with Down Syndrome, although their cognitive functioning among which logical reasoning was impacted, the approach of the teacher towards them was indifferent. This is because as compared to the children with autism and ADHD, these children could at most respond to the external stimuli being presented to them. As aforementioned that the teachers had a rigid set of expectations of being interim outcome-oriented, but their behaviour towards the children with Down Syndrome contradicted; this is because although they wanted the children in the school to develop the sense of being responsive to their environment and for the most, they did gain a partial understanding of it as part of their larger academic goals. However, in this quest of exploration and curiosity, whenever they posed questions to the teacher as part of normal teacher-student interaction, their initiatives in themselves were presented as a scenario of amusement wherein their alignment of thought processes was dismissed.

The diversity in this realm of pursuing education has been diverse with regard to culture and more sensitisation towards the need for special education. It is in this context that Inclusive Education (IE), a term frequently used within the education research policy, has been lauded for its dynamic rather than a static process and, in this context, has been viewed as a social construct (Mac Ruairc, 2013; Slee, 2012). This construct relies deeply on the relationship between people and the societal system, which constitutes the social environment (Mac Ruairc, 2013; Slee, 2012). In the year 1976, Bronfenbrenner adapted his social ecological theory to the field of education, which postulated two important determinants of students learning: one being the attributes of the learner and the environment and the second being the relationships that is bound to develop as a result of the interactions between these two

Understanding Socio-Emotional Competence Through the Lens of Special Education & Educators: A Review

variables. It is through this novel adaptation that a distinction emerged wherein it was understood that the absolute traits or characteristics of students should not be a decisive criterion for the quality and effective education that a student will receive but will be impacted by the range of factors that is characterized by the interconnections and relationships formed within their school ecological context (Anderson et al., 2014)

The ecology of an inclusive education framework, as Bronfenbrenner has postulated, will invariably have the learner at the centre of this framework. The existence of the learner is understood as a “nested arrangement of structures” characterised by five different systems, and it is how decisions and actions are designed on these premises that will benefit the learner. As with these schools of understanding, three primary determinants of IE are being described for the learner- the first determinant being participation, in which the learner is expected to be active while associating themselves with different aspects of school socially and academically, thereby creating a rich collaborative environment towards a meaningful learning experience with peers. This determinant was a difficult establishment in the special school because one major criterion which contributed to this limitation was the inability to divide the classroom setting based on age group and the specific neurodevelopmental disorder. This encouraged frequent misunderstandings between peers, and although they yield less control over their emotions and how they perceive their environment, an initiative from within the school lacked to segregate students based on their specific needs. In addition, it was also observed that with repeated exposure to similar conflicts and disagreements between the students, the teacher's acknowledgement of how these conflicts can impact the future orientation of the students was very minimal.

Moreover, an important characteristic of this determinant is that in this learning experience, the learners must have a voice to establish how the particular learning environment is impacting them (Portela, 2013). This should also yield an opportunity for the learners to engage in activities which interest them rather than being forced to accomplish a task. In this essence, it was observed that at the very outset, when the students were merged irrespective of their needs, it was difficult for them to adapt and learn from each other, and the inability of one student to understand and cater to the comfort of others, often created an external perception of conflict-ridden scenarios which when comprehended were situations when they tried to convey the levels of discomfort or the scrutiny they deserved was not communicated properly. Such an observation was not just limited to peer relations but also with respect to teachers, wherein as these students could only span their attention for a short period of time, the mere instructions of teachers to accomplish a task which they didn't necessarily enjoy or the desire to do it was induced by repeated appraisal of fear, did not to a greater extent contribute to impactful learning experiences because when asked to do the same task the next day, either they would show apprehension or rejection of it altogether.

The second most important determinant is how the learning experience itself can be made achieving in nature. This conveys how learning goals can be customised to meet individual needs and how assessment provided in the same regard can be made meaningful and attainable for the learners (Slee, 2012). An observation made in the special school was that even though the curriculum tries to focus on distinct academic junctions from English to Mathematics, the distribution of the subjects or the specificity of the syllabus needed to be more precise. The teachings were not in harmony with every day of the week. As we have established that these children often find it difficult to organise, locate or rationalise the happenstance around themselves, it was also evident in this aspect that although a

Understanding Socio-Emotional Competence Through the Lens of Special Education & Educators: A Review

curriculum was in place, they found it difficult to distinguish between the subjects and often applied same schemas or strategies across subjects. In this regard, as the classroom setting was very thronged, it was challenging to address dynamic changes occurring within the setting, and this was not just limited to the conflicts that arose but also with respect to the wrong application of schemas that often go unnoticed by teachers. In addition, whenever a task challenging for the student was placed and although the task was not attainable and the student placed an effort was almost always neglected or abhorred. Such patterns were also paired with punitive measures with the justification that if a task is not attainable and suitable for the student, the scope of exploration should not be provided as it runs a risk of deviating from the established curriculum and the mistakes that might occur while trying to accomplish the task is not entirely anticipated.

