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Application of Social Learning Theory in Teaching Strategies for Students with Special Educational Needs: A Review

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Abstract

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), is one of the most influential theories in understanding how individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and behaviours through social interaction and observation. This review article aims to examine the principles of Social Learning Theory and its application in teaching strategies for students with special educational needs. The review synthesizes findings from previous studies focusing on five core concepts of the theory: observational learning, modelling, imitation, reinforcement, and self-efficacy. The analysis explores how these principles contribute to inclusive education, social competence, behavioural development, academic participation, family involvement, and teacher effectiveness among students with special educational needs. Findings from previous studies indicate that Social Learning Theory provides a valuable framework for supporting inclusive education and promoting positive social, behavioural, and academic outcomes among students with disabilities. Various instructional approaches, including parent-mediated learning, peer modelling, video modelling, positive behaviour support, and self-efficacy enhancement, have been shown to improve communication skills, adaptive behaviours, social interaction, and learning outcomes. The review also highlights the important roles of family involvement and teacher effectiveness in facilitating successful educational experiences for students with special educational needs. Despite its strengths, several limitations were identified, including implementation challenges, resource constraints, and the need to consider cognitive and neurological factors influencing learning. Overall, the findings suggest that Social Learning Theory remains highly relevant in special education and provides a strong foundation for developing effective, inclusive, and evidence-based teaching practices.

Keywords: Social Learning Theory, Special Education, Observational Learning, Self-Efficacy, Inclusive Education

Introduction

Students with special educational needs (SEN) often experience challenges in academic learning, social interaction, communication, and behavioural regulation compared to their typically developing peers. These challenges may hinder their participation in classroom

activities and affect their overall educational outcomes. Learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, and other developmental conditions frequently require specialized instructional approaches that support not only academic achievement but also social and behavioural development. Consequently, educators are increasingly encouraged to adopt evidence-based teaching strategies that promote active participation, social engagement, and positive behavioural outcomes in inclusive educational settings (Mourtziapi et al., 2026; Schaub & Lütolf, 2024).

Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the learning process because knowledge and behaviour are often acquired through interactions with others. Students learn not only from direct instruction but also from observing the behaviours, attitudes, and responses of teachers, parents, and peers. In special education, social interaction is particularly important because many students with disabilities experience difficulties in communication, social relationships, and adaptive behaviour. Research has shown that interventions involving peer interaction, parent-mediated support, and collaborative learning opportunities can significantly improve students' social competence and participation in educational settings (Wilson et al., 2024; Vallecillo, 2025). Furthermore, positive behaviour support programs implemented by educators and parents have been found to facilitate behavioural development and social adjustment among children with autism and other developmental disabilities (Mestari et al., 2024).

Research examining preschool children's acceptance of peers with special needs further indicates that social attitudes and inclusive behaviours are strongly influenced by observational experiences within family and educational environments. Children who are exposed to positive social models demonstrate greater acceptance and understanding of diversity, highlighting the importance of social learning processes in inclusive education (Sümer Dodur & Yüzbaşioğlu, 2025).

One theoretical framework that explains how individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and behaviours through social interaction is Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Developed by Albert Bandura (1977), the theory proposes that learning occurs through observation, modelling, imitation, reinforcement, and self-efficacy. Unlike traditional behaviourist theories that emphasize direct reinforcement as the primary mechanism of learning, Social Learning Theory highlights the importance of observing others and learning from their actions and experiences. According to Bandura, individuals can acquire new behaviours by observing models, evaluating the consequences of those behaviours, and subsequently imitating them when appropriate. This perspective has significant implications for special education because many instructional interventions used with students with disabilities are grounded in modelling and observational learning principles.

The application of Social Learning Theory can be observed in various educational interventions, particularly video modelling, peer modelling, parent-mediated interventions, and positive behaviour support programs. Previous studies have demonstrated that video modelling is effective in improving social communication skills, academic performance, and adaptive behaviours among students with autism spectrum disorder (Kurt, 2024; Wilson et al., 2024; Vallecillo, 2025). Similarly, imitation-based interventions have been found to support skill acquisition and behavioural development among children with developmental

disabilities (Halbur, 2023). In addition, positive reinforcement strategies and behaviour support programs continue to play an important role in promoting desirable behaviours and reducing challenging behaviours in educational settings (Mestari et al., 2024; Karkanidis et al., 2025).

Another important component of Social Learning Theory is self-efficacy, which refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to perform specific tasks successfully. Self-efficacy has received considerable attention in inclusive and special education research because teachers' confidence influences instructional effectiveness, classroom management, and attitudes towards inclusion. Several studies have reported that higher levels of teacher self-efficacy are associated with more positive attitudes toward inclusive education and greater willingness to implement evidence-based instructional practices for students with special educational needs (Reichenberg et al., 2023; Mourtziapi et al., 2026; Pivarč, 2026). These findings suggest that Social Learning Theory contributes not only to understanding student learning but also to explaining teacher behaviour and instructional decision-making.

Therefore, this article aims to review the concepts and principles of Social Learning Theory and examine its application in teaching strategies for students with special educational needs. Specifically, the article analyses previous studies related to observational learning, modelling, imitation, reinforcement, and self-efficacy, as well as their contributions to improving educational outcomes, social development, and inclusive practices in special education.

Introduction to Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura and the Development of Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory was developed by Albert Bandura in the 1970s as an extension of traditional behavioural learning theories. Bandura argued that learning is not solely the result of direct reinforcement and punishment, as proposed by behaviourist theorists, but also occurs through observation of others within social environments (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura, individuals acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours by observing models such as parents, teachers, peers, and other significant individuals. This perspective introduced a broader understanding of human learning by emphasizing the interaction between personal factors, behaviour, and environmental influences.

