Epistemological Accessibility in Inclusive Islamic Education: Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation as a Middle-Range Theory of Disciplinary Participation

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ABSTRACT:

Inclusive education increasingly emphasises equitable access to learning, yet comparatively limited attention has been devoted to how learners gain access to the disciplinary reasoning through which specialised knowledge is interpreted, justified, and applied. This article addresses this theoretical gap by developing Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation (APM) as a mechanism-based middle-range educational theory explaining inclusive disciplinary participation within authority-based disciplines. Using an interpretive qualitative case study, data were generated through semi-structured interviews with five teachers and seven students, classroom observations, and document analysis within the Syahadah Ulya Ulul Albab Programme in Malaysia. Reflexive thematic analysis combined with abductive theorisation identified five interconnected constructs: epistemic diversity, adaptive pedagogical mediation, mediation of scholarly authority, epistemological accessibility, and epistemic readiness. The findings indicate that meaningful inclusion was achieved not by simplifying disciplinary knowledge but by progressively enabling learners to understand disciplinary language, evidential standards, interpretive principles, and scholarly reasoning while preserving disciplinary integrity. Based on these findings, the study proposes Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation as a middle-range educational theory explaining how pedagogical mediation transforms differences in learners' epistemic preparation into meaningful disciplinary participation. The study contributes to inclusive education by introducing epistemological accessibility as a complementary dimension of educational inclusion and by providing an empirically grounded explanatory framework that is theoretically transferable to other authority-based disciplines.

Keywords: adaptive pedagogical mediation, epistemic readiness, epistemological accessibility, inclusive education, Islamic education

1.1 Inclusive Education and the Challenge of Meaningful Participation

Inclusive education has become one of the most influential educational paradigms in contemporary policy and research, reflecting a global commitment to ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students regardless of disability, socioeconomic background, language, culture, prior educational experience, or learning diversity (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Contemporary conceptions of inclusion extend far beyond the physical placement of students within mainstream classrooms. Instead, inclusion is increasingly understood as a multidimensional process that enables learners to participate meaningfully in educational activities, access disciplinary knowledge, develop intellectual agency, and experience a genuine sense of belonging within learning communities (Florian, 2014; Slee, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). Consequently, educational success is no longer evaluated solely by students' attendance or academic achievement but also by the quality of their participation in classroom discourse, knowledge construction, and disciplinary engagement.

This shift has encouraged substantial developments in pedagogical theory. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) proposes that barriers to learning should be anticipated through the design of flexible curricula that provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression (CAST, 2024). Similarly, Differentiated Instruction emphasises proactive adaptation of teaching according to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles while maintaining common learning objectives (Tomlinson, 2017). Inclusive Pedagogy further argues that meaningful inclusion should avoid segregating learners through excessive differentiation and instead create rich learning opportunities that extend participation for everyone without lowering academic expectations (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian, 2014). Collectively, these perspectives have transformed educational practice by shifting attention from learner deficits towards the removal of barriers within teaching, curriculum, and assessment.

Despite these important advances, much of the existing literature conceptualises inclusion primarily in terms of curriculum accessibility, instructional flexibility, participation in classroom activities, and equitable assessment (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2014; UNESCO, 2020). Comparatively less attention has been devoted to explaining how learners gain access to the epistemological foundations that govern specialised disciplinary knowledge. Students may actively participate in classroom discussions, complete learning tasks successfully, and demonstrate procedural competence while remaining uncertain about how disciplinary knowledge is generated, evaluated, justified, and contested within scholarly communities. Consequently, participation in educational activities should not automatically be interpreted as meaningful participation in disciplinary knowledge construction.

This issue becomes increasingly significant in educational contexts characterised by specialised bodies of knowledge and recognised disciplinary traditions. In such contexts, successful learning requires students to understand not only disciplinary content but also the conceptual frameworks, evidential standards, interpretive principles, and reasoning processes through which knowledge claims are validated. Without access to these epistemological dimensions, learners may remain peripheral participants despite appearing fully engaged in classroom activities. Inclusive education therefore requires a broader conceptualisation that encompasses not only instructional accessibility but also learners' progressive access to disciplinary ways of knowing.

