

The relationship between social acceptance and inhibitory control ability in young learners

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Abstract: Social acceptance is an important aspect of interactions in young learners and may influence children's emotional and cognitive development. Inhibitory control, which is a partial function of executive functioning, is essential for effective impulse control and self-regulation. The aim of the study is to investigate the relationship between social acceptance and inhibitory control in primary school children. In this study, the Delis-Kaplan Executive Functions System (D-KEFS) subscales for measuring inhibitory control (Delis et al., 2001) and the Self-perception Profile for Children (SPPC) subscale of the Social Acceptance Questionnaire (Babinčák et al., 2012) were used to measure the values of the variables. The sample consisted of randomly selected 141 children in their fourth year of primary school with a mean age of 9.4 years. Results showed a significant positive correlation between the level of social acceptance and inhibitory control. Specifically, children who felt more accepted by their peers showed higher impulse control and behavioral regulation. The findings revealed that the development of inhibitory control may contribute to better social acceptance and thus to positive cognitive and emotional development in students.

Keywords: social acceptance, inhibitory control, executive functioning, young learner.

Theoretical background

People as social beings have an innate need to be part of a group, to be socially accepted, and to form stable, positive, and lasting social bonds

(Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Allen et al., 2021). This fundamental drive, known as the need for belonging, involves the desire to be included in a particular social group and to form enduring, mutually beneficial relationships with its members (Pardede & Kovač, 2023; Lavigne et al., 2011). Social acceptance, a key aspect of this process, is explained as the positive evaluations received from peers, which foster successful social integration and the development of healthy relationships (Ballara, 2023; Wellons et al., 2024). This acceptance manifests through friendship selection, participation in group activities, and receiving positive feedback (Coelho et al., 2017). Riley (2015) defines social acceptance as the degree of popularity, respect, and recognition among peers, typically assessed using sociometric status.

The interplay between social acceptance and cognitive skills such as inhibitory control has garnered significant attention in developmental research. Inhibitory control is the ability to suppress dominant or automatic actions when they are unlikely to lead to valuable outcomes (Kang et al., 2022; Tiego et al., 2018). It enables individuals to control impulses and distractions to focus on specific tasks (Gärtner & Strobel, 2021; Rechaa et al., 2025). As a core component of executive functioning, inhibitory control supports the regulation of behavior and the achievement of long-term goals, playing a critical role in self-regulation, emotional regulation, and cognitive processing in young learners (Ananthavalli, 2024; Diamond, 2013; Blair, 2016).

Inhibitory control is integral to emotion regulation, particularly in the ability to suppress emotional reactions and engage in goal-directed behaviors (Cardinale et al., 2019; Bartholomew et al., 2019). Specifically, it helps manage interference, both internally and externally, which supports the regulation of emotional and cognitive tasks in complex environments (Rezende et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Children with well-developed inhibitory control are more adept at managing their social behaviors, enhancing their social acceptance and fostering better peer relationships (Tepordei et al., 2023; Rhoades et al., 2009). Research shows that inhibitory control predicts greater social competence and peer acceptance, highlighting its importance for positive developmental outcomes (Dicataldo et al., 2023; Zeytinoglu et al. 2023).

In addition to supporting emotional regulation, inhibitory control plays a pivotal role in cognitive tasks by actively suppressing irrelevant thoughts or distractions (Wang et al., 2020). This ability is fundamental to understanding cognitive abilities, as it regulates interference from

competing thoughts and actions (Albaladejo-García et al., 2023). The development of inhibitory control is essential for children's adaptive behavior across multiple domains, including cognitive, emotional, and social development (Schulz et al., 2023; Rhoades et al., 2009). For instance, children with higher inhibitory control tend to exhibit more prosocial behaviors, leading to better social interactions and greater acceptance among peers (Liman, 2024; Vecchio et al., 2023).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs have been shown to foster inhibitory control and self-regulation, equipping children to better manage their emotions and build healthier social relationships (Lawson et al., 2018; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Moreover, research indicates that the brain regions responsible for inhibitory control are also involved in processing social interactions, contributing to the regulation of social behaviors and social acceptance (Kang et al., 2022; Rhoades et al., 2009). Well-developed inhibitory control not only enhances social behaviors but also fosters positive peer relationships and greater social acceptance (Ferschmann et al., 2023). In contrast, poor inhibitory control often leads to disruptive behaviors, hindering social integration and potentially resulting in social rejection (Bonham et al., 2020; Berry, 2011).