Bandura's theory emerged from his criticism of behaviourism, which viewed learning primarily as a response to external stimuli. He proposed that individuals are active participants in their own learning processes and can learn new behaviours without direct experience. Through observational learning, individuals can acquire behaviours by watching others perform actions and observing the consequences associated with those actions. This concept has become one of the most influential foundations of contemporary educational practices, particularly in special education, where modelling and guided observation are widely used instructional strategies.

Social Learning Theory

The central premise of Social Learning Theory is that learning occurs within a social context. Individuals learn by observing the behaviour of others, processing the observed information, and later reproducing similar behaviours when appropriate. Bandura identified several key components of learning, including observational learning, modelling, imitation,

reinforcement, and self-efficacy. These components explain how individuals acquire and maintain new behaviours through social experiences.

The relevance of Social Learning Theory is evident in many interventions used in special education. For example, video modelling interventions have been widely applied to improve social communication, academic skills, and adaptive behaviours among students with autism spectrum disorder. Studies by Kurt (2024), Wilson et al. (2024), and Vallecillo (2025) demonstrated that students who observed instructional videos showing target behaviours were able to imitate and apply those behaviours effectively in real-life situations. These findings support Bandura's proposition that observation and modelling are powerful mechanisms for learning.

Similarly, parent-mediated interventions have shown that children with developmental disabilities learn important social and behavioural skills through observing and interacting with parents who model appropriate behaviours. Research examining parent-mediated positive behaviour support programs reported improvements in social competence and behavioural outcomes among children with autism and other developmental disorders, highlighting the practical significance of observational learning within family contexts (Mestari et al., 2024).

Social Cognitive Theory

In the 1980s, Bandura expanded Social Learning Theory into what became known as Social Cognitive Theory. While Social Learning Theory focused primarily on observational learning and modelling, Social Cognitive Theory incorporated cognitive processes that influence behaviour and learning. Bandura argued that individuals do not merely imitate observed behaviours; rather, they actively interpret, evaluate, and regulate their actions based on their beliefs, expectations, and experiences.

A central concept introduced in Social Cognitive Theory is self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their capability to perform specific tasks successfully. Self-efficacy influences motivation, persistence, effort, and performance in learning situations. In educational settings, teachers and students with higher levels of self-efficacy are generally more likely to engage positively in learning activities and overcome challenges effectively.

The importance of self-efficacy has been highlighted in numerous special education studies. Reichenberg et al. (2023) found that educational interventions can positively influence teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and instructional practices. Similarly, Schaub and Lütolf (2024), Mourtziapi et al. (2026), and Pivarč (2026) reported that teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy demonstrate more positive attitudes toward inclusive education and greater confidence in supporting students with special educational needs. These findings reflect the continuing relevance of Social Cognitive Theory in explaining educational practices and teacher behaviour.

The significance of self-efficacy has also been demonstrated in intervention-based studies. Research investigating app-based reading interventions found that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs improved following successful implementation of instructional technologies,

suggesting that mastery experiences and successful practice contribute significantly to efficacy development (Reichenberg et al., 2023).

Evolution and Contemporary Relevance of the Theory

Over time, Social Learning Theory has evolved from a theory primarily concerned with observational learning into a broader framework that explains human behaviour through interactions among cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors. The theory has influenced numerous educational interventions, including peer modelling, video modelling, positive behaviour support, collaborative learning, and self-regulation programs.

Recent studies continue to demonstrate the applicability of Social Learning Theory in special education. Video-based interventions have been found to improve communication skills, social interaction, and academic performance among students with disabilities (Wilson et al., 2024; Vallecillo, 2025). Likewise, positive behaviour support programs and reinforcement-based strategies have proven effective in promoting desirable behaviours and reducing behavioural challenges among students with autism and ADHD (Mestari et al., 2024; Karkanidis et al., 2025). These findings suggest that Bandura's theoretical framework remains highly relevant in contemporary educational settings, particularly for supporting inclusive education and the holistic development of students with special educational needs.

Overall, Social Learning Theory and its later development into Social Cognitive Theory provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how students learn through observation, social interaction, and cognitive processes. The theory continues to serve as an important foundation for designing effective teaching strategies that support the academic, social, and behavioural development of students with special educational needs.

Concepts and Main Principles of Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory explains that learning occurs through interactions between individuals and their social environment. According to the theory, individuals acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours by observing others, interpreting observed information, and applying it in appropriate situations. The theory is built upon several key concepts, namely observational learning, modelling, imitation, reinforcement, and self-efficacy. These principles have been widely applied in educational settings, particularly in special education, where students often require structured opportunities to develop academic, social, and behavioural skills.

Observational Learning

Observational learning refers to the process through which individuals acquire new knowledge and behaviours by observing others. Rather than learning solely through direct experience, students can learn by watching the actions, interactions, and consequences experienced by models within their environment. In educational settings, models may include teachers, parents, peers, or individuals presented through instructional media.

The importance of observational learning is particularly evident in special education. Students with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities often benefit from opportunities to observe appropriate social and behavioural interactions before attempting them independently. Parent-mediated intervention studies have demonstrated that children

acquire communication and behavioural skills through observing parental demonstrations and guided interactions (Mestari et al., 2024). Similarly, video-based instructional approaches provide structured opportunities for students to observe target behaviours repeatedly, allowing them to develop social communication and academic skills more effectively (Wilson et al., 2024; Vallecillo, 2025).

Observational learning also contributes to the development of inclusive attitudes and social acceptance. Research examining parental influence on preschool children's acceptance of peers with special needs suggests that children learn social values and attitudes by observing the behaviours and beliefs demonstrated by significant adults in their environment. These findings highlight the importance of observational learning in shaping both academic and social outcomes. Observational learning also occurs through family interactions, where parents serve as primary behavioural models. Studies involving families of children with autism reported that parental confidence and behavioural practices significantly influence children's learning experiences and adaptive development (Gur et al., 2025).

