



Research article



Experiencing Inclusion in Schools: Narratives of Policy, Practice, and Social Belonging

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Abstract

This study explores how inclusion is experienced in schools through students' narratives of policy, everyday practice, and social belonging. Using a qualitative approach, the research focuses on how students interpret inclusion within their daily interactions, classroom participation, and relationships with teachers and peers. The study involved 20 secondary school students from a school that actively promotes inclusive education. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations, then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in students' experiences of acceptance, participation, and belonging. The findings reveal four key dimensions of inclusive experience. First, students understand inclusion primarily as a feeling of being recognized, accepted, and valued in everyday school life. Second, teacher practices play a significant role in mediating inclusion, as supportive interaction and equitable participation opportunities shape students' sense of involvement. Third, peer relationships emerge as a central foundation for belonging, where friendship, collaboration, and social acceptance reinforce feelings of inclusion. Finally, the study identifies a gap between policy intentions and lived experiences, showing that while schools promote inclusive values, their realization depends on consistent everyday practice. Overall, the study highlights that inclusion is not only a structural or policy-driven goal but also a relational and emotional experience shaped by daily social interaction. Understanding students' narratives provides important insight into how inclusive education is interpreted and lived within school environments. Strengthening inclusive schooling therefore requires attention to recognition, relationships, and the everyday practices that foster genuine belonging.

Keywords: inclusive education, student belonging, school inclusion, everyday practices, educational policy

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central focus in contemporary educational discourse, with growing recognition that schools play a critical role in ensuring equal access, participation, and a sense of belonging for all students. Across different educational systems, inclusion is no longer viewed solely as the placement of diverse learners within mainstream classrooms, but as a broader commitment to creating supportive environments where every student feels valued, respected, and socially connected. Current scholarship consistently highlights that inclusion involves not only policy implementation but also everyday practices that shape students' experiences of acceptance, participation, and recognition in school life (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2021; Florian, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). At the practical level, inclusion is closely linked to how students experience social relationships, classroom interaction, and institutional support. Research has shown that the success of inclusive education is influenced not only by formal policies but also by how these policies are enacted through teacher practices, peer interaction, and school culture (Messiou, 2020; Graham, 2021; Boyle et al., 2022; Walton, 2024). In this sense, inclusion is both a structural and social process that affects how students see themselves within the school environment and whether they feel that they truly belong. These developments suggest that understanding inclusion requires attention to lived experiences. Beyond policy documents and institutional commitments, the everyday realities of school life shape how inclusion is interpreted, practiced, and felt by students.

Despite the growing emphasis on inclusive education across policy frameworks and institutional agendas, much of the existing research has concentrated on structural implementation, access to schooling, and support for students with diverse learning needs. While these perspectives are important, they often foreground policy design and institutional strategies rather than examining how inclusion is experienced in the everyday lives of students. As a result, the lived realities of inclusion, particularly how students interpret acceptance, participation, and belonging in school environments, remain insufficiently explored (Allan, 2020; Artiles & Kozleski, 2021; Dyson, 2022; Magnússon, 2023). Another limitation in current scholarship is the tendency to treat inclusion as a measurable outcome rather than as a social and relational process. Many studies evaluate inclusive education through indicators such as access, placement, or academic support, but pay less attention to how policies are translated into daily practices within classrooms and school communities. The gap between policy intentions and students' actual experiences can be significant, as inclusion is often shaped by subtle social interactions, peer relationships, and school culture (Biesta, 2021; Thomas, 2022; Keddie, 2023; Waitoller & Artiles, 2024). This suggests the need for research that foregrounds narratives and everyday experiences. Understanding how students experience inclusion requires attention to the interplay between policy, practice, and social belonging, particularly how these dimensions are interpreted and negotiated within the daily realities of school life.

Responding to these gaps, this study seeks to explore how inclusion is experienced and understood through the everyday narratives of students within school environments. Rather than focusing solely on policy frameworks or institutional strategies, this research centers on how inclusion is interpreted, practiced, and felt in daily school life. The study pays particular attention to how students make sense of inclusion through their interactions with peers, relationships with teachers, and participation in classroom and school activities. In this way, inclusion is approached not only as an educational policy but as a lived social experience shaped by routine practices and social dynamics. This research adopts a qualitative perspective to capture the voices and experiences of students as they navigate school environments that aim to be inclusive. By focusing on narratives, the study aims to understand how policy intentions are translated into everyday practices and how

these practices influence students’ sense of acceptance, participation, and belonging. Attention is given to how students interpret support, recognition, and social relationships, and how these elements contribute to whether they feel included within the school community.

