



Original Article

Inclusive Education: Enhancing Social Integration and Academic Achievement for Students With and Without Learning Disabilities Aged 5 to 14

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Received 16th May 2024

Revised 22nd November 2024; Accepted 09th December 2024

Abstract: Inclusive education is recognized as essential for fostering the holistic development of children, irrespective of their abilities or limitations. This paper examines the effects of inclusive education on students with learning disabilities (SWLD) and students without learning disabilities (SWOLD) in Southern Vietnam, focusing on its impact on social integration and academic achievement. The study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative interviews with educators and quantitative analysis of student performance data. There are 487 participants, consisting of 132 SWLD and 355 SWOLD. These participants were drawn from inclusive and non-inclusive schools across various educational levels in southern Vietnam. Results indicate that inclusive practices significantly enhance social integration, empathy, and understanding among students. For SWLD, inclusive education leads to improved academic outcomes, particularly in the early education stages, while SWOLD reports favourable or neutral effects on academic achievements. However, at the secondary education level, the impact tends to be neutral or adverse for SWOLD. The research also identifies challenges in Southern Vietnam, including insufficient funding, inadequate teacher training and limited policy support, which hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. Addressing these barriers is crucial for creating an equitable learning environment for all students in Vietnam.

Keywords: Inclusive education, students with disabilities, social integration, academic achievement, empathy.

1. Introduction

In 2018, the United States Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defined a

specific learning disability as a disorder that hinders the essential cognitive processes involved in comprehending and utilizing language, including speaking, listening, thinking, reading, writing, spelling, and mathematical reasoning. This encompasses conditions such as dyslexia, minimal brain dysfunction, brain injury, perceptual disabilities

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<https://doi.org/10.25073/2588-1159/vnuer.4930>

and developmental aphasia. It is important to note that specific learning disabilities do not include difficulties primarily caused by intellectual disability, emotional disturbances, visual, auditory or motor impairments or unfavourable environmental, cultural or economic factors [2]. In 2013, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) distinguished between developmental learning disability and academic learning disability. Learning difficulties associated with developmental issues are identified in young children attending preschool. They include problems with attention, memory, language comprehension, perceptual abilities, motor skills, cognitive processes and the delayed acquisition of fundamental skills. Examples of academic learning disabilities include deficiencies in reading, writing, spelling and mathematical proficiency, which are typically honed during the initial stages of formal education [4].

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2008) stated that inclusive education was a process of supplying education to all students regardless of their genders, backgrounds, abilities, characteristics and learning expectations. It is "central to the achievement of high-quality education for all learners and the development of more inclusive societies" [6]. Inclusive education's goal is to provide children with and without disabilities equal opportunities and educational resources to foster their development, independence and social engagement [7].

Ruijs and Peetsma (2010) stated that the term "inclusive education" refers to the approach of integrating students with special needs into regular classroom environments as opposed to placing them in special education facilities. To put it another way, it means integrating special education students into regular classrooms and giving them the support resources they require there, rather than relocating them to receive support elsewhere. Students' interactions with peers provide both students with learning disabilities (SWLD) as well as students without learning disabilities

(SWOLD) with critical opportunities to enhance their social and cognitive development [9]. These interactions help SWLD feel less isolated in their communities by positively impacting their psychological well-being and showing a better sense of integration into the community.

In addition, various views of educational organizations are the root causes of differences in the application of inclusive education. Politicians, academics and practitioners, therefore, have different opinions about inclusive education and the roles and capabilities that schools should play in promoting its success [10]. Therefore, exploring inclusive education in educational contexts has several practical and scholarly obstacles. An institutionalized framework with mechanisms that sustain exclusion for some students has been established as a result of a variety of factors, including the creation of policies, administrative supervision, instructional practices, student interactions and all facets of educational communication [11].

Vietnam has also been trying to integrate inclusive education into schools, in order to benefit Vietnamese children with disabilities, with the desire to provide them with the best possible development and help them integrate better into modern society. Since the early 1990s, the Vietnamese government has established policies to ensure that children with disabilities have access to education. This focus is currently reflected in the national plan titled "Inclusive Education during the period of 2018 - 2020," which aims to enhance accessibility and improve the quality of education for individuals with disabilities. The plan prioritizes ensuring that people with disabilities receive equitable, high-quality education [12]. By 2020, the objectives included providing inclusive, quality education to at least 70% of preschool-age children with disabilities, as well as the broader population of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, at least 50% of managers, teachers and staff involved in educating people with disabilities received training, with 40% of provinces and cities

establishing centers to support the development of inclusive education. Moreover, all provinces, regions, cities and educational institutions are expected to implement legal provisions regarding education accessibility. Vietnam has also actively engaged in international commitments and regional inclusive education goals, establishing a strong legal framework at multiple levels to support these efforts [12].