Modelling

Modelling is a central component of Social Learning Theory and refers to the demonstration of behaviours, skills, or attitudes by a model that can subsequently be observed and learned by others. Effective models provide clear examples of desired behaviours, enabling learners to understand how specific actions should be performed.

Among the various forms of modelling, video modelling has emerged as one of the most effective instructional strategies in special education. Kurt (2024) found that video modelling interventions significantly improved behavioural and learning outcomes among students with autism spectrum disorder. Similarly, Wilson et al. (2024) reported that video modelling effectively supported the development of social communication skills among autistic adults by providing clear visual demonstrations of target behaviours. A review by Vallecillo (2025) further concluded that video-based interventions are effective in teaching social, behavioural, and academic skills to individuals with disabilities across diverse educational contexts.

Beyond child-focused interventions, modelling strategies have also been used to enhance communication goals among autistic adults. Findings indicate that repeated exposure to video-based demonstrations improves social communication skills and promotes greater independence in social situations (Wilson et al., 2024).

Modelling can also occur through teachers, parents, and peers. Parent-mediated interventions provide opportunities for children to learn through observing parental behaviours, while peer modelling enables students to learn appropriate social and academic behaviours through interactions with classmates. These findings indicate that modelling serves as a practical mechanism for translating theoretical principles into effective educational interventions.

Imitation

Imitation refers to the reproduction of behaviours that have been previously observed. It is closely linked to observational learning because individuals often imitate behaviours that they

perceive as successful, rewarding, or socially acceptable. Through imitation, students transform observed information into actual behavioural performance.

Research involving students with developmental disabilities has demonstrated the importance of imitation in skill acquisition. Halbur (2023) found that structured modelling approaches effectively improved object imitation skills among children with developmental disabilities. The study highlighted that repeated exposure to demonstrated behaviours increased students' ability to reproduce target actions accurately. Similarly, video modelling interventions frequently rely on imitation as the mechanism through which learners acquire new social and academic skills (Kurt, 2024; Vallecillo, 2025).

For students with autism spectrum disorder, imitation is particularly important because difficulties in social learning and communication often limit opportunities for natural skill acquisition. Consequently, educational interventions that provide repeated opportunities for observation and imitation can facilitate the development of communication, social interaction, and adaptive behaviours.

Reinforcement

Reinforcement refers to the consequences that influence the likelihood of a behaviour being repeated. While Social Learning Theory emphasizes observational learning, Bandura also acknowledged the importance of reinforcement in maintaining and strengthening learned behaviours. Individuals are more likely to adopt behaviours that are associated with positive outcomes and less likely to repeat behaviours associated with negative consequences.

Positive behaviour support programs provide practical examples of reinforcement-based strategies in special education. Mestari et al. (2024) reported that positive behaviour support interventions helped reduce challenging behaviours and improve adaptive functioning among children with autism. Such interventions typically involve the systematic use of praise, rewards, and supportive feedback to encourage desirable behaviours.

Similarly, research on reward and consequence strategies for students with ADHD suggests that positive reinforcement improves behavioural regulation, classroom participation, and task completion. Reinforcement-based approaches create structured learning environments where students receive immediate feedback regarding their behaviours, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive behavioural change. These findings demonstrate that reinforcement remains a critical component of effective teaching practices within the framework of Social Learning Theory.

Research involving students with ADHD further demonstrated that structured reward and consequence systems contribute positively to behavioural regulation and classroom engagement, supporting the role of reinforcement in sustaining desirable behaviours (Karkanidis et al., 2025).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is one of the most influential concepts introduced through the evolution of Social Learning Theory into Social Cognitive Theory. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform specific tasks successfully and achieve desired outcomes. Individuals

with high levels of self-efficacy are generally more motivated, persistent, and resilient when facing challenges.

In educational contexts, self-efficacy influences both student learning and teacher effectiveness. Research has consistently shown that teachers with higher self-efficacy demonstrate greater confidence in implementing inclusive educational practices and supporting students with special educational needs. Schaub and Lütolf (2024) found that self-efficacy significantly influenced educators' attitudes towards inclusive education. Similarly, Mourtziapi et al. (2026) reported that teachers with stronger self-efficacy beliefs were more willing to adapt instructional practices to accommodate diverse learning needs.

Additional studies have highlighted the role of self-efficacy in promoting effective teaching and inclusive classroom practices. Reichenberg et al. (2023) demonstrated that educational interventions can positively enhance teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, while Pivarč (2026) found that self-efficacy influences teachers' confidence in managing inclusive learning environments. These findings suggest that self-efficacy is not only a predictor of instructional effectiveness but also a key factor supporting successful implementation of inclusive education.

Overall, observational learning, modelling, imitation, reinforcement, and self-efficacy collectively form the foundation of Social Learning Theory. These interconnected principles explain how individuals learn through social experiences and provide valuable guidance for the development of effective teaching strategies in special education. The extensive application of these principles in contemporary research demonstrates their continuing relevance in supporting the academic, behavioural, and social development of students with special educational needs.

Application of Social Learning Theory in Special Education

Social Learning Theory has become one of the most influential frameworks in special education because it explains how students acquire knowledge, skills, and behaviours through observation, interaction, and experience. The theory is particularly relevant for students with special educational needs because many educational interventions rely on modelling, imitation, reinforcement, and self-regulation to promote learning and behavioural development. Previous studies have demonstrated that Social Learning Theory can be applied through parent-mediated learning, peer modelling, video modelling, positive behaviour support, and self-efficacy enhancement strategies.

Parent-Mediated Learning

Parent-mediated learning refers to educational interventions in which parents actively support their children's learning and behavioural development through structured interactions, guidance, and modelling. Within the framework of Social Learning Theory, parents serve as primary models whose behaviours, attitudes, and responses influence children's learning experiences.