Through this focus on lived experience, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of inclusion as a relational and contextual process. It highlights how policy, practice, and social interaction intersect in shaping students’ experiences of belonging in school. Guided by this aim, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do students experience and interpret inclusion in their everyday school lives? (2) How do school practices and social interactions shape students’ sense of belonging?

2. Research Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how inclusion is experienced through everyday school practices and social interaction. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand participants’ lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of inclusion within natural educational settings. As Creswell (2018) explains, qualitative research is particularly useful for examining how individuals make meaning of social phenomena within specific contexts. In this study, inclusion is approached as a social and relational experience that unfolds through daily interaction rather than as a fixed policy outcome. In addition, this research draws on insights from Merriam and Tisdell (2021), who emphasize that qualitative inquiry is well suited for exploring complex human experiences, particularly when the goal is to understand how participants interpret their environments. By focusing on students’ narratives and everyday practices, the study aims to capture how inclusion is enacted, experienced, and negotiated within the realities of school life.

2.2 Research Participants

This study involved 20 student participants drawn from a secondary school that actively promotes inclusive education practices. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture diverse experiences related to inclusion, participation, and social belonging. The selection considered variation in academic backgrounds, social interaction patterns, and levels of engagement in school activities to ensure a wide range of perspectives on how inclusion is experienced in everyday school life. All participants were students who regularly engaged in classroom learning, peer interaction, and school-based activities where inclusion policies were enacted in practice. Their experiences provided insight into how inclusion is interpreted through daily relationships with teachers, peers, and the broader school environment. By focusing on students’ narratives, the study aimed to understand how institutional efforts to promote inclusion are perceived and experienced at the personal level.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Category	Group	Number	Details
Total Participants	Students	20	Secondary level
Gender	Male	10	
	Female	10	
Age Range	15-18 years	20	Grades 10-12
School Context	Inclusive school	20	Mixed academic and social backgrounds

2.3 Research Instruments

To explore students' experiences of inclusion, this study employed qualitative data collection instruments designed to capture personal narratives and everyday social interaction. The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide that encouraged students to share their experiences related to participation, acceptance, peer relationships, and their sense of belonging in school. The interview questions focused on how students perceived inclusion in classroom activities, how they experienced support from teachers and peers, and how school practices influenced their comfort and involvement. In addition to interviews, non-participant observations were conducted in selected classrooms and school spaces to understand how inclusion was enacted in daily practice. An observation sheet was used to document patterns of participation, interaction, and engagement among students. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details, such as moments of collaboration, support, or isolation, that reflected how inclusion was experienced in real school situations. These combined instruments provided a richer understanding of both expressed perceptions and observed practices.

2.4 Research Procedures

The research was conducted through a series of structured stages to ensure systematic and ethical data collection. First, formal permission was obtained from the school administration to carry out the study within the school environment. After approval was granted, the researcher introduced the purpose of the study to potential participants and explained that participation was voluntary. Students who agreed to take part provided informed consent prior to the data collection process. Data collection was carried out over several weeks. The process began with observations in classrooms and common school areas to understand how inclusion was reflected in daily interaction, participation, and social relationships. These observations helped identify situations where inclusive practices were visible in action. Following this stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and later transcribed for analysis. Throughout the process, field notes were maintained to document interactional contexts and everyday moments that reflected students' experiences of inclusion.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns related to students' experiences of inclusion, participation, and social belonging. This process followed the interactive analytical framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and observation notes were organized to build familiarity with the dataset. The researcher then conducted initial coding by identifying meaningful segments related to students' perceptions of acceptance, support, participation, and relationships within the school environment. Next, similar codes were grouped into broader categories to capture recurring experiences across participants. These categories were then refined into key themes that reflected how inclusion was understood and experienced in everyday school life. Data displays, such as thematic summaries and grouped excerpts, were used to support interpretation. To enhance credibility, insights from interviews were continuously compared with observation findings to ensure consistency and depth in the analysis.

3. Findings

The analysis generated four interrelated themes that reflect how students experience inclusion through policy, everyday school practices, and social interaction: (1) inclusion as a feeling of being accepted and recognized, (2) teacher practices as key mediators of inclusion, (3) peer relationships as foundations of belonging, and (4) the gap between policy intentions and lived experiences.

3.1 Inclusion as a Feeling of Being Accepted and Recognized

One of the most prominent patterns in the data shows that students often understood inclusion not as a formal policy but as an emotional and social experience. For many participants, feeling included was closely connected to being accepted, listened to, and recognized within classroom and school activities. Students described inclusion in terms of everyday moments, such as being invited to participate, having their opinions valued, and feeling comfortable expressing themselves.