An investigation into the implementation of inclusive education was carried out across several schools in southern Vietnam. It aimed to assess the standard of inclusive learning in both Southern Vietnam and the whole country. Additionally, the study sought to gain insights into the accomplishments and challenges encountered during the adoption of inclusive education practices within the Vietnamese educational system. The results indicate that the integration of inclusive education in Vietnam encounters numerous challenges. A significant number of Vietnamese children with disabilities are not properly exposed to inclusive education. These students are educated separately in special schools for students with disabilities, where they receive tailored instruction to address their needs and prepare them for their future careers. However, being isolated from the regular educational environment with non-disabled students makes it difficult for them to communicate and integrate into society as a whole. Consequently, SWLD in Vietnam should be educated in general settings alongside SWOLD to enhance their self-esteem, integrate better into society and develop the necessary skills for their future. Besides, it is obvious that the successful implementation of inclusive education in the Vietnamese context requires effort from all leaders, educators and collaboration from families of children with disabilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Why Is Inclusive Education Important?

Chamberlain et al., (2007) argued that inclusive education could enhance learning and development for both SWLD and SWOLD if they are given opportunities to receive more

appropriate support, learn from age-appropriate models, interactional partners and experience collaboration.

The goal of inclusive education is to guarantee that every student has equal access to opportunities for high-quality education. The primary goal of educational institutions should be to foster holistic growth in students, addressing their intellectual, physical, social, personal and vocational dimensions. This approach enables SWLD to gain the skills necessary for independence and a smooth transition into society. This reduces their perception of differences, limitations and feelings of inadequacy resulting from their disability [14]. The advantages of inclusive education are numerous and include institutional changes to improve educational accessibility as well as the development of robust community engagement. The author also highlights benefits, including enabling flexible learning settings that are customized to students' needs and promoting community engagement to foster significant relationships among families, communities and educational institutions. Vaghrodia and Patel (2022) also indicate that incorporating students with disabilities into a conventional educational environment demonstrates the importance of inclusive education in fostering an atmosphere that embraces diversity and cultivates fundamental virtues like empathy and kindness. Recognizing the significance of inclusive education for societal development, Vietnam has initiated efforts to raise public awareness about educational equality and to advocate for support for children with disabilities. Inclusive education in Vietnam began over 30 years ago, with significant developments starting in 1991 when the National Center for Special Education (NCSE) received funding from Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to establish the first inclusive education model in two northern districts. By 1992, nearly 1,000 of the 1,078 students with mild, moderate and severe disabilities were enrolled in preschool and general education classes in Thuong Tin and Tu Liem districts. That same year, the National Assembly

approved a new Constitution, which highlighted that "The government and society create conditions for children with disabilities to receive appropriate cultural and vocational education. In 2007, Vietnam signed the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, becoming the first nation in Asia and the second globally [16].

The country's commitment to ensuring equal rights and access to education for these children is reflected in a range of legal documents. This includes the 1946 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, as well as the Constitutions of 1959, 1980, 1992 and 2013, all of which emphasize the protection of civil rights and the prohibition of discrimination and mistreatment. Furthermore, various laws contain specific chapters, sections or provisions dedicated to individuals with disabilities, detailing policies, assistance and care. Vietnam has also established a comprehensive legal framework that addresses the rights of children with disabilities and their access to education [12].

Since having well-timed strategies and effective implementation, inclusive education in Vietnam has begun to yield positive results. Awareness and support for children with disabilities within the community have significantly increased. Community members surveyed and interviewed by the evaluation team indicated that participation in project activities led to a noticeable shift in their perception. Caring for and supporting all children, including those with disabilities, became a shared community responsibility and priority. For example, local leaders organized public awareness campaigns through newspapers and radio stations, while community groups such as women's and farmers' unions collaborated to raise funds for the education of children with disabilities. Additionally, notable achievements from the early stages of inclusive education include substantial upgrades to local infrastructure, revised age requirements and ensuring that no more than 5% of students in a class have disabilities and that these students are no more than three years older than their peers. There

have also been significant improvements in teaching quality and attitudes towards children with disabilities, along with increased family support and involvement. Overall, the educational experience for children with disabilities has markedly improved since the introduction of inclusive education [13].

