Social Inclusion Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Mainstream Education

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ABSTRACT:
This review explores how students with disabilities experience social inclusion in mainstream education, focusing on their relationships, participation and sense of belonging. Drawing on empirical studies of inclusive schooling, it examines social inclusion as a multidimensional construct encompassing peer interaction, friendships, classroom and school participation, and emotional wellbeing. The review first outlines a conceptual background that distinguishes physical, academic and social inclusion and situates student experiences within the social model of disability and ecological perspectives. It then synthesises evidence on students' positive and negative experiences in peer relationships, classroom activities and informal school spaces, highlighting how these shape their self esteem, motivation and engagement with learning. Factors that promote social inclusion such as inclusive teacher attitudes and practices, supportive school cultures and leadership, and active family and community involvement are contrasted with persistent barriers, including stigma and bullying, structural and resource constraints, and policy practice gaps that prioritise placement over meaningful participation. Finally, the review identifies future directions for research, emphasising the need for student voice studies, longitudinal and intersectional approaches, robust measures of social participation, and implementation research that bridges policy and practice. Overall, the study argues that genuine inclusion for students with disabilities requires coordinated, multi level efforts to ensure they can participate, connect and belong in mainstream schools.

Keywords: Social Inclusion, Students with Disabilities, Mainstream Education, Peer Relationships, Classroom Participation.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a central global agenda to ensure that all children, including those with disabilities, learn together in mainstream school settings (Wang, Z et al; 2025). It emphasises the right of every learner to access quality education in regular schools, with appropriate support, rather than being segregated into special settings(Wang, Z et al; 2025). Further, the mainstream schooling refers to general education schools and classrooms where students with and without disabilities share the same learning environment, curriculum and social spaces (Australian Council for Educational Research. 2019). Within this context, inclusive education goes beyond physical placement to address participation, equity and removal of barriers so that diverse learners can learn and live together in school communities**(**Wang, Z et al; 2025).

Disability in education is commonly understood as a long-term physical, sensory, intellectual, learning or psychosocial impairment that interacts with various barriers and may hinder full effective participation in school life on an equal basis with others (Vetoniemi, J et al; 2021). Mainstream education thus becomes the primary arena where social dynamics between students with disabilities and their peers play out. Social inclusion in schools can be described as the process and outcome through which students with disabilities are accepted, have meaningful interactions, form friendships, participate in academic and non-academic activities, and develop a sense of belonging within the classroom and wider school (Vetoniemi, J et al; 2021).

Focusing only on academic inclusion such as curriculum access or individualised support may leave social inclusion unaddressed, resulting in students who are present in mainstream classrooms but socially isolated (Vetoniemi, J et al; 2021). Research on social participation of students with special educational needs showed that they often report fewer friendships, limited peer interactions, and reduced participation in informal activities compared to their non-disabled peers, even when formally included in mainstream schools (Subban, P et al; 2022). Studies of student experiences highlight concerns about enrolment without genuine integration, peer rejection, and "tokenistic" inclusion where learners with disabilities are physically present but not fully involved in class and school life. These patterns have important implications for emotional wellbeing, self-esteem, motivation and long-term educational trajectories (Florian, L; 2014; Vetoniemi, J et al; 2021; Chakraborti-Ghosh, S et al; 2014).

Hence, the present review aims to synthesise existing knowledge on how students with disabilities themselves experience social inclusion and exclusion in mainstream education, and to identify the key factors that shape these experiences. By drawing on empirical studies that foreground student voice, social participation and everyday school relationships, the review seeks to clarify the conditions under which mainstream schooling supports or undermines genuine social inclusion for learners with disabilities. In doing so, it intends to highlight both promising practices and persistent barriers, and to inform educators, school leaders and policymakers about ways to strengthen socially inclusive cultures in mainstream schools.

2. Conceptual Background of Social Inclusion in Schools

Social inclusion in schools can be understood as a multidimensional concept that encompasses students' participation in everyday school life by their acceptance through peers and staff, the quality of their relationships, equitable access to opportunities & ability to exercise a meaningful voice in decisions that affect them(United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2016). In this sense, inclusion is not limited to being physically present in a classroom but involves being recognised as a valued member of the school community who can engage, contribute and belong. Relational perspectives on inclusion emphasise that belonging emerges through sustained, positive interactions in which students are respected, listened to and supported, particularly for those

who experience disadvantage or disability (University of York, Department of Education. 2022). Thus, students with disabilities in mainstream education, social inclusion therefore requires attention to the social, emotional and relational dimensions of schooling alongside structural and academic considerations.