1.2 Theoretical Gap: From Curriculum Accessibility to Epistemological Accessibility

The emphasis on equitable participation has significantly advanced inclusive education; however, an important theoretical limitation remains. Most contemporary frameworks focus on improving access to curriculum, instructional

strategies, classroom participation, and assessment accommodations while providing comparatively limited explanation of how teachers facilitate learners' access to disciplinary reasoning itself (CAST, 2024; Florian, 2014; Tomlinson, 2017). As a result, the mechanisms through which learners develop an understanding of disciplinary evidence, interpretive judgement, and scholarly reasoning remain insufficiently theorised within inclusive education research.

This limitation is particularly evident in authority-based disciplines, where legitimate participation depends upon engagement with recognised intellectual traditions rather than mastery of factual knowledge alone. Disciplines such as Islamic Education, law, medicine, theology, engineering, and other professional fields require learners to understand how disciplinary conclusions are constructed, justified, challenged, and refined according to accepted epistemological standards (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Moje, 2015). Meaningful participation therefore requires access not only to instructional materials but also to the intellectual practices through which disciplinary communities generate and evaluate knowledge.

Research on disciplinary literacy similarly demonstrates that each discipline possesses distinctive languages, evidential standards, interpretive frameworks, and forms of reasoning that differ fundamentally from everyday communication (Moje, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Students who lack opportunities to engage with these disciplinary practices frequently experience difficulties participating in higher-order learning despite successfully completing routine classroom activities. Although disciplinary literacy scholarship explains the characteristics of disciplinary thinking, it provides comparatively limited explanation of how teachers progressively mediate learners' entry into these specialised epistemic communities from an inclusive education perspective. Similarly, sociocultural theories of learning emphasise that knowledge develops through participation in socially organised practices mediated by more knowledgeable others (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). While these perspectives provide a strong theoretical foundation for understanding learning as participation, they do not specify the pedagogical mechanisms through which teachers intentionally transform differences in learners' prior epistemic preparation into increasingly legitimate disciplinary participation. Consequently, a conceptual gap remains between general theories of learning and practical theories of inclusive pedagogy.

The present study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of epistemological accessibility, defined as learners' progressive access to the disciplinary language, evidential standards, interpretive principles, and reasoning processes through which specialised knowledge is organised and validated. Unlike curriculum accessibility, which concerns learners' opportunities to access instructional content, epistemological accessibility focuses on learners' opportunities to participate in disciplinary ways of knowing. This distinction is theoretically significant because it explains why students may appear academically engaged while remaining excluded from the intellectual practices that define legitimate disciplinary participation.

Building upon this conceptual distinction, the study develops Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation (APM) as a mechanism-based middle-range educational theory explaining how teachers progressively mediate disciplinary reasoning without reducing disciplinary complexity. The proposed framework positions epistemological accessibility as the central educational mechanism linking epistemic diversity with epistemic readiness and ultimately with inclusive disciplinary participation. In doing so, the study extends existing inclusive education theory beyond instructional adaptation towards a more comprehensive explanation of how learners gain legitimate access to specialised disciplinary knowledge.

1.3 Islamic School Education as an Empirical Context

Islamic school education provides a theoretically informative context for examining the challenges

of inclusive disciplinary participation because learning extends beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge to encompass engagement with established traditions of disciplinary reasoning, evidential judgement, and scholarly interpretation. Unlike many school subjects in which learning outcomes primarily emphasise conceptual understanding or procedural competence, Islamic Education requires students to participate in forms of reasoning that are grounded in recognised epistemic traditions, authoritative texts, and historically developed interpretive methodologies. Consequently, meaningful participation depends not only on access to curriculum content but also on learners' ability to understand how disciplinary knowledge is constructed, interpreted, evaluated, and justified within scholarly communities (Greene et al., 2016; Shulman, 2005).