2.2. Impact of Inclusive Education on SWLD

Education is commonly acknowledged as a tool for societal levelling owing to its capacity to nurture both cognitive and personal development [6]. However, it has long been an issue at educational institutions across the globe for varied student groups and underprivileged communities—such as those with disabilities, those from different ethnic backgrounds and people from lower socioeconomic status - to be excluded. In response to this challenge, the notion of inclusive education has emerged as a vital agent of change in contemporary educational practices. By affirming the entitlement of every individual regardless of their diversities, to an equitable and high-quality educational experience, inclusive education signifies an essential shift in educational paradigms [14].

According to UNESCO, "Every learner is important and equally important," which implies that every child can develop into a wonderful person, regardless of their level of disability. The achievements of Stephen Hawking demonstrate that a disability does not preclude a person from achieving success and making important contributions to science. Regardless of a person's background or characteristics, schools should prioritize fostering an inclusive learning environment and appreciating each person for their contributions. This will guarantee equity in the educational system and promote a sense of community.

Lerner (2003) observed that SWLD either had intellectual disabilities or behaviour disorders or both, so they had difficulties with processing skills such as memory and thinking as well as visual and auditory perception. As a result, they had problems learning in at least one subject such as reading, math or writing.

Lerner (2003) also stated that there have been studies indicating that inclusive education has a positive impact on the social outcomes of SWLD. He asserted that if SWLD studied in general settings, they would have opportunities to observe, imitate and reflect on the actions and behaviours of other typically developing students. As a result, they could learn and develop their social skills better. Rafferty, Boettcher and Griffin (2001) found that children with severe disabilities performed better in language improvement and social skills in inclusive classrooms which are a more positive and caring environment than in segregated classrooms. In the study of Rea and colleagues in 2002 which examined the impact of inclusion on SWLD's academic achievement, they found that SWLD performed better in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies and they were more likely to improve their self-esteem in the classroom.

In addition, teacher efficacy refers to the beliefs or views that teachers have about their ability to teach students with various needs and to support the students' desired improvement. Previous studies have consistently highlighted teacher efficacy as a critical factor that separates competent teachers from those who are having difficulty delivering instruction [6]. Furthermore, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) explained that there was a negative relationship between teacher efficacy and emotional exhaustion and that higher teacher efficacy

levels are associated with lower emotional exhaustion. All of these studies pointed to a tendency for teachers who had high levels of teacher efficacy to experience lower levels of psychological discomfort.

In another study, Sree Priya (2016) stated that the goal of educational programs in schools should be to support students' comprehensive development, which includes intellectual, physical, social, personal and career aspects. This will help SWLD gain the skills they need to live independently and adjust to real-world situations, reducing feelings of inadequacy, limitations and differences due to their disabilities. Parveen and Qounsar's (2018) study illustrated that SWLD exhibit improved peer interaction and communication abilities when engaged with non-disabled peers. Inclusive educational environments foster social learning opportunities, facilitate the formation of positive peer relationships and provide valuable communication models for SWLD. Consequently, the research underscores the role of inclusive education in fostering a supportive and enriching learning atmosphere for students with impairments, thereby positively influencing their social and communicative growth. The table below is a summary of the impact of inclusive education on SWLD according to four aspects: social outcomes, academic outcomes, teacher efficacy, and comprehensive development.

Table 1. Impact of Inclusive Education on Students with Learning Disabilities (SWLD)

Aspect	Findings
Social Outcomes	- Improve peer interaction and communication abilities when engaging with non-disabled peers. - Inclusive environments foster social learning opportunities, positive peer relationships and provide valuable communication models.
Academic Outcomes	- Improve performance in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. - Increase likelihood of improved self-esteem in the classroom.
Teacher Efficacy	- Teacher efficacy is a critical factor in delivering effective instruction to SWLD. - Higher levels of teacher efficacy are associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion and psychological discomfort.
Comprehensive Development	- Educational programs should support students' comprehensive development, including intellectual, physical, social, personal and career aspects. - This approach helps SWLD gain skills for independence and societal adjustment.