Interventions aimed at enhancing inhibitory control have demonstrated significant improvements in social outcomes, especially for children with ADHD, by helping them regulate their behavior in social contexts (Chacko et al., 2024; Drechsler et al., 2020; Nejati et al., 2020). Inhibitory control also helps children adhere to cultural and social norms, which is particularly critical in collectivist cultures where harmony and conformity are highly valued (Gavazzi et al., 2023). Theories of self-regulation suggest that robust inhibitory control aligns children with social norms, improving their interactions and acceptance among peers (Liman, 2024; Blake et al., 2014).

Furthermore, children with stronger inhibitory control are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, which in turn enhances their social acceptance (Zeytinoglu et al., 2023; Vecchio, 2023). Social learning theory highlights that positive social interactions can improve children's self-regulation as they observe and imitate the behaviors of socially accepted peers (Wagner et al., 2020; Hladik et al., 2024). A longitudinal study found that children with higher levels of peer acceptance exhibited improvements in inhibitory control over time (Wang & Feng, 2023).

The dynamic relationship between inhibitory control and social acceptance suggests reciprocal interactions. Children with well-developed

inhibitory control are more likely to gain social acceptance, which, in turn, reinforces their self-regulation abilities through positive feedback mechanisms (Wesarg-Menzel, 2023). Empirical research supports this relationship, demonstrating that self-regulation predicts future social acceptance, and social acceptance fosters the continued development of self-regulation (Robson et al., 2020).

Social acceptance is also often examined in relation to academic achievement, mainly through the lenses of social psychology, educational psychology, and developmental psychology. There have been several meta-analytical studies in the past decade that have explored the relationship between social acceptance and school achievement, as well as related themes like peer relationships, motivation, and teacher-student interactions. Using meta-analytic techniques, Wentzel, Jablansky, Scalise (2020) summarized evidence from 72 studies that examined the links between peer acceptance and academic outcomes. The results indicate that children who are socially accepted by peers also tend to be academically proficient (e.g. Cillessen & van den Berg, 2012; Tetzner, Becker & Maaz, 2017). Peer acceptance has been related to classroom grades, standardized test scores, and IQ. These results were confirmed for kindergarten, elementary-age and adolescent students (Wentzel et al. 2020, based e.g. on Wilson, Karimpour & Rodkin, 2011; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). However, there is stated in meta-analytical studies that the correlational nature of the research on relation between social acceptance and school achievement makes impossible conclusions about causality and direction of the effect. The developmental explanation based on research findings claims that elementary-school pupils tend to identify as popular peers academically engaged, adolescent students tend to identify as popular students who display manifestation of academical disengagement (Wentzel et al., 2020). Boehnke (2008) similarly points out that high academic performance may not always be a variable that is positively correlated with social acceptance. He operates with the term “nerd.” In the study, Boehnke examines consequences of high peer pressure on academic performance in mathematics among 1 700 middle-school students in Germany, Canada, and Israel. Its core assumption is that students with very high abilities in mathematics underachieve to avoid social exclusion (in the form of being called, e.g., nerds) in their schools. Findings of the study make it obvious that—concerning achievement in mathematics—the primary victims of peer pressure in middle school are girls, boys more likely than girls being the perpetrators. High individual preferences of achievement values can buffer effects of peer pressure.

Methods

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between inhibitory control and social acceptance in young learners.

Research Question

What is the relationship between inhibitory control and social acceptance in elementary school children (ISCED 1)? It was hypothetically expected that inhibitory control and social acceptance are statistically significantly related. School achievement and fluid intelligence in relation to social acceptance were controlled for.

Research sample

Schools in Eastern Slovakia were selected by random cluster sampling. The clusters represented schools in larger cities, small towns, and rural schools. Specifically, five primary schools representing clusters in different regions in Eastern Slovakia participated in the study. The research initially included 225 primary school students. After the selection was carried out, pupils were selected by convenience sampling – pupils whose parents agreed to participate in the research were included in the preliminary sample. Subsequently, the pupils who did not speak Slovak as a first language and/or had any behavioral, emotional disturbances were excluded from the sample. The research sample finally consisted of 141 pupils from different primary schools in Slovakia, 41.8% were male and 58.2% were female. The mean age of the young learners who participated was 9.4 years.

