



**Facilitating social inclusion and self-determination in students with vision impairment: Promoting competence, autonomy and relatedness.**

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**Background:** Perceptions of social inclusion are vital to the mental health and motivation of students with disabilities. In this study, I explored the social inclusion in high school of Australian students with vision impairments (VI).

**Methods:** Twelve high school students with VI were administered an initial questionnaire, the Psychological Sense of School Membership. For the next seven days, the students carried iDevices loaded with the PIEL Survey App. Seven times a day, both in and out of school, the App presented the students with the same in-the-moment survey about the activities and interactions in which they were engaged. Lastly, the students were interviewed about the social aspects of school.

**Results:** Five themes encompassed the varying influences on school social inclusion. These were: (a) putting myself forward; (b) knowing me; (c) having control; (d) having a place to shine; and (e) peer exclusion and rejection. These themes align with the needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness found in self-determination theory, a theory of motivation. This linking of school social inclusion, self-determination and motivation suggests students will put effort into engaging with, and feel included in school if activities and interactions fulfil their innate needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness.

**Conclusion:** This finding is important as it shifts the focus of social inclusion away from “deficits” in the student to a focus on their social environment. Practitioners may need to reframe their understandings of competence, autonomy and motivation as being influenced by the environment, rather than being somewhat stable traits of individual students. Self-determination is taught to students with VI as part of the Expanded Core Curriculum. These findings however, call into question the extent to which self-determination can be “taught” if it is a by-product of transactions within the social environment. While skills such as choice and decision making and goal-setting can be taught, students need incentive to exercise these at school. Staff can enhance the social inclusion and self-determination of students with VI by focussing on enabling these students to: explore and build on strengths; fully access the curriculum alongside their peers; and have time and opportunity to develop friendships with these peers. These findings may have a wider application and be relevant to students with disabilities other than VI.