Students entering Islamic secondary schools frequently come from diverse educational pathways that provide markedly different opportunities for disciplinary preparation. Some learners have previously attended religious primary schools or integrated Islamic education programmes where they have acquired foundational knowledge of Arabic, Qur'anic studies, classical Islamic texts (*turāth*), and traditional approaches to scholarly interpretation. Others enter from mainstream educational settings with comparatively limited exposure to disciplinary language, evidential reasoning, or engagement with scholarly debate. These differences influence students' confidence, conceptual understanding, disciplinary vocabulary, interpretive competence, and ability to participate meaningfully in classroom discussions involving specialised religious knowledge. Rather than reflecting differences in intellectual ability, these variations illustrate the unequal distribution of prior epistemic experiences that characterise many contemporary classrooms (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

Within Islamic Education classrooms, teachers therefore perform responsibilities that extend considerably beyond the transmission of disciplinary content. Consistent with sociocultural perspectives on learning, teachers function as pedagogical mediators who progressively support learners in acquiring the conceptual tools, interpretive strategies, and evidential standards required for legitimate disciplinary participation (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). Students are expected not only to memorise religious concepts or legal rulings but also to understand how scholarly judgements are formulated, how alternative interpretations emerge from recognised methodological traditions, and how disciplinary conclusions are justified through evidence. These pedagogical expectations require teachers to balance disciplinary rigour with educational inclusion, ensuring that learners with diverse educational backgrounds are progressively supported without compromising the integrity of disciplinary knowledge.

From this perspective, differences in students' classroom participation should not be interpreted primarily as indicators of cognitive ability or learning deficits. Instead, the present study conceptualises these differences as epistemic diversity, referring to variation in learners' prior access to disciplinary language, scholarly traditions, interpretive principles, and standards of evidential reasoning. This conceptualisation aligns with contemporary perspectives on epistemic cognition, which argue that learners' engagement with knowledge is shaped by their previous opportunities to understand how knowledge is generated, evaluated, and justified rather than merely by their capacity to acquire information (Greene et al., 2016). Accordingly, unequal participation reflects differences in educational opportunity rather than inherent limitations in learners' intellectual potential.

Recognising epistemic diversity has important implications for inclusive education. Contemporary inclusive education increasingly advocates removing barriers to participation by adapting curriculum, instruction, and assessment while maintaining high expectations for all learners (CAST, 2024; Florian, 2014; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). However, these approaches provide comparatively limited explanation of how teachers mediate learners' progressive entry into disciplinary ways of

knowing. Within authority-based disciplines such as Islamic Education, pedagogical adaptation cannot be limited to simplifying instructional materials or modifying classroom activities. Rather, teachers must intentionally mediate learners' understanding of disciplinary language, scholarly authority, evidential reasoning, and interpretive judgement if meaningful participation is to be achieved. The empirical context of the present study is the Syahadah Ulya Ulul Albab Programme, an Islamic Education programme designed to integrate the national curriculum with systematic engagement in Qur'anic studies, Arabic language, and classical Islamic scholarship. The programme provides a particularly informative setting for theory development because students enter with diverse educational experiences that create substantial variation in epistemic preparation while being expected to participate in the same disciplinary learning environment. This variation allows examination of how teachers progressively respond to epistemic diversity through pedagogical mediation while maintaining disciplinary integrity. Consequently, the programme serves not merely as the setting for data collection but as an analytically rich case through which the educational mechanisms underlying inclusive disciplinary participation can be investigated and theoretically reconstructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

1.4 Purpose and Contribution of the Study

The theoretical gap identified in the preceding discussion raises an important educational question: How do teachers enable learners with diverse epistemic backgrounds to participate meaningfully in authority-based disciplines without reducing disciplinary complexity? Existing theories of inclusive education have substantially advanced understanding of instructional accessibility, curriculum adaptation, and equitable participation (Ainscow, 2020; CAST, 2024; Florian, 2014). Nevertheless, they provide comparatively limited explanation of the pedagogical mechanisms through which learners gain access to disciplinary reasoning itself. Addressing this gap requires a theoretical framework that explains not only how teachers adapt instruction but also how such adaptations progressively enable learners to participate in specialised disciplinary knowledge.