2.3. Impact of Inclusive Education on SWOLD

According to [25], learning environments must support the growth and development of all students for inclusive education to be implemented. As a result, research must be done to determine how inclusion affects both SWLD and SWOLD. Numerous reviews and meta-analyses, e.g. [26-28] have consistently highlighted the extensive advantages of inclusive education for both students with and without disabilities. These examinations underscored that inclusive education yielded diverse benefits, including enhanced academic development, positive behaviour cultivation such as increased independence, patience, trust, acceptance of diversity and responsiveness to others' needs, as well as improved communication, language and physical development. Despite concerns about potential negative impacts on the academic performance of SWOLD when integrating students with disabilities, recent research, as depicted in these reviews, dispels such apprehensions, showing that students without disabilities thrive in inclusive environments, often achieving equal or superior academic outcomes compared to those in non-inclusive settings.

Kart and Kart (2021) asserted that the academic consequences of inclusion for SWOLD exhibit a variety of outcomes depending on the educational level. These authors' findings revealed that inclusion has mostly positive or neutral impacts on the academic performance of typically developing students in the early grades, whereas later grades tend to show neutral or adverse effects. Moreover, SWOLD has been socially advantaged by participating in inclusive classrooms alongside students with disabilities. Primarily, the social benefits of inclusion encompass the mitigation of fear, hostility, prejudice discrimination, alongside the promotion of tolerance, acceptance and understanding.

In a comprehensive study based on a representative sample from the Netherlands, Ruijs et al., (2010) investigated the academic performance of 27,745 primary school students within inclusive educational settings, examining

potential variations based on the intelligence levels of typical students and the types of disabilities among included students. The findings revealed no differences in the academic achievements of students without disabilities between inclusive and non-inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, there was no differential impact of inclusion observed on typically developing students of varying intelligence levels, nor did the type of disability among included students significantly affect the academic outcomes of SWOLD. In a subsequent study by Ruijs (2017), the influence of students with disabilities on the academic performance of their peers without disabilities was examined across primary and secondary education settings in the Netherlands, utilizing administrative data encompassing all Dutch students. Overall, the results indicated that the presence of SWLD did not have any statistically substantial influence on the academic achievements of general education students in both primary and secondary schools. Additionally, there was no noticeable difference in the impact of inclusion on students with varying levels of academic achievement [20].

In another study, Sermier Dessemontet and Bless (2013) examined the influence of inclusion on the academic performance of typically developing students categorized as low, average and high achievers, within classrooms containing students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities in Switzerland. The study initially involved 280 students with intellectual disabilities and 500 students without disabilities in a pretest. From those participants, 202 pairs were selected for further analysis based on criteria including gender, socioeconomic status, mother tongue, age and pretest scores. The findings revealed no statistically significant disparity in achievement scores (both in literacy and mathematics) between SWOLD enrolled in inclusive versus non-inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, the study found no notable effects of inclusion on the academic progress of low, average or high-achieving SWOLD.

Blazer (2017) claimed that SWOLD in inclusive classrooms demonstrates greater respect for their disabled classmates, increases their understanding of other children's needs, becomes more comfortable around persons with disabilities and learns how to be friends with their disabled classmates. In 2024, research by Jardinez and Natividad highlighted the primary social outcomes of inclusion, which include reducing fear, hostility, conflict and prejudice, while promoting compassion, recognition and empathy. Their study emphasized the significant and positive impact of inclusive education, not only within classroom environments but also in fostering more inclusive and empathetic communities. Furthermore, it underscored the importance of promoting social cohesion and fostering a culture of mutual respect within a society that values embracing diversity and promoting

acceptance. Students without disabilities also benefit from inclusive education. Participating in educational activities alongside peers with special educational needs (SEN) fosters the development of respect, acceptance of differences, the formation of new friendships, understanding of how to assist others and cognitive growth through explaining and learning from peers with SEN. This inclusive environment also helps children with special needs improve their interpersonal communication and acceptance among peers while contributing to a diverse educational setting, socialization and overall development of all students [18]. The summary table below describes the impact of inclusive education on SWOLD according to four factors: social outcomes, academic outcomes, teacher efficacy and comprehensive development.