A counter-argument that can be placed in this aspect is that the very practice of limiting one's curiosity cannot be justified as part of an education curriculum, especially when it comes to special children, and this takes us to the third determinant of successful IE, which is imbibing the culture of valuing the learners for who they are and what they intend to offer. Coming from practical experience, it was observable that these children displayed a quest to explore their environment, and this involved beyond the academic books, and this varied for every child. Some showed a deeper interest in learning about colour theory, while others in making art. A limitation that arose for the school to magnify these observations is that they imparted a culture to be stringent, a follower of routine and schedules that it gave very less opportunity for the students to explore beyond the stipulated time from academics. It was observed in this regard that this culture established a sense of impatience and restlessness in them wherein their sole objective and definition of having a fruitful learning experience was to finish tasks which weren't of greater interest in a haphazard way, after which they could indulge in their activities which gave them a sense of fulfilment. From a personal stance, this again is a drawback of the schooling management concerning policy making because of primary identification, segregation based on specific interests, and away from punitive measures with collaborative learning strategies.

Theoretical frameworks have tried to understand how the long-term effects of individual stress on teachers can impact how they model behaviour in classroom settings (Hastings, 2005). Hastings (2005) is of the view that if a teacher is known to have adverse emotional reactions to problems in the class or with a particular student, then even though such reactions will impact their well-being but at the same time, runs the risk of accumulation over time which can be unleashed negatively towards their immediate environment. This was very evident in the special school, wherein the intensity of a teacher would respond to a particular student varied across the week in; at times, the teacher might project themselves to be very understanding of the contextual differences, whereas, at other times, it was difficult to quantify patience. In this regard, an effort has been made to understand a reciprocal relationship between how behavioural problems in a specific classroom scenario will induce a specific response from the teacher and how that will impact the behavioural problem further by either reducing or increasing its future intensity (Hall & Oliver, 1992). If we try to understand this from a wider perspective, then an agreement occurs that while responding to a particular situation, there exists a need to be mindful of our own thoughts, emotions and thinking patterns to evaluate how our behaviours might induce an action which can have negative future consequences. This very essence was conveyed by the concept of emotional intelligence formulated by Peter Salovey and D.Mayer in the year 1990, which they defined

Understanding Socio-Emotional Competence Through the Lens of Special Education & Educators: A Review

as a subset of social intelligence that involves the capacity to actively distinguish between one's own emotions and those of others in order to inform one's thoughts and behaviour.

There is a great understanding that a classroom that fosters a warm relationship between the teacher and the student when there exists a positive development with regard to the student's social and emotional well-being in a school setting, where children feel the most accepted in the environment with the help of their teachers. (Reichl, 2017). In this context, the idea of social and emotional learning (SEL) assumes a significant role because it is recognised that a teacher's well-being in this area can have an impact on how effectively students' SEL develops (Reichl, 2017). According to the definition of SEL, it is a set of procedures through which individuals acquire knowledge and effectively apply that knowledge or skill to control and understand their own emotions as well as to feel and demonstrate empathy for others, all of which help individuals maintain healthy social connections (Reichl, 2017). Although this is easily comprehended, a challenge will arise is with respect to applying the same strategy in special schools wherein modelling and teaching emotions or being aware of a particular emotion cannot be expected out of the special children as it will take a prolonged sense of exposure and sensitisation. However, the initial initiative will always occur from the teacher's end, wherein the very promotion of SEL will require robust training of teachers, and this will not just be limited to being trained as special educators.