To address this issue, the present study develops Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation (APM) as a mechanism-based middle-range educational theory explaining how teachers transform differences in learners' epistemic preparation into meaningful disciplinary participation. Rather than conceptualising adaptation as a collection of effective instructional strategies, the proposed theory explains the sequential educational mechanisms through which teachers recognise epistemic diversity, mediate disciplinary language and scholarly authority, facilitate epistemological accessibility, and ultimately support learners' development of epistemic readiness. In doing so, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of classroom practice towards an explanatory framework specifying how inclusive disciplinary participation develops within authority-based educational contexts (Merton, 1968; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

The proposed framework is grounded in qualitative evidence generated through semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, and document analysis conducted within the Syahadah Ulya Ulul Albab Programme. Guided by an interpretivist perspective and an abductive approach to qualitative theory construction, the study reconstructs the pedagogical processes through which teachers progressively mediate learners' understanding of disciplinary language, conceptual relationships, scholarly authority, and evidential reasoning. This analytical approach allows empirical observations to be integrated with existing scholarship in inclusive education, epistemic cognition, and sociocultural learning to generate a coherent middle-range educational theory (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Crotty, 1998; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Central to the proposed theory is the concept of epistemological accessibility, defined as learners' progressive access to the disciplinary language, evidential standards, interpretive principles, and standards of judgement through which

specialised knowledge is organised, evaluated, and validated. Unlike curriculum accessibility, which primarily concerns learners' opportunities to engage with instructional content, epistemological accessibility concerns learners' opportunities to participate in the intellectual practices through which disciplinary knowledge is constructed and justified. The study therefore argues that epistemological accessibility functions as the principal educational mechanism linking epistemic diversity with epistemic readiness, thereby enabling inclusive disciplinary participation. This article makes three interrelated contributions to the field of inclusive education. First, it extends existing theories of inclusion by introducing epistemological accessibility as a complementary dimension of educational participation that foregrounds learners' access to disciplinary reasoning rather than curriculum alone. Second, it develops Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation as an empirically grounded explanatory mechanism demonstrating how teachers can preserve disciplinary integrity while simultaneously expanding meaningful participation among learners with diverse epistemic backgrounds. Third, it advances a bounded middle-range educational theory that is theoretically transferable to other authority-based disciplines—including legal education, medical education, theology, engineering, and professional education—where meaningful participation depends upon engagement with recognised disciplinary traditions, specialised epistemic practices, and established standards of evidence. In this way, the study contributes not only to Islamic Education but also to broader international scholarship seeking theoretically robust explanations of inclusive participation in specialised disciplinary learning.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed an interpretive qualitative case study to examine how teachers facilitated meaningful disciplinary participation among students from diverse educational backgrounds within an Islamic education programme. A qualitative case study was appropriate because the research sought to understand pedagogical processes within their natural educational setting rather than to measure predetermined variables or evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

The study was guided by an interpretivist perspective, which views educational meaning as socially constructed through interactions between teachers, students, disciplinary knowledge, and the learning environment (Crotty, 1998). Rather than testing an existing theoretical model, the study adopted an abductive approach to theory development (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), allowing empirical findings to be interpreted alongside contemporary scholarship on inclusive education, sociocultural learning, and epistemic cognition. This process led to the development of Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation (APM) as a mechanism-based middle-range educational theory explaining inclusive disciplinary participation within authority-based disciplines.

2.2 Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted within the Syahadah Ulya Ulul Albab Programme, an integrated Islamic education programme designed to provide advanced Islamic learning alongside the national curriculum. Students entered the programme through different educational pathways, resulting in substantial variation in Arabic proficiency, familiarity with classical Islamic texts (*turāth*), disciplinary terminology, and prior experience with scholarly reasoning.

Purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) was used to recruit participants who possessed direct experience of teaching and learning within the programme. Twelve participants were involved, comprising five Islamic Education teachers and seven students representing different educational backgrounds. This variation enabled the study to explore how teachers responded to differences in students' epistemic preparation while maintaining consistent disciplinary expectations.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were generated from three complementary sources: semi-structured interviews, non-

participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews explored teachers' pedagogical decision-making and students' learning experiences. Classroom observations focused on naturally occurring instructional practices, including diagnostic questioning, conceptual sequencing, language mediation, guided interpretation, and the explanation of scholarly authority. Documentary evidence, including curriculum documents, lesson plans, and teaching materials, was analysed to contextualise classroom practice and support triangulation across data sources.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) within an abductive theory-building framework (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Analysis involved familiarisation with the data, inductive coding, development and refinement of themes, and theoretical interpretation through continuous dialogue between empirical evidence and relevant literature.

Rather than treating themes as descriptive categories, the analysis examined how they interacted to explain the educational mechanism linking learners' diverse epistemic preparation with meaningful disciplinary participation. This process generated five interconnected theoretical constructs: epistemic diversity, adaptive pedagogical mediation, mediation of scholarly authority, epistemological accessibility, and epistemic readiness. Together, these constructs form the explanatory mechanism underpinning Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation (APM).

2.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was established using the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation across interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, while an audit trail and reflexive memos supported dependability and confirmability. Rich descriptions of the educational context and participants enhance the transferability of the findings to comparable authority-based educational settings.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms were used throughout the study to protect confidentiality.

3. Results

Analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and programme documents generated five interrelated themes explaining how teachers supported students from diverse educational backgrounds in achieving meaningful participation within an authority-based discipline. Rather than representing independent findings, the themes formed a sequential educational mechanism through which differences in students' prior epistemic preparation were progressively transformed into inclusive disciplinary participation. Collectively, these findings provide the empirical basis for the development of Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation (APM) as a middle-range educational theory.

3.1 Recognition of Epistemic Diversity

Teachers consistently recognised that students entered the programme with markedly different levels of disciplinary preparation. These differences were reflected in Arabic proficiency, familiarity with classical Islamic texts, disciplinary vocabulary, and experience in scholarly reasoning. Importantly, teachers interpreted these differences as variations in prior educational opportunity rather than differences in intellectual ability.

One teacher explained:

"Students come from different educational backgrounds. Some already understand the language of the discipline, while others first need guidance to understand how scholars reason before they can participate confidently." (Teacher 2)

Students similarly reported that they initially relied on memorisation because they lacked experience in interpreting scholarly arguments or evaluating evidence. Classroom observations

confirmed that students with stronger disciplinary preparation participated more confidently, whereas others required additional instructional guidance before contributing to discussion.

These findings indicate that learner diversity extends beyond cognitive or academic differences to include unequal access to disciplinary language, interpretive traditions, and scholarly reasoning. This educational condition is conceptualised as epistemic diversity, representing the starting point of Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation.

3.2 Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation

After recognising differences in students' epistemic preparation, teachers consistently adapted how disciplinary knowledge was mediated without reducing academic standards. Instead of simplifying content, they modified instructional processes to make disciplinary reasoning progressively understandable.

Across interviews and classroom observations, five recurring pedagogical strategies were identified: diagnostic questioning to identify prior understanding; conceptual sequencing from familiar to abstract ideas; mediation between everyday and disciplinary language; guided interpretation of authoritative texts; and structured comparison of scholarly opinions.

One teacher stated:

"Adaptation is not about lowering standards. It is about changing how students are guided until they can understand the reasoning independently." (Teacher 4)

Observations demonstrated that teachers encouraged students to justify interpretations with evidence rather than simply recalling accepted answers. Curriculum documents likewise showed a deliberate progression from foundational concepts towards increasingly sophisticated disciplinary reasoning.

These findings suggest that pedagogical adaptation functions as a mechanism for expanding learners' access to disciplinary reasoning while preserving disciplinary integrity. This mechanism is conceptualised as Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation.

3.3 Mediation of Scholarly Authority

A third theme concerned how teachers mediated scholarly authority during classroom instruction. Rather than presenting disciplinary conclusions as unquestionable truths, teachers explicitly explained the evidence, interpretive principles, and methodological reasoning underlying different scholarly positions.