Table 2. Impact of Inclusive Education on SWOLD

Aspect	Findings
Academic Outcomes	No significant differences in academic achievement between SWOLD in inclusive and non-inclusive classrooms. No differential impact of inclusion on SWOLD of varying intelligence levels or based on the type of disability among included students. Equal or superior academic outcomes are demonstrated compared to those in non-inclusive settings.
Social Outcomes	Greater respect for disabled classmates, increased understanding of others' needs and improved comfort around persons with disabilities. Reduced fear, hostility, prejudice and discrimination, while promoting tolerance, acceptance and understanding. Establishment of new friendships and understanding of how to assist others.
Cognitive Development	Cognitive growth through explaining and learning from peers with special educational needs (SEN).
Interpersonal Skills	Improved interpersonal communication and peer acceptance for children with special needs. Contribution to a diverse educational setting, socialization and overall development of all students.

3. Investigating the Effects of Inclusive Education on Students With and Without Learning Disabilities

3.1. Methodology

In this study, a survey was conducted in southern Vietnam to investigate the impacts of

inclusive education on students with and without learning disabilities. The survey encompassed 487 participants, consisting of 132 students with learning disabilities and 355 students without learning disabilities. These participants were drawn from 5 public schools and 3 special schools located in 3 different

cities in southern Vietnam. The five public schools participating in this study were selected based on the following criteria: (a) they have implemented inclusive education for at least three academic years; (b) they enroll a higher proportion of students with disabilities compared to the regional average; and (c) they have documented improvements in the performance of their students with disabilities through either quantitative or qualitative evidence since adopting inclusive education practices.

All participants were between 4 and 15 years old and had either current or previous enrollment in inclusive classes. Most of the students with disabilities in the study came from families with average or above-average economic conditions. However, some students came from disadvantaged backgrounds or ethnic minority groups. Those from ethnic minorities typically have limited access to quality medical care, leading to delayed intervention for their conditions compared to other students with disabilities.

Table 3. Survey Demographics

Demographics	Participants
Total Participants	487
SWLD	132
SWOLD	355
Age 5-7 years	158
Age 8-10 years	183
Age 11-14 years	146
Public Schools	5
Special Schools	3

Before data collection, the school boards and individual participants were briefed on the research objectives. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that their data would be recorded anonymously. Informed consent was obtained from the participating teachers, community volunteers and the parents or guardians of the minors. All data collection procedures were conducted on school premises to ensure convenience for the participants.

The research methodology involved having each student in the study complete a survey to assess their perceptions of the impact of inclusive education on academic achievement and social development. Two distinct surveys were administered: one for SWLD and another for SWOLD. SWLD received assistance from a teacher or guardian to complete the survey.

The survey instrument was designed to gather insights into the experiences of students with and without learning disabilities in inclusive education settings. The survey focused on aspects such as academic achievements, social development and overall perceptions of inclusion.

3.2. Results

Firstly, the findings indicated that among the 487 participants, 419 students (86%) expressed a positive evaluation of inclusive education. In contrast, 29 students (6%) provided a neutral evaluation, believing that inclusive education does not significantly impact their school experience. Additionally, 39 students (8%) perceived inclusive education as hurting both their academic performance and social development.

Evaluation of Inclusive Education among Participants

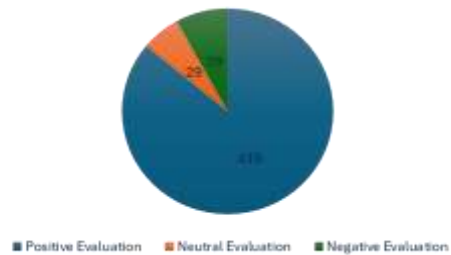


Chart 1. Overall appraisal of inclusive education by students.

The survey findings shed light on the significant impacts of inclusive education on students with and without learning disabilities. However, to gain deeper insights into the effects of inclusive education on particular groups of students, a more comprehensive analysis was performed, yielding the following

