

# THE PATHWAY-PROJECT

## ACADEMIC AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN THEIR TRANSITIONAL PHASE FROM PRIMARY TO LOWER-SECONDARY SCHOOL IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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### Kurzfassung / Abstract

By ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008, Austria committed to providing individualized support measures in an environment that enables the best possible academic and social development of all students, with the goal of full inclusion (UN 2006, Art. 24, 2e).

#### Aim of the Study

The research project PATHWAY investigated the academic, social, and emotional development of students with special educational needs (SEN) in Austria. The empirical design allowed in particular for two group comparisons

1. Comparison between students with SEN attending inclusive and special classes.
2. Comparison between students without SEN attending inclusive and regular classes.

Key background factors such as socioeconomic status and intelligence quotient (IQ) were taken into account.

#### Research Design

Conducted as a longitudinal study in Vienna (Elliott et al., 2008), PATHWAY combined quantitative and qualitative methods, including:

- standardized questionnaires,
- problem-centred interviews,
- and the participatory photovoice method.

This mixed-methods approach allowed for a deeper understanding by linking statistical data with students' lived experiences (cf. Flick, 2011) and has provided comprehensive insights into the academic, social, and emotional development of students with and without SEN in various school environments in Vienna. This multi-method longitudinal study, spanning the transition from primary to secondary education, revealed complex dynamics and challenges within the Austrian education system.

## Key Findings

- **Emotional well-being:** Students without SEN in regular classes reported the highest levels of emotional well-being and social integration. For students with SEN, emotional well-being was initially higher in inclusive settings but declined significantly by grade 6, while remaining stable in special schools.
- **Academic performance:** An overall advantage of inclusive settings for students with SEN was only partially supported. Differences were subject-specific (e.g., reading vs. mathematics). And no significant differences in learning outcomes and academic development between inclusive and mainstream classes for students without SEN
- The **achievement gap** between inclusive and special classes did not widen over time, contrary to expectations.
- **Systemic issues:** The study revealed hidden segregation practices, such as frequent pull-out measures, and challenging class compositions in inclusive settings.
- A particularly concerning finding was the high proportion of students with **clinically significant emotional distress**, indicating a structural overload in the system.

## Conclusions

The PATHWAY project makes clear: Inclusion requires more than structural integration.

- The focus must shift to individualized support and attention to psychosocial needs.
- Education policy should ask not just *“Where do students learn?”* but rather *“How are they supported?”*
- The legitimacy of special schools must be critically examined, as they offer no measurable academic or emotional advantages.

## Bisherige Disseminationen

Pirker, A., Hafenscher, J., & Lindner, K.-T. (2023). Investigating the Self-Perception of Social, Emotional, and Academic Inclusion of Students with and without Special Educational Needs through Photovoice. *Education Sciences*, 13(4), 423. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13040423>

Lindner, K.-T., Pirker, A., Gitschthaler, M. & Schwab, S. (under preparation). Teachers' Perspectives on Educational Transitions for Vulnerable Students.

Pirker, A., Lindner, K.-T., Schwab, S. (under revision). The influence of school placement on students' school well-being, social inclusion and academic self-concept of students with and without learning disability'.