Measuring instruments

- D-KEFS Color-Word Interference Test

To assess the children's level of inhibitory control, the Delis-Kaplan color-word interference test of Delis-Kaplan executive function system (D-KEFS) test battery was used. The D-KEFS test battery was adapted for use with the Slovak population, and the psychometric characteristics were tested and described by Ferjenčík et al. (2014). The internal consistency was below 0.70 in the individual indicators of all battery tests, which from a psychometric point of view tends to be considered as the lower limit of "good" reliability. In this study, the D-KEFS color-word interference test was used. The test represents a version of the Stroop test. Test conditions measure the ability to inhibit "learned" behavioral responses. Within the

study three conditions were administered: (1) naming the color of colored squares (baseline), (2) reading color words printed in black ink (control), and (3) naming the color of the ink in which incongruent color words are printed, e.g., the word “red” printed in blue ink (inhibitory control). The time taken to complete each condition was recorded in seconds, with particular emphasis on the third condition (incongruent color words) as a measure of inhibition control. Higher completion time indicates poorer inhibition control (Stroop, 1935; Delis, Kaplan, & Kramer, 2001).

- Harter Scale of Perceived Competence for Children

Social acceptance was measured using the Harter Scale of Perceived Competence for Children. The Harter scale was validated and standardized for the Slovak population by Babinčák et al. (2012). The self-assessment questionnaire is designed to assess the child’s perceived competence and overall self-esteem. It contains several subscales, and the Social Acceptance subscale was specifically used in the present study. The Social Acceptance subscale consists of 6 items that assess the child’s perceived social competence and peer acceptance. Each item is rated on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (very true). Scores are summed to provide an overall measure of social acceptance, with higher scores indicating greater perceived social acceptance (Harter, 1982).

The reliability and validity of both the D-KEFS color-word interference test and Harter’s Perceived Competence Scale for Children are well established in the scientific literature, making them appropriate instruments for assessing inhibition control and social acceptance in a school-age population.

- School achievement

Classroom grades were used as an indicator of pupil performance. According to The Instructional Guidelines no. 22/2011 for the assessment of primary school pupils (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of Slovak Republic, 2011), a pupil’s performance in each school subject (in the Slovak Republic) is classified on the following 5-point grading scale: 1—excellent, 2—commendable, 3—good, 4—sufficient, and 5—insufficient. For the purposes of identifying school achievement the following was applied in the research design: Based on the end-of-year certificate marks of pupils in individual subjects at the end of the school year the performance in the two main subjects of the primary education curriculum (Slovak language and Mathematics) was identified.

- Cognitive abilities

Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) — the numeracy battery (subtest Pictures) was used to measure fluid intelligence. The reliability of the Cognitive Abilities Test numeracy battery is 0.85 (Thorndike & Hagen, 1986).

Procedure

The study was cross-sectional and was carried out in different primary schools in Eastern Slovakia. Data collection took place in a quiet room in each participating school to ensure a distraction-free environment. Informed consent was obtained from the participants' legal guardians. Participants were first briefed about the study, including its purpose and the tasks they would perform. Instructions were given verbally, and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions to ensure that they understood the tasks. D-KEFS color-word interference test was administered in a clinical setting. The average test administration time was 15 minutes. In relation to Harter's Perceived Competence Scale for Children, the pilot test administration demonstrated that student performance is influenced by their level of reading comprehension. For this reason, to get reliable data, tests were carried out in small groups of 4–5 children, each group working in a separate room. The administration of the test in one group took an average of 60 minutes. School achievement data for the research purpose was provided by school principals. The cognitive abilities test was administered in groups of 5 students, administration lasted for 60 minutes. In sum, every pupil was subjected to cca 135 minutes of assessment in a clinical as well as a small group setting. All the instruments were conducted by trained psychologists. The administration took place in school conditions during compulsory school hours.

Statistical method

The data were evaluated by regression analysis in the statistical program JAMOVI.

Results

This section presents the main findings of the study. It begins with descriptive statistics for all key variables, followed by correlation and regression analyses exploring the relationships between inhibitory control, social acceptance, cognitive abilities, and academic achievement.