One student explained how simple recognition shaped their sense of inclusion:

"When the teacher asks for my opinion and listens to what I say, I feel like I am part of the class. It makes me feel that I matter, and that makes me more confident to join discussions." (S3, Female, 16 years old)

Another participant connected inclusion with being treated equally:

"I feel included when everyone is treated the same and no one is left out. Even small things like working together in groups or sharing ideas can make me feel that I belong." (S11, Male, 17 years old)

A similar reflection was shared by another student who emphasized emotional comfort:

"Sometimes inclusion is just about feeling comfortable in class. When I know that my friends and teachers accept me, I feel more relaxed and not afraid to participate." (S7, Female, 15 years old)

Another participant described how recognition shaped participation:

"When someone appreciates what I do or say, I feel more confident to take part. It makes me feel that I am important in the class, not just sitting there." (S15, Male, 18 years old)

These responses suggest that inclusion is experienced less as a formal structure and more as a social and emotional condition rooted in recognition, acceptance, and everyday interaction.

3.2 Teacher Practices as Key Mediators of Inclusion

Another important theme emerging from the data highlights the central role of teacher practices in shaping students' experiences of inclusion. Students frequently described how teachers' attitudes, communication styles, and instructional decisions influenced whether they felt supported and valued in the classroom. Inclusion was often experienced through everyday actions, such as how teachers encouraged participation, responded to student difficulties, and created opportunities for involvement. These practices were perceived as powerful in determining whether the classroom felt open and welcoming for all learners.

One student reflected on how teacher support affected their sense of inclusion:

"When the teacher notices that I am struggling and helps me without making me feel embarrassed, I feel supported. It makes me feel that the teacher cares about my learning and wants me to succeed." (S4, Female, 16 years old)

Another participant described how teacher encouragement increased participation:

"I feel more included when the teacher gives everyone a chance to speak. Even if I am quiet, the teacher sometimes invites me to share my thoughts, and that makes me feel noticed." (S9, Male, 17 years old)

A similar perspective was expressed by another student who emphasized fairness in teacher interaction:

"Some teachers try to involve all students, not only the ones who are always active. When that happens, I feel that everyone has the same opportunity to be part of the lesson." (S2, Female, 15 years old)

Another student highlighted how classroom atmosphere was shaped by teacher behavior:

"When the teacher creates a friendly and respectful environment, it makes it easier for me to participate. I don't feel afraid of making mistakes because I know the teacher will understand." (S18, Male, 18 years old)

These narratives indicate that teacher practices serve as key mediators of inclusion, influencing how students experience support, participation, and recognition in everyday classroom life.

3.3 Peer Relationships as Foundations of Social Belonging

A further theme highlights the importance of peer relationships in shaping students' experiences of inclusion and belonging. Many participants described that their sense of being included in school was strongly connected to how they were treated by classmates. Everyday interactions such as working together, sharing ideas, helping each other, and simply being accepted within peer groups contributed significantly to their feeling of being part of the school community. For students, inclusion was often experienced not only through institutional support but also through the quality of social connections formed in daily school life.

One student explained how friendship influenced their sense of belonging:

"I feel included when I can work and talk with my friends easily. When they accept me and listen to my ideas, I feel like I am part of the group and not alone in class." (S6, Female, 16 years old)

Another participant emphasized the role of peer support in difficult situations:

"Sometimes I don't understand the lesson, but my friends help me. That makes me feel supported and more comfortable to stay involved in class activities." (S13, Male, 17 years old)

A similar reflection was shared by another student who highlighted the emotional dimension of peer acceptance:

"When my classmates include me in group work and conversations, I feel that I belong. It makes school feel like a place where I am accepted, not just a place to study." (S1, Female, 15 years old)

Another participant described how peer interaction shaped confidence:

"If my friends respond positively when I speak, I feel more confident to share again. Their support makes me feel that I am part of the class." (S20, Male, 18 years old)

These accounts suggest that peer relationships function as a central foundation for social belonging, reinforcing students' experiences of inclusion through everyday interaction and shared participation.

3.4 The Gap Between Policy Intentions and Lived Experiences

The fourth theme reveals a noticeable gap between the ideals of inclusive education promoted through school policies and the realities students experience in their daily lives. While participants were aware that their school aimed to be inclusive, some described moments where inclusion was not consistently reflected in everyday practice. These experiences were often subtle, such as feeling overlooked during class activities, not being invited into group work, or sensing that certain students received more attention than others. This suggests that inclusion is not only shaped by formal policies but also by how consistently inclusive values are practiced in routine interactions.