Research has shown that parent-mediated interventions are particularly effective for children with autism spectrum disorder and developmental disabilities. Studies examining parent-mediated positive behaviour support programs found that children improved their

communication skills, adaptive behaviours, and social interactions when parents were trained to model appropriate behaviours and provide consistent reinforcement (Mestari et al., 2024). Through daily interactions, children observe parental behaviours and gradually acquire similar behavioural patterns through observation and imitation. This finding is consistent with Bandura's (1977) proposition that learning occurs through the observation and reproduction of behaviours demonstrated by significant role models.

Furthermore, parental influence extends beyond behavioural development to social attitudes and inclusion. Research on preschool children's acceptance of peers with special needs suggests that children develop positive attitudes toward diversity and inclusion by observing the behaviours and beliefs demonstrated by their parents. These findings support the Social Learning Theory proposition that learning occurs within social contexts and is strongly influenced by significant role models.

Peer Modelling

Peer modelling involves learning through observing and interacting with classmates or peers who demonstrate appropriate academic, social, or behavioural skills. Social Learning Theory suggests that learners are more likely to imitate behaviours demonstrated by individuals who are similar to themselves, making peer models particularly effective in educational settings.

In inclusive classrooms, peer modelling provides opportunities for students with special educational needs to observe appropriate social interactions, communication skills, and classroom behaviours. Through collaborative learning activities and peer-assisted instruction, students can learn new behaviours and skills while developing positive social relationships. Studies on inclusive education have consistently highlighted the importance of peer interactions in promoting participation, social acceptance, and engagement among students with disabilities (Mourtziapi et al., 2026; Schaub & Lütolf, 2024).

Peer modelling is especially beneficial for students with autism spectrum disorder, who often experience difficulties in social communication and interaction. Observing peers engage successfully in classroom activities provides concrete examples of desired behaviours and facilitates social learning. Consequently, peer-mediated approaches have become widely recognized as effective strategies for supporting inclusion and social development. Consistent with Bandura (1977), peers function as influential social models whose behaviours provide learners with observable examples of appropriate academic and social conduct.

Video Modelling

Video modelling is one of the most widely researched applications of Social Learning Theory in special education. This strategy involves presenting learners with video demonstrations of target behaviours, skills, or tasks that can later be imitated and applied in real-life situations. Video modelling incorporates several principles of Social Learning Theory, including observation, modelling, imitation, and reinforcement.

Research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of video modelling interventions for individuals with autism spectrum disorder. Kurt (2024) reported that video modelling significantly improved behavioural and learning outcomes among students with autism by providing clear and repeated demonstrations of target skills. Similarly, Wilson et al. (2024)

found that video modelling enhanced social communication skills among autistic adults, enabling them to practice and generalize learned behaviours across different contexts. Supporting these findings, Vallecillo (2025) concluded that video-based interventions are effective across academic, behavioural, and social domains for individuals with disabilities. Collectively, these studies suggest that video modelling remains one of the most evidence-based applications of Social Learning Theory in special education because it provides learners with consistent, accessible, and repeatable demonstrations of desired behaviours and skills. This finding is consistent with Bandura's (1977) proposition that individuals learn new behaviours by observing models and reproducing behaviours that are perceived as effective or socially appropriate.

However, despite the positive findings, the effectiveness of video modelling interventions may vary according to learner characteristics, cognitive abilities, and opportunities for repeated practice. Vallecillo (2025) emphasized that successful implementation depends not only on the quality of video demonstrations but also on contextual support and instructional fidelity. Therefore, video modelling should be integrated with guided practice and reinforcement strategies to maximize learning outcomes among students with special educational needs.

In addition to social communication and behavioural outcomes, video modelling has also been applied in academic instruction. Previous studies reported improvements in problem-solving skills and task completion among students with autism spectrum disorder when video demonstrations were integrated into learning activities (Vallecillo, 2025; Kurt, 2024). These findings further support the effectiveness of video modelling as an instructional strategy that provides learners with structured, accessible, and repeatable opportunities to acquire new skills.

Positive Behaviour Support

Positive Behaviour Support programs effectively improve behavioural outcomes among children with autism and developmental disabilities (Mestari et al., 2024; Reward and Consequence Strategies in ADHD Support, 2024). Although PBS is often associated with behavioural approaches, its implementation aligns closely with Social Learning Theory because students learn appropriate behaviours through observation, modelling, and reinforcement.

Research has demonstrated that positive behaviour support programs effectively improve behavioural outcomes among children with autism and other developmental disabilities. Mestari et al. (2024) reported that educators who implemented positive behaviour support strategies observed improvements in students' adaptive behaviours and reductions in challenging behaviours. These interventions typically involve modelling appropriate behaviours, providing positive reinforcement, and creating supportive learning environments that encourage behavioural growth.

Similarly, studies examining reward and consequence strategies among students with ADHD found that reinforcement-based approaches improved behavioural regulation, classroom participation, and task completion. Through repeated exposure to positive consequences,

students learn to associate desirable behaviours with favourable outcomes, thereby increasing the likelihood of behavioural maintenance and generalization.

However, several studies noted that reinforcement-based interventions may produce inconsistent outcomes when implementation fidelity is low or when students do not receive consistent support across home and school environments. In addition, excessive reliance on external rewards may limit opportunities for students to develop intrinsic motivation and independent behavioural regulation. Therefore, reinforcement strategies should be integrated with modelling, guided practice, and self-regulation techniques to ensure sustainable behavioural development among students with special educational needs.

Self-Efficacy Enhancement

Self-efficacy enhancement represents one of the most important applications of Social Cognitive Theory in special education. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capability to perform tasks successfully and overcome challenges. According to Bandura, self-efficacy influences motivation, persistence, effort, and performance.

Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of self-efficacy among educators working in inclusive and special education settings. Schaub and Lütolf (2024) found that teachers with stronger self-efficacy beliefs reported more positive attitudes toward inclusive education, greater confidence in supporting students with diverse learning needs, and a stronger willingness to implement inclusive practices. Similarly, Mourtziapi et al. (2026) reported that self-efficacy significantly influenced teachers' readiness to adapt instruction and accommodate students with disabilities.