As one teacher observed:

"Students gradually realise that the important question is not simply which opinion is correct, but why scholars arrive at different conclusions." (Teacher 1)

Students described a gradual shift from memorising rulings to understanding the reasoning supporting alternative interpretations. Classroom observations confirmed that teachers regularly compared juristic opinions, explained differences in interpretive methodology, and demonstrated how evidence was evaluated within recognised scholarly traditions.

These findings indicate that scholarly authority became an educational resource rather than a barrier to participation. Transparent mediation enabled students to understand how legitimate disciplinary knowledge is constructed, justified, and evaluated.

3.4 Development of Epistemological Accessibility

As adaptive pedagogical mediation continued, students demonstrated increasing access to disciplinary reasoning. Rather than merely recalling information, they became progressively able to interpret evidence, explain disciplinary concepts, and justify their conclusions using recognised scholarly principles.

One student reflected:

"Previously I memorised the answers. Now I understand why scholars reach different conclusions and how they justify them." (Student 3)

Observations showed increasing use of disciplinary terminology, more explicit reference to evidence, and greater confidence in explaining

scholarly reasoning. Documentary evidence further indicated that assessment tasks increasingly emphasised explanation, interpretation, and justification rather than factual recall.

These findings demonstrate that meaningful inclusion involves more than participation in classroom activities. Students progressively gained access to the epistemological foundations of disciplinary knowledge. This process is conceptualised as epistemological accessibility, representing the immediate educational outcome of Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation.

3.5 Epistemic Readiness and Inclusive Disciplinary Participation

The final theme demonstrated that increasing epistemological accessibility enabled students to participate more confidently and independently within disciplinary learning. Teachers observed that students became increasingly capable of questioning interpretations, evaluating evidence, and engaging in scholarly dialogue while maintaining respect for recognised disciplinary traditions.

One teacher summarised this transformation:

"Our goal is not to produce students who simply remember answers but students who understand how disciplinary reasoning works." (Teacher 5)

Students likewise described increased confidence in discussing disciplinary issues because they understood the reasoning underlying scholarly conclusions rather than relying exclusively on memorised knowledge. Classroom observations confirmed more active participation, greater independence in asking questions, and stronger engagement in evidence-based discussion.

Taken together, the findings indicate that inclusive disciplinary participation emerged through a progressive educational process rather than through simplification of disciplinary knowledge. As students developed epistemological accessibility, they also acquired the epistemic readiness necessary for legitimate participation within an authority-based discipline.

The five themes collectively describe a coherent educational mechanism linking students' diverse epistemic preparation with meaningful disciplinary participation. Rather than functioning as isolated categories, the themes represent sequential stages within Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation: epistemic diversity establishes the initial educational condition; adaptive pedagogical mediation and mediation of scholarly authority constitute the core pedagogical mechanisms; epistemological accessibility represents the immediate educational outcome; and epistemic readiness culminates in inclusive disciplinary participation. This mechanism provides the empirical foundation for the middle-range educational theory developed in the following discussion

4. Discussion

This study sought to explain how teachers supported meaningful disciplinary participation among students from diverse educational backgrounds within an authority-based discipline. The findings indicate that inclusive participation was achieved not by reducing disciplinary complexity but by progressively mediating learners' access to disciplinary reasoning. Collectively, the five interconnected constructs—epistemic diversity, adaptive pedagogical mediation, mediation of scholarly authority, epistemological accessibility, and epistemic readiness—form a coherent explanatory mechanism describing how inclusive disciplinary participation develops. This mechanism extends current understandings of inclusive education by demonstrating that meaningful inclusion requires access not only to curriculum but also to the epistemological foundations of disciplinary knowledge.

4.1 Epistemic Diversity as an Educational Condition

The first contribution of this study is the reconceptualisation of learner diversity as epistemic diversity. Existing inclusive education literature has primarily examined learner differences in terms of disability, language, culture, or socioeconomic background (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The

present findings suggest that students may also differ substantially in their prior access to disciplinary language, scholarly traditions, and interpretive reasoning. These differences influence their capacity to participate meaningfully even when they share the same curriculum and classroom environment.