Within educational settings, it is useful to distinguish between physical, academic and social inclusion as related but distinct dimensions of students' experience. Physical inclusion refers primarily to placement in mainstream schools and classes, where students with disabilities learn alongside their non-disabled peers rather than in segregated or special settings (Dudley-Marling, C et al; 2014). Academic inclusion concerns access to the general curriculum, appropriate support, and fair assessment practices that enable students with disabilities to participate in learning on an equal basis(Chalise, K. 2024). Social inclusion, by contrast, focuses on peer interaction, friendships, participation in group work and extracurricular activities, and the subjective feeling of belonging and being accepted in the school community. Thus, a student may be physically and academically included but still socially marginalised if they lack meaningful relationships or feel isolated from their peers (Chalise, K. 2024; University of York, Department of Education. 2022).

The social model of disability provides a critical lens to understand the dimensions of inclusion in schools rather than viewing them as an individual deficit by focusing on environmental, attitudinal and institutional barriers restricted participation of impaired learners (Qu, S. 2020).

In mainstream education, this means that exclusion often arises not from the student's characteristics alone but from inaccessible classrooms, inflexible teaching practices, negative peer and teacher attitudes, and policies that fail to prioritise social participation (Chalise, K. 2024; Qu, S. 2020). Adopting a social model perspective encourages schools to focus on removing barriers and redesigning environments so that students with disabilities can fully participate, build relationships and exercise agency.

An ecological perspective further extends this view by situating social inclusion within multiple interacting levels: the individual student, peer group, classroom, school and wider policy context. At the individual level, students' social skills, communication abilities and self-perceptions influence to engage with peers and teachers. At the peer and classroom level, group norms, friendship networks, and teacher practices shape opportunities for interaction, cooperation and recognition. At the school and policy level, leadership, resource allocation, anti-bullying strategies and inclusion policies either support or undermine a culture of relational inclusivity (Mamas, C et al; 2025). Linking these conceptual and theoretical perspectives to student experiences allows us to explore the disabilities students feeling & action and relate them to mainstream school environments.

3. Social Inclusion Experiences of Students with Disabilities

Social inclusion experiences of students with disabilities in mainstream schools revolve strongly around peer relationships and friendships. Many studies show that when classmates offer friendship, informal help, and opportunities to collaborate, students with disabilities express feelings more confidently in class and playground interactions. Peer support arrangements, cooperative learning, and structured peer-to-peer programmes have been found to increase day-to-day social contact, the number of reciprocal friendships, and students' sense of belonging (Wang, Z et al; 2025 ; Ziegler, M et al; 2020). At the same time, research also highlights the negative experiences such as being ignored, left out from games, not chosen for group work, or being perceived as "different", which can lead to loneliness and lower self-esteem, even when the student is physically present in a mainstream classroom. These contrasting experiences make peer context central to understanding social inclusion and exclusion (Carter, E. W et al; 2015).

Beyond friendships, classroom participation and the broader fabric of everyday school life strongly shape the disabile students feeling. Studies of

social participation in inclusive schools indicate that opportunities to contribute in discussions, engage in group projects, and take on classroom roles can foster a feeling of being a full member of the class rather than a passive observer (Mamas, C et al; 2020 ; Nordström, I. 2011). Seating arrangements, classroom rules, and teacher strategies such as whether group work is genuinely mixed-ability or unintentionally isolates certain students have been shown to influence the frequency and quality of peer interactions. Experiences in informal spaces like corridors, playgrounds, canteens and school buses are equally important, because these are settings where friendships are maintained and social hierarchies become visible (De Boer, A et al; 2013).

Emotional and psychological dimensions are closely intertwined with these social experiences, affecting students feeling about school and themselves. According to study, when students with disabilities experience acceptance, safety, and positive recognition from peers and teachers, they tend to report higher levels of happiness, confidence and school satisfaction (Scheef, A et al; 2020). Conversely, experiences of bullying, subtle exclusion, pity or overprotection can generate anxiety, fear, embarrassment and shame, weakening students' trust in peers and staff. Research on social participation and belonging shows that such emotional responses directly influence motivation to attend school, willingness to participate in learning activities, and aspirations for further education (De Boer, A et al; 2013). In some studies, stronger social inclusion is associated with better academic engagement and a more positive sense of school belonging, while social isolation is linked to disengagement and poorer outcomes. This makes the emotional impact of social inclusion central to any comprehensive understanding of students' experiences in mainstream education De Boer, A et al; 2013; Scheef, A et al; 2020).

Finally, social inclusion experiences may vary considerably across different types of disability, underscoring that students with disabilities are far from a homogeneous group. Research comparing children with physical, sensory, intellectual and learning disabilities, and those on the autism spectrum or with behavioural and emotional difficulties, suggests that patterns of peer interaction, friendship formation and participation can differ markedly. Even within the same school, some students experience strong inclusion while others feel deep exclusion, reflecting the combined influence of individual characteristics, peer attitudes, classroom practices and school culture (Ziegler, M et al; 2020 ; Mamas, C et al; 2020 ; Nordström, I. 2011).