Additional studies indicate that self-efficacy can be enhanced through professional development programs, successful teaching experiences, and opportunities to observe effective instructional practices. Reichenberg et al. (2023) found that educational interventions positively influenced teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, while Pivarč (2026) reported that higher levels of self-efficacy were associated with more effective classroom management and instructional decision-making.

The enhancement of self-efficacy is particularly important because teachers who believe in their capabilities are more likely to implement innovative teaching strategies, support inclusive education, and respond effectively to students' diverse learning needs. Consequently, self-efficacy remains a critical factor influencing the successful application of Social Learning Theory in special education.

Overall, the application of Social Learning Theory in special education demonstrates how observational learning, modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy can be translated into practical teaching strategies. Parent-mediated learning, peer modelling, video modelling, positive behaviour support, and self-efficacy enhancement collectively contribute to improving academic performance, social competence, behavioural development, and inclusion among students with special educational needs.

Analysis of Previous Studies

Previous studies have demonstrated that Social Learning Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding learning processes among students with special educational needs. The theory has been widely applied in interventions focusing on behavioural development, communication skills, social interaction, academic performance, and inclusive education. Analysis of the literature reveals five major themes: observational learning and behaviour acquisition, modelling and skill development, reinforcement and behavioural outcomes, self-efficacy in inclusive education, and challenges associated with implementation.

Observational Learning and Behaviour Acquisition

Observational learning is a fundamental principle of Social Learning Theory and has been widely applied in special education to support behavioural acquisition and social development. Previous studies consistently reported that students with special educational needs benefit from opportunities to observe and imitate behaviours demonstrated by parents, teachers, and peers. Parent-mediated interventions, for example, were found to improve communication skills, adaptive behaviours, and social interaction among children with autism spectrum disorder by providing consistent modelling and reinforcement within natural learning environments (Mestari et al., 2024). Similarly, research examining children's acceptance of peers with special needs indicated that positive social attitudes and inclusive behaviours can be acquired through observation of parental beliefs and behaviours.

While most studies reported positive effects of observational learning on behavioural acquisition and social development, the magnitude of improvement varied across participants and intervention contexts. Parent-mediated interventions generally produced stronger outcomes when parents received structured training and ongoing support, suggesting that the quality and consistency of modelling play important roles in determining intervention effectiveness. These findings support Bandura’s (1977) proposition that learning occurs through observing and interpreting the behaviours of significant models within social environments.

However, observational learning may be less effective for students with severe communication difficulties, limited attention skills, or complex developmental needs. Such learners often require additional instructional support, repeated exposure, and guided practice before they can successfully process and imitate observed behaviours. This limitation suggests that observation alone may not be sufficient to produce meaningful behavioural change for all learners.

Overall, the findings indicate that observational learning serves as an important mechanism for behavioural acquisition and social adjustment among students with special educational needs. Nevertheless, its effectiveness depends on learner characteristics, the quality of modelling opportunities, and the availability of consistent support across educational and family environments.

Modelling and Skill Development

Modelling is one of the most extensively studied principles of Social Learning Theory and has been widely applied in special education to facilitate skill acquisition and behavioural development. Previous studies consistently demonstrated that modelling interventions, particularly video modelling, contribute positively to communication skills, social competence, academic performance, and adaptive behaviours among students with special educational needs. Kurt (2024) reported substantial improvements in behavioural and learning outcomes among students with autism spectrum disorder through video modelling interventions, while Wilson et al. (2024) found that video modelling enhanced social communication skills and promoted the generalization of learned behaviours across different settings. Similarly, Vallecillo (2025) concluded that video-based interventions are effective across academic, behavioural, and social domains for individuals with disabilities.

Although the overall findings support the effectiveness of modelling interventions, differences exist regarding the conditions under which these interventions produce optimal outcomes. While Kurt (2024) reported substantial improvements through video modelling, Vallecillo (2025) emphasized that intervention effectiveness depends heavily on implementation fidelity, contextual support, and learner characteristics. These findings suggest that modelling interventions are not universally effective but require careful adaptation to individual learning needs and educational contexts.

Furthermore, modelling alone may not be sufficient to sustain long-term behavioural change. Several studies indicate that reinforcement, guided practice, and repeated opportunities for skill application are necessary to ensure the maintenance and generalization of learned behaviours. This observation is consistent with Bandura's (1977) argument that observational learning involves not only exposure to models but also cognitive processing, practice, and motivational factors that influence behavioural reproduction.

Overall, the evidence supports modelling as a highly effective instructional strategy for students with special educational needs, particularly when integrated with reinforcement and opportunities for active participation. Nevertheless, successful implementation depends on learner characteristics, instructional quality, and the availability of ongoing support within educational environments.

Reinforcement and Behavioural Outcomes

Reinforcement is a central component of Social Learning Theory and has been widely applied in special education to promote desirable behaviours and reduce behavioural challenges. Previous studies consistently reported that reinforcement-based interventions contribute positively to behavioural regulation, classroom participation, and adaptive functioning among students with special educational needs. Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) programs, for example, were found to improve adaptive behaviours and reduce challenging behaviours among children with autism spectrum disorder by combining modelling, structured support, and positive reinforcement (Mestari et al., 2024). Similarly, studies examining reward and consequence strategies among students with ADHD reported improvements in behavioural regulation, task completion, and classroom engagement.

Although most studies agreed that reinforcement contributes positively to behavioural outcomes, differences were observed regarding the type, intensity, and duration of reinforcement required to achieve desired results. Some interventions relied primarily on tangible rewards, whereas others emphasized social reinforcement and positive feedback. These findings suggest that reinforcement strategies need to be adapted according to students' individual characteristics, behavioural needs, and educational contexts.