Importantly, epistemic diversity should not be interpreted as a deficit in learners' ability. Rather, it reflects unequal educational opportunities that shape learners' familiarity with disciplinary ways of knowing. This perspective shifts attention from remediating perceived learner weaknesses towards recognising differences in epistemic preparation as legitimate educational conditions requiring pedagogical response. By reframing diversity in this way, the study broadens contemporary understandings of inclusion and provides a more nuanced explanation of why equal access to curriculum does not always result in equal participation.

4.2 Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation as the Mechanism of Inclusion

The second contribution concerns the pedagogical mechanism through which teachers responded to epistemic diversity. Existing frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning, Differentiated Instruction, and Inclusive Pedagogy emphasise flexibility in curriculum, instruction, and assessment (CAST, 2024; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Tomlinson, 2017). While these approaches improve instructional accessibility, they provide comparatively limited explanation of how learners gain access to disciplinary reasoning.

The present findings demonstrate that teachers adapted pedagogy without lowering disciplinary standards. Through diagnostic questioning, conceptual sequencing, language mediation, guided interpretation, and explicit explanation of scholarly authority, they progressively enabled students to understand how disciplinary knowledge was interpreted and justified. Adaptation therefore functioned as a process of mediating disciplinary reasoning rather than simplifying disciplinary knowledge.

This distinction is theoretically important because it positions pedagogy as the mechanism through which learners gradually enter disciplinary communities. Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation consequently complements existing inclusive education frameworks by explaining how instructional adaptation can preserve disciplinary integrity while expanding meaningful participation.

4.3 Epistemological Accessibility Extends Inclusive Education Theory

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the introduction of epistemological accessibility as a complementary dimension of inclusive education. Contemporary scholarship has made significant advances in promoting curriculum accessibility, instructional flexibility, communication, and equitable assessment. However, comparatively little attention has been devoted to learners' access to the reasoning processes through which specialised knowledge is organised and validated. The findings indicate that students became increasingly confident and independent when they understood not only disciplinary conclusions but also the evidence, interpretive principles, and methodological reasoning supporting those conclusions. Participation therefore developed through increasing access to disciplinary ways of knowing rather than through exposure to disciplinary content alone. This concept extends inclusive education beyond questions of access to learning activities towards participation in disciplinary knowledge construction. Epistemological accessibility thus represents the educational process through which learners progressively acquire the intellectual tools necessary for legitimate participation within disciplinary communities.

4.4 Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation as a Middle-Range Educational Theory

Taken together, the empirical findings support the development of Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation (APM) as a mechanism-based middle-range educational theory. Unlike grand theories that seek universal explanations across all educational contexts, APM explains a bounded

educational mechanism operating within authority-based disciplines where participation depends upon recognised scholarly traditions, specialised disciplinary language, and established standards of evidence. The proposed theory explains a sequential educational process in which epistemic diversity creates the initial learning condition, adaptive pedagogical mediation and mediation of scholarly authority function as pedagogical mechanisms, epistemological accessibility emerges as the immediate educational outcome, and epistemic readiness enables inclusive disciplinary participation. Because this mechanism is theoretically bounded, its value lies not in universal applicability but in providing a coherent explanation for a specific educational phenomenon that can be examined and refined across comparable contexts. The theory also generates several propositions for future research. First, greater epistemic diversity is expected to increase the need for adaptive pedagogical mediation. Second, adaptive pedagogical mediation should enhance epistemological accessibility without reducing disciplinary integrity. Third, epistemological accessibility is expected to strengthen epistemic readiness, thereby supporting increasingly meaningful disciplinary participation. These propositions provide a foundation for future qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods investigations.