4. Factors Promoting Social Inclusion in Mainstream Education

It operates at multiple levels which begines with teachers' attitudes and everyday classroom practices. Research consistently shows that teachers' beliefs about disability, their expectations for students with special educational needs, and their sensitivity to individual differences strongly influence whether learners are invited into or pushed to the margins of classroom life (Mulawarman, W. G et al; 2023). When teachers hold high yet realistic expectations, view diversity as an ordinary feature of schooling, and are committed to equitable participation, students with disabilities are more likely to experience positive interactions, recognition and a sense of belonging (Nisha, P et al; 2024). Inclusive pedagogies such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, mixed-ability groups, and structured opportunities for collaboration have been linked to increased peer interaction and shared responsibility for learning, thereby strengthening social ties among students with and without disabilities. Moreover, teachers who explicitly teach and model social skills, empathy and pro-social behaviour help create classroom norms that discourage exclusion and encourage students to support one another (Cate, P. T et al; 2018).

Supportive school culture and leadership provide the wider context in which such inclusive practices can flourish. School leaders who articulate and enact a whole-school ethos that values diversity, promotes equity, and maintains zero tolerance for bullying contribute to environments where social inclusion is treated as

a core value rather than an optional add-on. Policies, mission statements and strategic plans that emphasise inclusion, combined with concrete structures for collaboration between special educators and mainstream teachers, can ensure that social and academic participation are addressed in a coordinated way. Studies of inclusive school leadership highlight the importance of allocating resources for support staff, professional development and inclusive extracurricular programmes (such as buddy systems, peer mentoring schemes, inclusive clubs and sports) that extend opportunities for interaction beyond the classroom. These initiatives give students with disabilities varied settings in which to build friendships and participate in shared activities, reinforcing their status as full members of the school community (Bastida, L. S. et al; 2024) .

Family and community support further strengthen social inclusion processes in mainstream education by linking school life to wider social networks. Parents of children with disabilities often play a critical role in advocating their children's social participation, raising concerns about exclusion, and collaborating with teachers to address emerging issues. Effective home–school communication, in which families and educators share observations about social successes and challenges, can help identify barriers early and design targeted responses such as social skills groups, peer education activities or adjustments to classroom organisation. Community organisations and NGOs working in disability and inclusion fields frequently provide training, awareness campaigns and resources that support schools in developing more inclusive attitudes and practices. Their involvement can also offer additional spaces after-school programmes, community sports, youth clubs where students with disabilities meet peers and engage in activities that complement and reinforce school-based inclusion efforts (Alhassan, A. M et al; 2025).

Taken together, these factors illustrate that promoting social inclusion in mainstream education requires coherent action across teacher practice, school culture and wider family-community networks. Teachers' inclusive beliefs and pedagogies shape the immediate experiences of students with disabilities in classrooms and informal school spaces. School leaders and policies create the structural and cultural conditions that either support or constrain such practices, influencing whether inclusion is sustained and visible throughout the school. Families and community organisations contribute by advocating for students' rights, providing insight into their social experiences, and extending opportunities for participation beyond school (Jenson, K. 2018 ; Chen, H et al; 2026).

5. Barriers and Challenges to Social Inclusion

In mainstream education, it arises at interpersonal, structural and policy levels, and they directly shape the everyday experiences of students with disabilities. Research shows that even when such students are formally enrolled in inclusive schools, they often encounter attitudinal, environmental and systemic obstacles that limit their participation, relationships and sense of belonging (Chaudhary, M. 2026). Understanding these barriers is essential for interpreting their social inclusion experiences and for designing interventions that go beyond placement to address the quality of their school lives (Chaudhary, M. 2026).

A major barrier relates to stigma, bullying and negative peer attitudes. Studies on violence and bullying against children with disabilities document frequent experiences of teasing, name-calling, physical aggression and social exclusion in school settings, which can lead to fear, withdrawal and reduced engagement. Stereotypes and labelling for example, assumptions that students with disabilities are less capable, dependent or "different" shape how peers perceive and interact with them, often resulting in fewer invitations to play, collaborate or form friendships. Hidden forms of exclusion, such as pity, overprotection and avoidance, may appear superficially benevolent but still position

students with disabilities as outsiders who are not expected to participate on equal terms. These experiences undermine self-esteem and belonging, even when students are physically present in mainstream classrooms (Connor, D. J et al; 2007).

