

# Symbolic Interactionism and Self-Concept in Special Education: Insights from Cooley and Mead

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**Abstract:** *This paper is a theoretical exploration, aiming to investigate the extent to which symbolic interactionist theory, specifically Cooley's Looking-Glass Self and Mead's Theory of the Social Self, can illuminate how pupils with special educational needs (SEN) develop their self-understanding. For students, inclusive education settings are a significant place of identity formation through micro-level (daily) exchanges with teachers and peers. Building on previous research on academic and social self-concept, peer interactions, and inclusive pedagogy, this paper suggests that symbolic interactionism offers a valuable perspective on both the emotional health and academic value of SEN learners. It also leaves important knowledge gaps, emphasizing the need to study the role that social processes play in shaping self-perceptions in this environment. Ultimately, the chapter offers concrete teaching strategies grounded in the work of Cooley and Mead to help teachers create classrooms that are not only inclusive but also reflective and identity-affirming. In connecting theory and practice, this work aims to foster a deeper understanding of the formation of self-concept in special education.*

**Keywords:** Special educational needs (SEN), self-concept, symbolic interactionism, inclusive education, looking-glass self, social self, peer relationships, identity development

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## 1. Introduction

There has been a global movement towards inclusive education in recent years, aiming to provide equal educational opportunities for children with special educational needs (SEN). As such, and despite advances in government and mainstream provision, perceptions of poor academic self-concept and limited emotional inclusion continue to be reported by some students with SEN. Such barriers are often not created by specific functional limitations of the disability, but are products of public perception and interaction at the educational level. Moreover, inquiries by Mhule, Babu, and Bindu (2024) and Douma et al. (2024) emphasize that reduced peer acceptability, limited relationship opportunities, and negative feedback contribute to undermining self-views among students in inclusive settings. Understanding and addressing these barriers is critical to developing truly inclusive learning communities.

Beside that from a sociological perspective, scientific identity is considered a socially constructed phenomenon (Crocetti, 2017), and it is acknowledged that our self-perception is shaped by the people with whom we interact. This view suggests that people establish their identity through the process of interacting and responding to social cues (Mead, 1934). According to two classic theorists, Cooley and Mead, the development of self-consciousness

is generated by feedback from the environment. The Looking-Glass Self (Cooley, 1902): The self-concept is created through our imagination of our appearance to others, the interpretive knowledge of what others are, and our emotional reaction to that interpretation. This concept was further elaborated upon by Mead, who emphasized the role-taking and symbolism, maintaining that the self is constructed through interaction (Mead, 1934).

Despite the importance of these theories, they are rarely used in special education studies. Much of the literature focuses on academic performance or behavioural interventions, even though social connections exert significant effects at the level of identity. This concept paper addresses this gap by examining how Cooley's and Mead's theories contribute to self-image development in SEN learners and their implications for inclusive pedagogy.

## 2. Problem Statement

Although the progress of inclusive education in the previous decades has improved the education of students with SEN, students with SEN still encounter difficulties in social and emotional development, identity communication, and social inclusion in regular classrooms. It has been shown that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are less likely to gain peer acceptance, initiate positive social relationships, or receive recognition for their capacities (Mhule et al., 2024; Pinto et al., 2019). A diminished intellectual and emotional self-concept, often resulting from social issues, can lead to reduced participation in the classroom and hinder overall learning.

Despite considerable research in the fields of cognitive support and instructional design, sociological theories that explore how identity is shaped through interactions are not well integrated into the existing body of knowledge. Symbolic interactionism, particularly as developed by Mead and Cooley, provides a functional theoretical underpinning for analysing how social signals, peer relations, and teacher feedback influence the self-concept of children with special educational needs (SEN). Cooley's (1902) looking-glass self and Mead's (1934) theory of role-taking both emphasize that self-concept is not something inherent or fixed, but is instead constructed through social interaction. However, these theories have been underutilized in special education, particularly in relation to social identity and classroom experiences.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Academic and Social Self-Concept in Students with Special Needs

It includes individuals' perceptions of their competencies, worth, and identity. Self-concept in education is generally divided into academic self-concept (ASC), which concerns students' judgments about their academic competences, and social self-concept (SSC), which concerns students' judgments of their relationships with others and society. For SEN pupils, these self-perceptions are critical for academic achievement and well-being.