Descriptive statistics

The mean time to complete the incongruent condition of the STROOP test, which measures inhibitory control, was $M = 85.8$ seconds ($SD = 21.4$). The mean score on the social acceptance subscale of the Harter Perceived Competence Scale for Children was $M = 3$ ($SD = 0.623$), indicating the extent of perceived social acceptance among participants. The mean score on the TKS test (fluid intelligence) was $M = 32.4$ ($SD = 4.86$). Academic achievement in mathematics ($M = 94.6$, $SD = 10.4$) and Slovak language ($M = 94.9$, $SD = 10.3$) was assessed using final grades originally reported on a 5-point ordinal scale, where 1 represented excellent performance and 5 indicated failure. In order to increase the variability of the data and enable more robust statistical analyses, these ordinal values were transformed into a continuous scale ranging from 60 to 100, using the following mapping: 1 = 100, 2 = 90, 3 = 80, 4 = 70, 5 = 60. Higher values on this new scale reflect better academic performance.

	Inhibition	Social acceptance	Math achievement	Language achievement	Fluid intelligence
N	140	140	140	140	140
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	85.8	3.00	94.6	94.9	32.4
Median	82.0	3.00	100	100	33.0
Standard deviation	21.4	0.623	10.4	10.3	4.86
Minimum	43	1	60	60	18
Maximum	180	4	100	100	40

Figure 1: Image of a table presenting descriptive statistics.

Correlation analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between inhibitory control and social acceptance. The analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between time to complete the STROOP test and social acceptance scores ($r = -0.220$, $p = 0.009$). This suggests that better inhibitory control (lower STROOP test completion time) is associated with higher levels of perceived social acceptance.

Regression analysis

To further examine the predictive power of inhibitory control on social acceptance, a linear regression analysis was conducted. Inhibitory control, as measured by STROOP test completion time, was entered as the predictor variable, and social acceptance, as measured by the Harter scale, was

entered as the criterion variable. The regression model was significant, $F(1, 139) = 7.15$, $p = 0.009$, with $R^2 = 0.0486$.

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²
1	0.221	0.0487

Figure 2: Image of a table summarizing the regression model for Stroop Time and Social Acceptance.

This means that inhibitory control accounts for approximately 4.87% of the variance in social acceptance scores. The regression coefficient ($B = -0.22$, $SE = 0.08$) was also significant ($p = 0.009$), indicating that with each additional second it takes to complete the STROOP test, there is an associated 0.22 point decrease in social acceptance scores.

Model Coefficients - Inhibition

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	108.48	8.73	12.42	<.001
Social acceptance	-7.57	2.85	-2.66	0.009

Figure 3: Image of a table showing regression coefficients for Stroop Time predicted by Social Acceptance.

The analysis in figure 4 showed that inhibitory control was significantly negatively correlated with social acceptance ($r = -0.221$, $p = 0.009$; Spearman's $\rho = -0.200$, $p = 0.018$), indicating that students with better ability to inhibit automatic responses in the Stroop test perceived higher levels of social acceptance. This association points to the potential role of self-regulation in social relationships in the school environment. In contrast, no statistically significant associations were recorded between inhibitory control and school performance, neither in mathematics ($r = -0.139$, $p = 0.101$) nor in Slovak language ($r = -0.031$, $p = 0.714$). Cognitive abilities test (fluid intelligence) scores did not show significant correlations with either social acceptance ($r = 0.055$, $p = 0.522$) or inhibitory control, but a weak but statistically significant positive correlation was observed between TKS and Slovak language performance ($r = 0.218$, $p = 0.010$; Spearman's $\rho = 0.208$, $p = 0.014$), which may indicate that cognitive abilities are more manifested in the area of verbal performance. As expected,

a strong positive correlation was confirmed between mathematics and Slovak language scores ($r = 0.678$, $p < 0.001$), indicating consistency of performance across subjects.