One student reflected on the difference between formal expectations and daily experience:

"Our school always talks about treating everyone equally, but sometimes in class I feel that some students get more attention than others. In those moments, I don't feel as included as I should." (S8, Female, 17 years old)

Another participant described how inclusion could feel inconsistent:

"There are times when I feel included, especially during group work. But sometimes I feel invisible, like no one really notices whether I am involved or not." (S12, Male, 16 years old)

A similar concern was shared by another student who linked inclusion with everyday recognition:

"The school says that everyone belongs, but sometimes it depends on the situation. If no one asks for your opinion or includes you in activities, it can make you feel left out." (S5, Female, 15 years old)

Another participant highlighted how inclusion depended on daily interaction:

"I think the school tries to be inclusive, but it really depends on how people treat each other. Policies are there, but what matters is what happens in class every day." (S17, Male, 18 years old)

These responses indicate that while inclusive policies provide an important foundation, students' sense of inclusion is shaped more strongly by everyday practices and interactions, where the ideals of inclusion are either realized or challenged in real school contexts.

4. Discussion

The findings suggest that students often interpret inclusion not as a structural arrangement or policy outcome, but as an emotional and relational experience rooted in recognition, acceptance, and everyday interaction. Feeling included was closely associated with being noticed, listened to, and treated as a valued member of the classroom community. This indicates that inclusion operates at the level of lived experience, where small moments of acknowledgment and participation shape students' sense of belonging. Rather than being defined solely by access or placement, inclusion becomes meaningful when students perceive that they are seen, heard, and respected within their learning environment.

This interpretation aligns with contemporary perspectives that position inclusion as a relational and affective process. Noddings (2021) emphasizes that recognition and care are central to meaningful educational relationships, as students' emotional experiences influence their willingness to participate and engage. Similarly, Keddie (2020) argues that inclusive schooling must move beyond structural integration to address the social and emotional dimensions of belonging. When students feel acknowledged in everyday interaction, they are more likely to see themselves as legitimate participants within the school community.

Research on belonging further highlights that recognition plays a key role in shaping students' educational experiences. Allen and Kern (2020) note that a sense of belonging is closely tied to feeling valued and accepted within social environments. In the context of inclusive education, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2021) stress that inclusion is realized through daily practices that affirm students' presence and contributions. More recent work also suggests that students' perceptions of recognition can significantly influence confidence, engagement, and emotional wellbeing in school (Goodenow & Grady, 2023). In this sense, inclusion emerges as a deeply personal experience, shaped by how students are recognized within the social life of the classroom.

The findings indicate that teachers play a central role in shaping how inclusion is experienced in daily school life. While policies provide a structural framework, it is teachers' attitudes, decisions, and interactional practices that determine whether inclusion becomes meaningful for students. Acts such as inviting participation, offering support without stigma, and ensuring equitable attention were repeatedly interpreted by students as signs of inclusion. This suggests that inclusion is not simply implemented through policy directives but enacted through the micro-level practices of teaching. In this sense, teachers function as key mediators who translate institutional commitments into lived classroom realities.

This interpretation is consistent with research that highlights the relational nature of inclusive pedagogy. Florian (2020) argues that inclusion depends largely on how teachers respond to diversity through everyday instructional practices, rather than on structural placement alone. Similarly, Ainscow (2020) emphasizes that inclusive schools are shaped through ongoing teacher engagement in creating opportunities for participation and recognition. Teachers' responsiveness and sensitivity to student needs can influence whether learners feel supported, visible, and valued in the classroom.

Scholars have also stressed the importance of teacher agency in bridging the gap between policy and practice. Pantic and Florian (2021) note that teachers' beliefs and professional judgment strongly shape how inclusive principles are enacted in real contexts. Research by Walton (2022)

further suggests that inclusive environments are sustained through consistent teacher efforts to build respectful and supportive classroom climates. More recent studies indicate that when teachers actively promote participation and fairness, students are more likely to experience inclusion as a genuine part of their educational experience rather than as an abstract institutional ideal (Graham & Slee, 2023). Thus, the success of inclusive education is closely tied to how teachers interpret, embody, and enact inclusive values in everyday practice.

The findings underline that students' sense of inclusion is strongly shaped by peer relationships and everyday social interaction. While institutional structures and teacher support provide important foundations, the feeling of belonging often emerges through routine moments of collaboration, friendship, and mutual recognition among classmates. Students described inclusion as something experienced through being accepted into groups, supported during learning activities, and acknowledged within peer networks. This suggests that belonging is not an individual condition but a socially constructed process formed through continuous interaction and shared participation in school life. This perspective aligns with sociological approaches that position belonging as relational and interactional. Yuval-Davis (2020) argues that belonging is produced through everyday social practices where individuals feel recognized and connected to others. In school contexts, this sense of connection is often built through peer acceptance, shared experiences, and collective participation. Similarly, Osterman (2020) emphasizes that students' relationships with peers significantly influence how they perceive their place within the learning environment.