4.5 Educational Implications

The findings have important implications for educational theory, classroom practice, curriculum development, and future research. Theoretically, the study broadens inclusive education by recognising that meaningful participation requires access to disciplinary reasoning as well as curriculum content. This perspective encourages future research to examine how different forms of pedagogical mediation influence learners' engagement with specialised knowledge across educational contexts.

From a practical perspective, teachers should begin instruction by recognising differences in students' epistemic preparation and intentionally design learning experiences that progressively mediate disciplinary language, evidence, interpretive principles, and scholarly reasoning. Such practices enable wider participation while maintaining academic rigour and disciplinary integrity. Curriculum developers should likewise incorporate explicit opportunities for students to develop disciplinary reasoning alongside content knowledge. Programmes for teacher education and professional development may also benefit from preparing teachers to recognise epistemic diversity and employ adaptive pedagogical mediation as part of inclusive teaching practice.

Finally, although the theory emerged from Islamic education, its explanatory mechanism is conceptually transferable to other authority-based disciplines, including medicine, law, theology, engineering, and professional education. Future research should therefore examine the applicability of Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation across diverse educational settings to refine its theoretical propositions and extend its explanatory scope.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how teachers supported meaningful disciplinary participation among students from diverse educational backgrounds within an authority-based discipline. The findings demonstrate that inclusive education extends beyond equitable access to curriculum, learning resources, and classroom participation. Meaningful inclusion also requires learners to gain progressive access to the disciplinary language, evidential standards, interpretive principles, and scholarly reasoning through which specialised knowledge is interpreted, justified, and applied.

The analysis showed that students entered the learning environment with different levels of epistemic preparation shaped by their previous educational experiences. Rather than reducing disciplinary complexity, teachers responded through adaptive pedagogical practices that progressively mediated disciplinary reasoning while preserving scholarly integrity. As students developed increasing access to disciplinary reasoning, they became more capable of

evaluating evidence, explaining disciplinary judgements, and participating confidently in scholarly dialogue. These findings demonstrate that inclusive disciplinary participation develops through a progressive educational process rather than through simplification of disciplinary knowledge. The principal contribution of this study is the development of Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation (APM) as a mechanism-based middle-range educational theory. The theory explains how epistemic diversity functions as the initial educational condition, how adaptive pedagogical mediation and mediation of scholarly authority operate as complementary pedagogical mechanisms, and how these processes progressively develop epistemological accessibility, epistemic readiness, and ultimately inclusive disciplinary participation. By introducing epistemological accessibility as a complementary dimension of inclusive education, the study extends contemporary perspectives on inclusion from ensuring participation in learning activities to enabling participation in disciplinary ways of knowing.

The study also demonstrates that disciplinary authority should not be viewed as an obstacle to inclusion. When teachers explicitly mediate disciplinary evidence, interpretive principles, and scholarly reasoning, disciplinary authority becomes an educational resource that supports increasingly independent and meaningful participation. This finding challenges assumptions that inclusive practice necessarily requires simplification of disciplinary knowledge and instead suggests that meaningful inclusion can coexist with high academic expectations when appropriate pedagogical mediation is provided. Although developed within the context of Islamic education, the explanatory mechanism proposed by Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation is conceptually transferable to other authority-based disciplines, including medicine, law, theology, engineering, and professional education. The transferability proposed here is theoretical rather than statistical, consistent with the logic of qualitative case study research and middle-range theory development. Future studies should therefore examine the applicability of the theory across different educational contexts using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches. Such research would enable refinement of the theoretical propositions advanced in this study and contribute to a broader understanding of how inclusive education can support meaningful disciplinary participation across diverse learning environments. In conclusion, this study argues that inclusive education should be understood not only as providing equitable opportunities to participate in educational activities but also as enabling learners to participate legitimately within disciplinary communities. By positioning epistemological accessibility as the central educational mechanism linking epistemic diversity with inclusive disciplinary participation, Adaptive Pedagogical Mediation offers a theoretically grounded and empirically informed framework that strengthens the relationship between inclusive pedagogy and disciplinary epistemology. In doing so, the study contributes a new explanatory perspective to inclusive education research and establishes a foundation for future theoretical development within authority-based disciplines.

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