detailed results. Among the cohort of 487 participants, 419 individuals, including 104 SWLD and 315 SWOLD, expressed favourable appraisals regarding the efficacy of inclusive educational practices. They reported positive effects of inclusion on their academic achievements and social development, particularly in early education stages such as preschool and primary school. Students with disabilities expressed a consensus that inclusive education afforded them more favourable life experiences. Initially, integration presented numerous challenges and uncertainties, as they found themselves feeling out of place and less assured in an environment where their peers progressed typically. However, with the support of educators and even peers without disabilities, they are gradually acclimating to the integrated setting and gaining confidence. The majority of SWLD acknowledge enhanced opportunities for social interaction and faster integration into communication networks with their non-disabled peers. Additionally, some students attest to increased confidence stemming from close friendships with non-disabled peers. The majority of SWOLD who positively evaluate inclusive education agree that it has minimal or no effect on their academic performance. However, they acknowledge that inclusive education significantly enhances their understanding of individuals with disabilities. They develop empathy when observing the communication and learning challenges faced by their peers with disabilities. These students also report that participating in an inclusive environment has taught them to be more patient, empathetic and adept at assisting individuals with disabilities. This helps increase the communication skills of these SWOLD. The findings suggest that inclusive education has a beneficial influence on the learning outcomes and social interactions of students from diverse backgrounds, consequently.

However, it is important to note that not all students experienced the same level of positive impact. A small group of 29 participants, comprising 2 SWLD and 27 SWOLD, reported neutral effects of inclusion, indicating that

while they did not necessarily experience significant positive impacts, they also did not perceive any adverse effects of being part of inclusive classrooms. This suggests that for a minority of students, inclusion may not have a noticeable impact on their academic or social experiences.

Furthermore, a notable fraction of 39 participants, consisting of 26 SWLD and 13 SWOLD, expressed experiencing negative effects of inclusion. Students with disabilities who hold negative views of inclusive education typically exhibit very introverted personalities. They are often reluctant to engage with new peers and resistant to change. Following their experiences with inclusive education, these students expressed a preference to return to the specialized schools they previously attended. These students reported challenges or adverse outcomes associated with inclusive education settings, such as difficulties in adapting to the learning environment, social isolation or feeling overwhelmed by the inclusive classroom dynamics. Some SWOLD had negative assessments of inclusive education, believing that their peers with disabilities disrupt their concentration in the classroom by frequently making noise or slowing down the learning process. They feel that teachers spend excessive time supporting students with disabilities, resulting in a perceived lack of attention for themselves. Identifying and addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure that inclusive education remains genuinely inclusive and supportive for all students.

The survey results highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of inclusive education and its impacts on students with and without learning disabilities. While the majority of participants reported positive effects, it is essential to recognize and address the challenges faced by those who experience neutral or negative outcomes. This underscores the need for further research and targeted interventions to ensure that inclusive education can effectively support the diverse needs of all students.

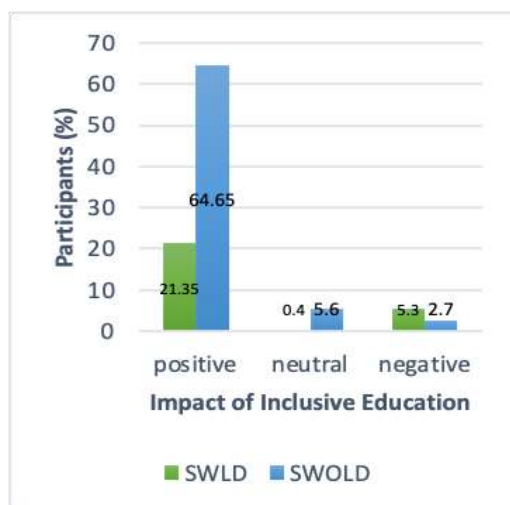


Chart 2. Appraisal of Inclusive Education by groups of students.

3.3. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, inclusive education has shown promising outcomes for both students with and without disabilities, particularly in the early education stages. The positive effects include enhanced social integration, improved academic achievement and the development of empathy and mutual understanding among students. However, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the diverse needs and challenges faced by students in inclusive classrooms to ensure that every learner receives the support and resources necessary to thrive.

Several recommendations have been formulated based on the reliable findings of this study, aiming to enhance the effectiveness of inclusive education in Vietnam, as outlined below:

i) Provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their skills in inclusive teaching practices;

ii) Implement individualized support mechanisms for students with learning disabilities to address their unique needs within inclusive classrooms;

iii) Foster a culture of inclusivity and acceptance within school communities to promote positive peer interactions and social integration for all students.

3.4. Limitations

The survey sample was drawn from specific regions in southern Vietnam, limiting the generalizability of the results to other contexts. Additionally, external factors such as socioeconomic status and cultural influences were not fully explored in this study but may impact the experiences of students in inclusive education settings.

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