Research in inclusive education further highlights the role of peer interaction in shaping participation and identity. Koster, Nakken, Pijl, and Van Houten (2021) note that positive peer relationships can strengthen feelings of acceptance and encourage students to engage more actively in classroom activities. At the same time, peer support contributes to emotional security and confidence, reinforcing the sense that students are valued members of the community. More recent studies suggest that belonging is strengthened when students experience reciprocal relationships that foster trust, recognition, and collaboration (Allen, Slaten, & Kern, 2022). In this sense, inclusion is not only supported by institutional efforts but also continuously constructed through the social life of the classroom, where peer interaction plays a central role in shaping students' everyday experiences of belonging.

The findings reveal a recurring tension between the ideals of inclusive education promoted through policy and the realities students encounter in everyday school life. While schools often articulate strong commitments to inclusion, students' narratives suggest that these intentions are not always consistently reflected in daily practices. Moments of feeling overlooked, excluded from group activities, or less recognized in classroom interaction indicate that inclusion is not fully realized through policy alone. This highlights the complexity of translating institutional visions into lived experiences, where inclusion is shaped by subtle and routine social dynamics rather than formal declarations. This gap between policy and practice has been widely discussed in inclusive education literature. Slee (2020) argues that although inclusive policies are essential, their impact depends heavily on how they are enacted within school cultures and everyday interactions. Similarly, Ball (2021) emphasizes that educational policies are often reinterpreted and reshaped at the level of practice, meaning that their implementation may vary significantly across contexts. As a result, inclusion can exist as a formal commitment while remaining uneven in practice.

Research also suggests that the success of inclusive education depends on how consistently inclusive values are embedded in school routines and relationships. Booth and Ainscow (2021) highlight that inclusion requires continuous reflection and adaptation at the classroom level rather than one-time structural changes. More recent work by Magnússon (2023) indicates that students'

lived experiences often reveal gaps between institutional narratives of inclusion and their daily realities. In this sense, the effectiveness of inclusive policy is ultimately measured not by its presence in documents but by how it is experienced by students in everyday school life.

This study offers important implications for understanding inclusion as a lived and relational experience rather than merely a policy objective. The findings suggest that meaningful inclusion is shaped through everyday recognition, supportive teacher practices, and positive peer relationships that foster a sense of belonging. Schools that aim to strengthen inclusive education should therefore focus not only on structural access and formal policies but also on cultivating classroom environments where students feel acknowledged, supported, and socially connected. Teacher awareness, equitable participation practices, and attention to peer interaction can play a significant role in translating inclusive ideals into everyday realities. In this sense, inclusion is sustained through consistent, small-scale actions that reinforce students' confidence, visibility, and engagement. However, this study also has several limitations. The research was conducted within a single school context and involved a relatively small group of participants, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other settings. In addition, the study relied primarily on students' narratives and observational insights, which capture personal experiences but may not fully represent broader institutional perspectives. Future research may involve multiple schools, include teachers and administrators as participants, or adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how experiences of inclusion evolve over time.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how inclusion is experienced through students' everyday narratives of policy, practice, and social belonging in school environments. The findings demonstrate that inclusion is not understood by students primarily as a formal policy framework, but as a lived experience shaped by daily interactions, recognition, and relationships. Students' sense of being included was closely tied to feeling accepted, valued, and supported in both academic and social contexts. These experiences were formed through routine classroom practices, teacher engagement, and peer relationships that influenced whether students felt visible and connected within the school community. The discussion highlights several key insights. First, inclusion emerges as an emotional and relational experience grounded in recognition and acknowledgment. Second, teachers play a crucial role in translating inclusive policy into meaningful practice through their everyday actions, interaction styles, and efforts to ensure participation. Third, peer relationships serve as a central foundation for belonging, as acceptance and collaboration among classmates significantly shape students' experiences of inclusion. Finally, the study reveals an ongoing gap between policy intentions and lived realities, where inclusive ideals are sometimes unevenly reflected in daily school life. Taken together, these findings suggest that inclusive education should be understood as a continuous social process rather than a fixed institutional achievement. While policies provide an important framework, the true experience of inclusion is shaped through everyday practices and relationships that foster recognition, participation, and belonging. Strengthening inclusive schooling therefore requires attention not only to structural access but also to the relational and emotional dimensions that shape how students experience their place within the school environment.

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