Regression analysis shows a reduced academic and social self-concept for adolescents with SEN compared to typically developing peers. Zakaria (2017) found that when students in the inclusive class did not receive the necessary support or felt socially isolated, they reported feeling less capable of succeeding. Khusheim (2022) also reported limitations in social integration in students with special educational needs that lead to a negative self-concept, especially when awareness of stigma or isolation is included. Furthermore, peer relations have

a substantial impact on self-concept; rejection, bullying, or exclusion can decrease self-confidence, while positive friendship interactions can also affect both social and academic self-concept.

Educator beliefs and practices also impact self-concept. Alnahdi, Lindner, and Schwab (2022) found that inclusive strategies, including differentiated instruction and positive reinforcement, are associated with a higher level of self-efficacy among children with SEN. Class participation can either enhance or weaken self-concept: active participation fosters a sense of agency and competence, while passive participation may perpetuate a sense of incompetence.

### **3.2 Peer Interaction and Inclusion**

Necessarily, peer encounters and social inclusion are cornerstones in the emotional development and construction of self-identity for students with SENs. Peer interaction refers to the type and extent of relationships with classmates, whereas social inclusion refers to the feeling of being accepted by the school community. Pinto, Baines, & Bakopoulou (2019) found a lower frequency of meaningful social interactions and a higher frequency of rejection and exclusion for students with SEN, with those who require greater levels of provision experiencing the worst outcomes. If you get repeated negative feedback from your peers into those patterns, then you are naturally going to withdraw emotionally and have a problem with your identity as well.

Peer rejection is emotionally costly. El-Asam, Colley-Chahal, and Katz (2023) argue that many young people with special educational needs feel isolated in both ‘real life’ and online, thereby increasing their likelihood of exposure to such harm-inducing behaviours. By contrast, more extensive peer interaction—often marked by frequent, inclusive, and purposeful interactions—has been linked with emotional safety and self-worth (Pinto et al., 2019). These results are in accord with symbolic interactionist theory, which posits that self-concept develops from social responses (Mead, 1934). Peer acceptance and cooperative learning should therefore be encouraged in order to protect against emotional isolation and to support the identity development of SEN students.

### **3.3 Inclusive Teaching Practices and Self-Development**

Inclusive instruction is essential for creating learning environments that promote success for all students. DI refers to adapting instruction and assessment to fit different levels of ability, with the potential outcome of increased academic diversity and student self-concept (Wu et al., 2024). Singh and Pallai (2023) note that personalized approaches and curriculum adaptations create inclusive spaces that celebrate difference.

Peer-assisted learning is one such important facet. Syrjämäki et al. (2019) showed that structured play interaction supports social engagement and cognitive development, and teacher responsiveness ensures that children with SEN are recognized and included. Social emotional learning (SEL) frameworks enhance self-awareness and emotional regulation, thereby reducing exclusion (Tabe & Fomukong, 2020). According to Margeviča-Grinberga and Laganovska (2023), effective inclusive practices can help future teachers develop students’ sense of belonging.

Differentiated instruction (DI), peer learning, social-emotional learning (SEL), and teacher scaffolding collectively form a framework that can improve academic access and foster a sense of self-identity (Töpfer & Behrmann, 2021).

#### **4. Application of the Theory in Special Education**

An understanding of self-concept development in SEN children is essential to create inclusive schooling. The Looking-Glass Self, as described by Cooley, illustrates how people consider others' thoughts about themselves, interpret these judgments, and form their self-conceptions (Cooley, 1902). Responses from peers and teachers in educational environments affect the self-worth of SEN students. Mead (1934) argues that the self emerges via role-taking and symbolic interaction (Cahoone, 2019). In addition, we hold that in educational settings, reciprocal recognition (i.e., being recognised oneself and recognising others as being valued) is an important part of identity (Gunter, 2018).