Nevertheless, excessive reliance on external rewards may limit the development of intrinsic motivation and independent behavioural regulation. Students may become dependent on reinforcement and demonstrate reduced behavioural consistency when rewards are withdrawn. This observation supports Bandura's (1977) argument that learning cannot be explained by reinforcement alone, as individuals also engage in cognitive processes when interpreting and reproducing observed behaviours. Therefore, reinforcement is most effective when combined with modelling, guided practice, and opportunities for self-regulation.

Overall, the literature indicates that reinforcement remains an effective strategy for supporting behavioural development among students with special educational needs. However, sustainable behavioural change is more likely to occur when reinforcement is integrated with broader social learning processes that encourage autonomy, self-management, and meaningful participation in learning activities.

Self-Efficacy in Inclusive Education

Self-efficacy has emerged as one of the most significant constructs within Social Cognitive Theory and is increasingly recognized as an important factor influencing inclusive educational practices. Previous studies consistently reported that teachers with stronger self-efficacy beliefs demonstrate greater confidence in managing inclusive classrooms, adapting instruction, and supporting students with diverse learning needs. Schaub and Lütolf (2024) found that self-efficacy was positively associated with teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, whereas Mourtziapi et al. (2026) reported that self-efficacy significantly influenced teachers' willingness to implement inclusive practices and adapt classroom instruction for students with disabilities. Similarly, Reichenberg et al. (2023) demonstrated that professional learning experiences positively strengthened teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and instructional competence.

Although these studies consistently highlight the positive role of self-efficacy in inclusive education, differences exist regarding the dimensions of teaching most strongly influenced by efficacy beliefs. While Schaub and Lütolf (2024) emphasized attitudes towards inclusion, Mourtziapi et al. (2026) focused on instructional adaptation and classroom implementation. These findings suggest that self-efficacy influences multiple aspects of teaching practice and contributes to the successful implementation of inclusive education in different ways.

However, high levels of self-efficacy alone do not guarantee effective educational practice. Several studies emphasized that institutional support, professional development opportunities, leadership commitment, and access to educational resources remain important determinants of successful implementation. Teachers may possess strong

confidence in their abilities yet still encounter challenges when working in environments with limited support systems or inadequate resources.

Overall, the literature suggests that self-efficacy functions as a key enabling factor for inclusive education by influencing teachers' motivation, confidence, and willingness to support diverse learners. Consistent with Bandura's (1977) proposition, beliefs about personal capability play a crucial role in determining behaviour and performance. Nevertheless, the impact of self-efficacy is influenced by broader organisational, contextual, and environmental factors that shape educational practice.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite the positive findings reported across the literature, several challenges and limitations were identified regarding the application of Social Learning Theory in special education. Most studies consistently reported improvements in social competence, behavioural development, and academic participation through observational learning, modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy interventions. However, the effectiveness of these approaches often depended on implementation quality, learner characteristics, teacher competence, and the availability of family and institutional support.

One limitation identified across the literature is the predominance of autism-focused research. Studies by Kurt (2024), Wilson et al. (2024), Vallecillo (2025), and Mestari et al. (2024) primarily examined interventions involving individuals with autism spectrum disorder. While these studies provide strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of Social Learning Theory, relatively little research has explored its application among students with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, emotional and behavioural disorders, or multiple disabilities. Consequently, the generalizability of existing findings across different disability categories remains uncertain.

Another challenge concerns implementation fidelity. Although modelling and reinforcement interventions are generally effective, their success often depends on consistent application across educational and home environments. Vallecillo (2025) emphasized that contextual support, instructional quality, and opportunities for repeated practice significantly influence intervention outcomes. Similarly, studies on inclusive education suggest that teacher self-efficacy alone is insufficient without adequate professional development, institutional support, and access to educational resources (Schaub & Lütolf, 2024; Mourtziapi et al., 2026).

In addition, Social Learning Theory has been criticized for placing greater emphasis on social and environmental influences than on biological, neurological, and cognitive factors. While Bandura (1977) acknowledged the role of cognition through Social Cognitive Theory, the framework may not fully explain learning differences associated with complex neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism spectrum disorder and ADHD. Therefore, some researchers argue that Social Learning Theory should be complemented by cognitive, developmental, and neurological perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of learning among students with special educational needs.

Overall, the literature suggests that Social Learning Theory remains a valuable framework for special education; however, its effectiveness is influenced by contextual, individual, and

organisational factors. Consequently, future research should explore the application of Social Learning Theory across a wider range of disability categories and educational contexts to improve the generalizability and practical relevance of existing findings.

Importance of Social Learning Theory in Special Education

Social Learning Theory has significant implications for special education because it provides a practical framework for understanding how students acquire knowledge, behaviours, and social skills through observation and interaction with their environment. The theory is particularly relevant for students with special educational needs, who often require structured opportunities to develop communication skills, adaptive behaviours, social competence, and academic engagement. Through principles such as observational learning, modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy, Social Learning Theory contributes to the development of inclusive and effective educational practices.

Promoting Inclusive Education

One of the most important contributions of Social Learning Theory is its support for inclusive education. Inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for students with special educational needs to interact with peers, observe appropriate social and academic behaviours, and participate actively in learning activities. Through observation and modelling, students learn classroom routines, communication skills, and socially appropriate behaviours from their peers and teachers. This process reflects Bandura's (1977) proposition that learning occurs through observing and interpreting the behaviours of significant models within social environments.

Research indicates that teacher self-efficacy plays a crucial role in successful inclusive education. Educators with higher levels of self-efficacy demonstrate more positive attitudes towards inclusion and greater confidence in adapting instruction to meet diverse learning needs (Schaub & Lütolf, 2024; Mourtziapi et al., 2026). Furthermore, inclusive learning environments that encourage interaction and collaboration enable students with disabilities to participate more meaningfully in educational experiences. However, successful inclusion depends not only on teacher self-efficacy but also on institutional support, resource availability, and opportunities for meaningful peer interaction. Without these conditions, inclusive practices may be difficult to implement effectively despite positive teacher attitudes. These findings suggest that Social Learning Theory provides a valuable foundation for fostering inclusive educational practices that support equity and participation.