The most appropriate model that is most likely to suit the special school used in this case study is that of the Prosocial Classroom Model postulated by Jennings and Greenberg (2009). Here, the first step is when we consider the teacher to be a key player in teacher-student relationships. A teacher is known to identify the specific needs of a student with regard to their emotional portrayal and also attempts to associate links within it through various cognitive appraisals, as these motivate the child to display a particular set of emotions. The second element of this model is that educators who have a deep understanding of SEL are better at managing the classroom environment. They have a tendency to use their abilities in emotional comprehension in a useful way by being proactive in enhancing the learning process and in controlling the behaviour of the students. This also applies to the scenario we previously discussed, where a child is exposed to rejection, withdrawal, or even conflicts from their peers. Teachers in this situation can help from a more dynamic perspective, where they will not take sides but instead address behaviours from both sides in a more effective way. The third element focuses on the role models that teachers with much higher SEL provide for encouraging appropriate social and emotional behaviour in kids. Together, these three model elements form a transactional relationship with the goal of promoting a healthy classroom environment where students can adapt to the structure of a healthy environment that fosters social, academic, and emotional outcomes. These changes will also strengthen the teacher's effectiveness and commitment to their job, creating a positive feedback loop that will prevent the teacher from becoming burnt out.

There is a lack of knowledge that can be directed at the development of teachers' personal selves, whereas the current system of education has assumed that a teacher will in fact, have these skills ingrained within them to establish support. While these qualities of a teacher will be readily welcomed in any educational institution, little attention has been given to how teachers could be supported in their development of social-emotional competence (SEC). Apart from these, as the child grows, there are different developmental milestones, both in terms of physical and mental development, that require a different level of strategies and for

this, training is essential (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). In this essence, a teacher might be well adapted to deal with a conflict-ridden classroom situation but at the same time, might not be able to deal quite well with demanding parents.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The paper aimed to explore the importance of socio-emotional competence in special education through a case study observed during a clinical psychology internship at a special school. The study highlights the unique needs of children with neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD, autism, down syndrome and intellectual disabilities. The focus is on how the classroom environment and teacher interactions impact the socio-emotional and academic development of children with special needs. The emphasis is on the importance of teacher training programs, especially those focused on socio-emotional competence. It has highlighted and taken inspiration from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to understand the child's development within the school environment. The discussion also touches on the need for inclusive education frameworks, which will signify value participation, individualised learning goals, and a culture that values, nurtures, and respects the unique contributions of each learner.

REFERENCES

- Acle-Tomasini, G., Martínez-Basurto, L. M., & Lozada-García, R. (2016). Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice: Ecological Risk/Resilience Model Contributions to Special Education. *Creative Education*, 07(07), 1093–1110. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2016.77114>
- Anderson, J., Boyle, C., & Deppeler, J. M. (2014). The ecology of inclusive education. In *SensePublishers eBooks* (pp. 23–34). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-692-9_3
- Damon, W., & Lerner, R. M. (2006). *Handbook of Child Psychology, Theoretical Models of Human Development*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Fraser, M. W. (2004). *Risk and Resilience in Childhood: An Ecological perspective*. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL17117741M/Risk_and_resilience_in_childhood
- Hall, S. S., & Oliver, C. (1992). Differential effects of severe self-injurious behaviour on the behaviour of others. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 20(4), 355–365. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s014134730001750x>
- Hastings, R. P. (2005). Staff in special education settings and behaviour problems: towards a framework for research and practice. *Educational Psychology*, 25(2–3), 207–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144341042000301166>
- Hayes, N., O'Toole, L., & Halpenny, A. M. (2017). Introducing Bronfenbrenner. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315646206>
- Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The Prosocial Classroom: teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 491–525. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>
- Kauffman, J. M. (1995). Why we must celebrate a diversity of restrictive environments. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 10(4). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ514833>
- Mac Ruairc, G., Ottesen, E., & Precey, R. (2013). Leadership for inclusive education. In *SensePublishers eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-134-4>
- Michalos, A. C. (2014). *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*. Springer.
- Oliver, C. (1995). Self-Injurious Behaviour in Children with Learning Disabilities: Recent Advances in Assessment and Intervention. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 36(6), 909–927. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1995.tb01341.x>

Understanding Socio-Emotional Competence Through the Lens of Special Education & Educators: A Review

- Panopoulos, N., & Korea, M. D. (2020). Bronfenbrenner's theory and teaching intervention: The case of student with intellectual disability. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.17263/jlls.759243>
- Pruaño, A. P. (2013). Students and Leadership for Inclusion. In *SensePublishers eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-134-4_14
- Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2017). Social and Emotional Learning and Teachers. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 137–155. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2017.0007>
- Slee, R. (2013). How do we make inclusive education happen when exclusion is a political predisposition? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(8), 895–907. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.602534>

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Arnisha, A. (2025). Understanding Socio-Emotional Competence Through the Lens of Special Education & Educators: A Review. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(3), 3186-3193. DIP:18.01.288.20251303, DOI:10.25215/1303.288