These theories inform the valuable role played by approaches such as cooperative learning and peer modeling in supporting role-taking practice and receiving identity-reinforcing feedback from learners. Jay, Adshead, and Ryklief (2023) show that student investment in "identity work" leads to a powerful growth experience. Singh and Kumar (2022) established that, through the interactionist theory, classroom practices can enable students with special educational needs to confront internalized stigma and develop critical self-awareness.

#### **5. Review of Articles on the Use of Theory**

Although symbolic interactionism provides a framework for explaining identity construction, its application in special education research is not common. Duque et al. (2020) identified practices such as interactive groups and dialogic communities, which reflected symbolic interactionist orientations, although they did not explicitly discuss the theory. Gandewath Napitupulo (2023) analysed exercise strategies that are somewhat indirectly related to Cooley's notions of reflected appraisals.

This void highlights the need for a more explicit application of symbolic interactionism in the study of special educational needs (SEN) education. Although research on identity work and critical pedagogy indirectly engages with theories of role-taking and self-reflection, the foundational contributions of Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902) are often overlooked. Future research could strengthen the conceptual framing of inclusion practices by more deliberately applying symbolic interactionism.

#### **6. Teaching Strategies Based on the Theory**

There are practical symbolic interactionist approaches, such as techniques that foster emotional security, build self-concept, and establish peer networks. Peer modelling is an example of Mead's role-taking, where collaborative group activities allow SEN students to observe and participate in social roles. As Gunter (2018) emphasises, students can "see themselves in the others" through such exchange.

Formative feedback must be well-organised. Cooley's ideas emphasize the process of internalization of the felt judgment by pupils (Cooley, 1902). Lundgren (2004) found that supportive and growth-focused feedback from teachers contributes to the development of self-concept (Torres & Anguiano, 2016). Collaborative learning supports Mead's theory of the "generalized other," where students' diverse perspectives are integrated.

Mead's work was further developed by Lemert (1974), who emphasized the role of power in structuring interactions. All students must be offered equal opportunities to speak and be recognized by the teacher. Reflective journaling and 'I am' statements encourage students to explore how they are affected by perceptions of their identity from 'outside' their lived experiences (Tilakaratna & Szenes, 2024).

## 7. Limitations and Future Directions

Symbolic interactionism is enlightening, but it primarily concentrates on micro-level relationships, tending to overlook systemic inequalities faced by SEN students (Lemert, 1974; Huebner, 2016). It does not take enough consideration of the socioeconomic, linguistic, or institutional hurdles. Furthermore, the vast majority of the studies employing this theory in education are qualitative. Future studies should empirically examine the influence of role-taking, reflective practices, and symbolic feedback on self-concept across various contexts, cultures, and classifications of disability.

## 8. Conclusion

Students with SEN have to navigate complex social spaces, and in turn, this will influence how they perceive themselves and their position within the learning community. This concept paper demonstrates how Cooley's and Mead's concepts can be applied to inclusive education, redirecting attention from strictly academic achievement toward the development of a healthy self-concept and identity. Peer modelling, reflective dialogue, and affirmational feedback play a crucial role in helping SEN students develop the resilience, confidence, and sense of self that are essential to their well-being. Simultaneously, the paper highlights a notable gap: although many contemporary educational practices align with aspects of symbolic interactionism, few researchers explicitly link such practices to Cooley's or Mead's theoretical insights. Filling this void in our knowledge and in the preparation we provide to teachers may enhance both our conceptions and practices for the classroom of tomorrow. Ultimately, symbolic interactionism is an underutilized but powerful framework for creating schools that allow every student to be truly seen, supported, and positioned to thrive and succeed (Töpfer & Behrmann, 2021).

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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