Structural and resource constraints also pose significant challenges to social inclusion. Reviews of inclusive education practice in various contexts highlight that large class sizes, limited support staff and insufficient teacher training make it difficult to provide individualised support while facilitating meaningful peer interaction (Bani Odeh, K et al; 2024; Devanesan, P. 2020).

Physical barriers such as inaccessible buildings, playgrounds, toilets and transport restrict students' mobility and participation in both academic and social activities, particularly for those with physical or sensory impairments (Devanesan, P. 2020). Academic practices like frequent pull-out sessions, separate activities or rigid tracking can unintentionally isolate students with disabilities from their classmates, reducing opportunities for shared learning and informal social contact (Dua, V et al; 2017 ; Connor, D. J et al; 2007 ; Devanesan, P. 2020). In such conditions, teachers may rely heavily on one-to-one adult support rather than peer-mediated strategies, which can further limit everyday peer relationships.

Policy–practice gaps represent another layer of barriers to social inclusion. International and national policies often emphasise the placement of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, but they may give less explicit attention to social participation, friendships and wellbeing as core outcomes. Analyses of inclusive education frameworks point out that monitoring and evaluation typically focus on enrolment rates, access to schooling and academic performance, while indicators of social inclusion such as peer acceptance, participation in school activities and emotional wellbeing remain under-measured. This can lead to situations in which schools are considered "inclusive" because students with disabilities attend general classes, even though their daily experiences are characterised by isolation, limited voice and few meaningful relationships. Practical difficulties in implementing inclusive policies at classroom level such as ambiguous guidelines, lack of resources, and conflicting expectations between special and general education further contribute to uneven and sometimes superficial inclusion (Connor, D. J et al; 2007 ; Devanesan, P. 2020) .

6. Future Directions and Research Consideration (Wang, Z et al; 2025; Norwich, B. 2022**)**

1. Prioritise qualitative and mixed-methods studies for students with different disabilities.
2. Include children and adolescents with disabilities as co-researchers or advisors to reduce their marginalisation in knowledge production and ensure that research questions reflect their concerns.
3. Design longitudinal research that follows students with disabilities across grades and key transitions to understand their social participation, peer networks and belonging evolve over time.
4. Investigate differences in social inclusion experiences across disability types and levels of support needs, rather than treating "students with disabilities" as a single group.
5. Conduct comparative research across urban–rural, public–private, and resource-rich versus resource-constrained mainstream schools to identify context-specific facilitators and barriers to social inclusion.
6. Create and validate multidimensional instruments that capture social participation, peer acceptance, friendships, sense of belonging and student voice, alongside academic inclusion indicators.
7. Integrate social network analysis, sociometric methods and student-reported outcomes into mainstream research designs to provide richer pictures of class-level and school-level inclusion patterns.
8. Systematically test the impact of specific interventions peer support arrangements, buddy programmes, cooperative learning structures, class-wide peer acceptance efforts, and

social-emotional learning curricula on social outcomes for students with disabilities.

9. Use implementation science frameworks to study how schools can move from nominal inclusion (placement) to substantive inclusion (participation, relationships, wellbeing), generating practical models for policy makers and practitioners.

7. Conclusion

This review underscores that social inclusion for students with disabilities in mainstream education is a multidimensional, relational process that goes far beyond mere physical placement in general classrooms, encompassing friendships, peer acceptance, everyday participation and a felt sense of belonging. Synthesised findings show that positive peer relationships, supportive teacher attitudes and inclusive pedagogies such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring and mixed-ability group work can foster rich social networks and enhance students' confidence, wellbeing and engagement, whereas stigma, bullying, subtle exclusion, pity and overprotection continue to undermine their self-esteem and position them at the margins of school life. Structural constraints, including large class sizes, limited support staff, inaccessible environments and academic arrangements that separate students from their peers, interact with policy practice gaps in which enrolment and access are emphasised more than social outcomes, leading in some contexts to tokenistic rather than substantive inclusion. Overall, the literature indicates that genuine social inclusion is achieved only when coordinated efforts at classroom, school and system levels intentionally target social participation, relationships and wellbeing; future research and practice must therefore foreground student voice, evaluate social as well as academic outcomes, and adopt ecological approaches that recognise the interconnected roles of peers, teachers, families, school leadership and policy in shaping the everyday inclusion experiences of students with disabilities in mainstream education.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No empirical datasets were developed or analyzed in the current paper. The essay is based on a policy-guided literature review and conceptual synthesis.

Author Contributions

.....contributed to the conceptualization, framework development, and text composition. .....contributed to the theoretical development, oversight, and critical editing of the work.

Ethics Statement

This article excludes human participation, human data, animal subjects, and clinical materials. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

The individuals listed as authors were the sole authors of this work. The work was not composed or modified using generative AI or AI-assisted technologies. The content of the contribution is the sole responsibility of all writers.

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