Enhancing Social Competence

Social competence is a critical area of development for many students with special educational needs, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder and developmental disabilities. Difficulties in communication, social interaction, and relationship-building often affect students' ability to participate successfully in school and community settings.

Social Learning Theory emphasizes that social behaviours can be learned through observation and imitation of appropriate models. Research on video modelling interventions has consistently demonstrated improvements in communication skills, social interaction, and adaptive behaviour among individuals with autism spectrum disorder (Kurt, 2024; Wilson et al., 2024). Similarly, parent-mediated interventions provide opportunities for children to

observe and practice social behaviours within natural environments, contributing to improved social competence and interpersonal functioning (Mestari et al., 2024).

These findings highlight the importance of modelling and guided social experiences in helping students develop the skills necessary for successful social participation (Wilson et al., 2024; Kurt, 2024; Mestari et al., 2024). Nevertheless, some students with severe communication difficulties may require more intensive and individualized interventions before they can successfully generalize learned social behaviours across different contexts.

Supporting Behavioural Development

Behavioural development is another area in which Social Learning Theory has demonstrated substantial value. Many students with special educational needs experience behavioural challenges that may interfere with learning and social participation. Social Learning Theory explains that behaviour is influenced by observation, environmental feedback, and reinforcement, making it highly relevant for behavioural interventions. This explanation is consistent with Bandura's (1977) view that behavioural development results from interactions between environmental influences and individual cognitive processes.

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) programs illustrate how Social Learning Theory can be applied to promote desirable behaviours and reduce challenging behaviours. Mestari et al. (2024) reported that positive behaviour support interventions improved adaptive behaviour and reduced behavioural difficulties among children with autism. Similarly, studies examining reward and consequence strategies among students with ADHD found that reinforcement-based approaches enhanced behavioural regulation and classroom participation.

These findings suggest that behavioural development is most effective when students are provided with clear behavioural models, opportunities for practice, and consistent reinforcement. Consequently, Social Learning Theory offers educators practical strategies for creating positive and supportive learning environments that encourage behavioural growth. However, behavioural improvements may not be sustained when reinforcement strategies are inconsistently applied across school and home settings.

Improving Academic Participation

Academic participation is essential for successful learning outcomes, yet many students with disabilities face barriers that limit their engagement in classroom activities. Social Learning Theory contributes to academic participation by providing instructional approaches that facilitate learning through observation, demonstration, and guided practice.

Video modelling interventions have been found to improve academic skills across various educational contexts. Studies involving students with autism spectrum disorder demonstrated that video modelling enhanced problem-solving abilities, task completion, and classroom engagement by providing clear demonstrations of expected performance (Vallecillo, 2025; Kurt, 2024). Through repeated observation and imitation, students were able to acquire and generalize academic skills more effectively. Similar findings were reported across a range of video-based interventions that demonstrated positive effects on learning engagement and task completion among students with disabilities (Vallecillo, 2025; Wilson et

al., 2024). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these interventions may vary according to students' cognitive abilities, learning preferences, and access to technological resources.

Furthermore, observational learning enables students to learn from teachers and peers without relying exclusively on direct instruction. This process increases opportunities for participation and supports independent learning. Therefore, Social Learning Theory contributes to academic success by creating accessible learning experiences that accommodate diverse learning needs.

Strengthening Family Involvement

Family involvement is widely recognized as an important factor influencing educational outcomes for students with special educational needs. Social Learning Theory highlights the role of parents as influential models who shape children's behaviours, attitudes, and learning experiences.

Parent-mediated interventions have demonstrated positive effects on communication skills, social behaviour, and adaptive functioning among children with autism spectrum disorder (Mestari et al., 2024). Through consistent modelling and reinforcement within home environments, parents support the transfer and maintenance of skills learned in school settings. This finding supports Bandura's (1977) argument that family members function as powerful social models whose behaviours influence children's learning and development. In addition, parental behaviours influence children's attitudes toward diversity, inclusion, and social relationships.

The theory therefore emphasizes the importance of collaboration between schools and families. When parents and educators provide consistent behavioural models and reinforcement strategies, students receive coherent learning experiences that promote behavioural and academic development across multiple environments.

Evidence also suggests that parental self-efficacy contributes to the effectiveness of home-based learning and behavioural interventions. Parents who possess greater confidence in supporting their children are more likely to engage consistently in educational activities and reinforce positive behaviours across different environments (Gur et al., 2025). However, parental involvement may be influenced by factors such as socioeconomic conditions, parental education levels, time constraints, and access to support services.

Enhancing Teacher Effectiveness

Teacher effectiveness is closely associated with the successful implementation of educational interventions and inclusive practices. Social Learning Theory contributes to teacher effectiveness by emphasizing self-efficacy, observational learning, and professional modelling.

Research consistently demonstrates that teachers with stronger self-efficacy beliefs are more confident in managing inclusive classrooms. Similar findings have been reported among early childhood educators, where self-efficacy was positively associated with attitudes toward inclusion and instructional adaptability (Schaub & Lütolf, 2024). Reichenberg et al. (2023)

further reported that professional learning experiences and educational interventions positively influence teachers' self-efficacy and instructional competence.

Teachers also serve as important role models for students. Through their behaviours, attitudes, and instructional practices, teachers influence students' academic engagement, social development, and behavioural outcomes. Consequently, Social Learning Theory not only explains how students learn but also provides guidance for enhancing teaching effectiveness and professional practice. Nevertheless, high levels of teacher self-efficacy alone may not guarantee effective instructional practice if educators lack adequate training, mentoring, or institutional support.