		Inhibition	Social acceptance	Math achievement	Language achievement	Fluid intelligence
Inhibition	Pearson's r	—				
	df	—				
	p-value	—				
	Spearman's rho	—				
	df	—				
	p-value	—				
Social acceptance	Pearson's r	-0.221	—			
	df	138	—			
	p-value	0.009	—			
	Spearman's rho	-0.200	—			
	df	138	—			
	p-value	0.018	—			
Math achievement	Pearson's r	-0.139	0.044	—		
	df	138	138	—		
	p-value	0.101	0.603	—		
	Spearman's rho	-0.101	0.019	—		
	df	138	138	—		
	p-value	0.233	0.828	—		
Language achievement	Pearson's r	-0.031	0.022	0.678	—	
	df	138	138	138	—	
	p-value	0.714	0.792	<.001	—	
	Spearman's rho	-0.053	0.012	0.623	—	
	df	138	138	138	—	
	p-value	0.531	0.888	<.001	—	
Fluid intelligence	Pearson's r	0.004	0.055	0.141	0.218	—
	df	138	138	138	138	—
	p-value	0.967	0.522	0.096	0.010	—
	Spearman's rho	-0.007	0.027	0.165	0.208	—
	df	138	138	138	138	—
	p-value	0.939	0.750	0.051	0.014	—

Figure 4: Image of a table presenting a correlation analysis of the relationships between school acceptance, school achievement, and fluid intelligence.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between inhibitory control, as measured by the D-KEFS color-word interference test, and social acceptance, as measured by the Harter Scale of Perceived Competence for Children, among elementary school students.

Results revealed a significant negative correlation between inhibition control and social acceptance, suggesting that children with better inhibition control tend to have higher levels of perceived social acceptance. The significant negative correlation ($r = -0.220$, $p = 0.009$) found between inhibitory control and social acceptance suggests that children who are more skilled at controlling their impulses and focusing attention are more likely to be socially accepted by their peers. This finding is consistent with theories of developmental psychology that consider self-regulation to be a key component of social competence. Children who can control their behavior and reactions are better equipped to navigate social interactions, adhere to social norms and form positive relationships with peers. These findings have several implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the results support the view that cognitive control processes, such as inhibitory control, are integral to social functioning. As previous research confirmed, overall, there are significant and positive associations between peer social acceptance and academic achievement. The strength of the relation was stronger for elementary students than for secondary students and for students from Asian countries compared to those in North American and European countries; it also was stronger when predicting classroom grades as opposed to standardized test scores (Wentzel et al. 2020). In our research on a sample of 141 students, no connections were confirmed with either academic performance or fluid intelligence. It appears that children in this age group, when assessing peer relations, perceive behavioral manifestations related to self-regulation and type of behavior rather than to academic achievement. This reinforces the importance of incorporating self-regulatory skills into models of social development. In practical terms, the findings suggest that interventions aimed at improving inhibitory control could have a positive impact on social acceptance. For example, programs aimed at improving executive functioning, including inhibitory control, could potentially improve children's social integration. Educators and psychologists should consider incorporating activities that promote self-regulation skills into their curricula and interventions. Despite the significant findings, the study has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Although a correlation between inhibition control and social acceptance is evident, the direction of the relationship cannot be clearly determined. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the mutual influence of these variables over time. Second, the modest amount of explained variance ($R^2 = 0.0486$) suggests that inhibitory control is only one of many factors that contribute to social acceptance. Other variables, such as emotional intelligence, social skills,

and environmental factors, were not accounted for in this study. Future research should include a wider range of predictors to better understand the multifaceted nature of social acceptance. Third, the use of self-report measures of social acceptance may be subject to social desirability bias and may not fully capture the complexity of peer relationships. Supplementing self-assessment data with information from peers, teachers, and parents could help avoid the limitation of single-informant bias and provide a more comprehensive assessment of social acceptance. This study drew on a cluster-randomized sample of five primary schools in Eastern Slovakia, encompassing urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts. Nonetheless, its geographical scope remains confined to a single region, thereby limiting generalizability. Moreover, the sample size ($N = 141$) is moderate, which may constrain statistical power. These limitations, regional specificity and sample size—should be considered when interpreting the findings. Future research should aim to address these limitations by using longitudinal designs and examining other factors that contribute to social acceptance. In addition, examining potential moderators such as age, gender, and cultural context could reveal important nuances in how inhibitory control influences social acceptance in different groups. We recommend developing interventions targeting inhibitory control and other related skills and testing their effectiveness in improving children's social outcomes.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence for a significant relationship between inhibition control and social acceptance in young learners. Although inhibitory control is an important factor, it explains only a small part of the variance in social acceptance, suggesting that other variables also play a significant role. These findings underscore the complexity of social acceptance and highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to understanding and promoting positive social interactions in children. Future research and interventions should continue to explore and address the various factors that contribute to successful social integration and healthy peer relationships.

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