Overall, the importance of Social Learning Theory in special education lies in its ability to support inclusive education, enhance social competence, promote behavioural development, improve academic participation, strengthen family involvement, and increase teacher effectiveness. By integrating observational learning, modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy into educational practice, the theory provides a comprehensive framework for supporting the holistic development of students with special educational needs.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This review examined the application of Social Learning Theory in teaching strategies for students with special educational needs. The analysis of previous studies demonstrated that the theory remains highly relevant in contemporary special education due to its emphasis on observational learning, modelling, imitation, reinforcement, and self-efficacy. The literature consistently indicates that these principles contribute positively to students' social, behavioural, and academic development. These findings are consistent with Bandura's (1977) proposition that learning occurs through observation, imitation, reinforcement, and interactions within social environments.

Studies on observational learning highlighted the importance of social interaction and exposure to positive role models in facilitating behavioural acquisition and social adjustment among students with disabilities. Similarly, research on modelling interventions, particularly video modelling, demonstrated significant improvements in communication skills, social competence, academic performance, and adaptive behaviours among students with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities (Kurt, 2024; Wilson et al., 2024; Vallecillo, 2025).

The findings also revealed that reinforcement-based approaches, including Positive Behaviour Support programs and reward systems, effectively promote desirable behaviours and reduce behavioural challenges among students with special educational needs (Mestari et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies focusing on self-efficacy consistently reported that teachers with stronger self-efficacy beliefs are more confident in implementing inclusive practices and supporting diverse learners (Schaub & Lütolf, 2024; Mourtziapi et al., 2026; Pivarč, 2026). Overall, the evidence suggests that Social Learning Theory provides a comprehensive framework for supporting inclusive and effective educational practices.

Strengths of Social Learning Theory

One of the major strengths of Social Learning Theory is its ability to explain learning as a social and interactive process rather than solely as a response to external stimuli (Bandura, 1977). The theory recognizes that individuals learn by observing others and interpreting environmental experiences, making it particularly relevant for students with special educational needs who often require structured opportunities for social learning.

Another strength of the theory is its practical applicability in educational settings. The principles of observational learning, modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy can be translated into evidence-based interventions such as video modelling, peer-mediated learning, parent-mediated interventions, and positive behaviour support programs. The effectiveness of these interventions has been supported by numerous studies involving students with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and other developmental disabilities (Wilson et al., 2024; Vallecillo, 2025; Mestari et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the theory provides a strong foundation for inclusive education by emphasizing the importance of social interaction, collaboration, and participation. It also recognizes the role of teachers, parents, and peers as influential models who contribute to students' learning and development. Through its focus on self-efficacy, the theory additionally explains how beliefs about personal competence influence motivation, persistence, and educational success. This perspective is supported by studies showing that teachers with stronger self-efficacy beliefs are more willing to implement inclusive practices and adapt instruction to meet diverse learner needs (Schaub & Lütolf, 2024; Mourtziapi et al., 2026).

Limitations of Social Learning Theory

Despite its significant contributions, Social Learning Theory is not without limitations. One limitation identified in the literature is that the theory places considerable emphasis on environmental and social influences while providing less attention to biological, neurological, and cognitive factors that may affect learning among students with disabilities. Conditions such as autism spectrum disorder and ADHD involve complex neurological characteristics that cannot always be fully explained through observational learning and modelling alone. This limitation suggests that Social Learning Theory may need to be complemented by cognitive and neurodevelopmental perspectives when addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Another limitation concerns the variability of intervention outcomes. Although many studies report positive effects of modelling and reinforcement-based strategies, the effectiveness of these interventions often depends on factors such as students' cognitive abilities, communication skills, motivation levels, and access to educational support. Consequently, not all students respond equally to the same intervention approaches.

The literature also highlights practical challenges associated with implementation. Effective application of Social Learning Theory often requires extensive teacher training, technological resources, parental involvement, and ongoing support. Schools with limited resources may face difficulties implementing video modelling programs, positive behaviour support systems, and individualized interventions consistently. Therefore, contextual factors must be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of Social Learning Theory in special education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should continue exploring the application of Social Learning Theory across diverse disability categories and educational contexts. Although a substantial body of research exists regarding autism spectrum disorder, fewer studies have examined the theory's application among students with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and other special educational needs. This imbalance in the literature limits the generalizability of existing findings and highlights the need for broader investigation across different disability categories. Expanding research to these populations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the theory's effectiveness.

Future studies should also investigate the integration of Social Learning Theory with emerging educational technologies. Recent advances in digital learning, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and interactive multimedia offer new opportunities for implementing observational learning and modelling strategies. Research examining the effectiveness of technology-enhanced interventions could contribute significantly to the development of innovative teaching practices.

In addition, more longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the long-term impact of modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy interventions on students' academic achievement, social competence, and behavioural development. Existing research often focuses on short-term outcomes, making it difficult to determine the sustainability of intervention effects over time.

Finally, future research should further explore factors influencing teacher self-efficacy and implementation fidelity in inclusive education. Understanding how professional development, institutional support, and collaborative practices affect teachers' ability to apply Social Learning Theory could provide valuable insights for improving educational outcomes for students with special educational needs.

Final Conclusion

In conclusion, Social Learning Theory remains one of the most influential and applicable theoretical frameworks in special education because it provides a practical explanation of how students acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours through social interaction and observation (Bandura, 1977). Its emphasis on observational learning, modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy provides valuable insights into how students with special educational needs acquire knowledge, skills, and behaviours. The findings of this review demonstrate that the theory supports inclusive education, enhances social competence, promotes positive behavioural development, encourages academic participation, strengthens family involvement, and improves teacher effectiveness.

Although certain limitations and implementation challenges remain, the overall evidence suggests that Social Learning Theory continues to provide a strong foundation for designing effective educational interventions and inclusive teaching practices. As educational environments continue to evolve, the theory will remain an important framework for supporting the holistic development and educational success of students with special educational needs. Future integration of Social Learning Theory with emerging technologies

and inclusive pedagogical approaches may further enhance its relevance and effectiveness in addressing the diverse needs of learners in contemporary educational settings.

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