

From Opportunity to Experienced Inclusion: Participation, Belonging, and Agency of Students with Disabilities in Vietnamese Lower-Secondary Classroom

Hoang Thi Duyen

Faculty of Foreign Language, University of Phuong Dong, Viet Nam

Email: duyen.ht@phuongdong.edu.vn ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/812-825-812-825>

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ABSTRACT:

Placement in a mainstream classroom does not establish that students with disabilities participate meaningfully or experience belonging. This convergent mixed-methods study examined how participation opportunities, peer relations, accessibility, support, and belonging were experienced in three Vietnamese lower-secondary schools. Data collected between June 18 and August 20, 2026 comprised 100 valid teacher surveys, interviews with 14 students with disabilities and 10 teachers, and 16 classroom observation episodes. Teacher ratings were most positive for direct teacher support ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.64$), inclusive climate ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.78$), and participation opportunities ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.68$), while coordination ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.66$), school support ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.79$), and accessibility ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.75$) were more cautiously rated. Student voice and observation showed that opportunity became meaningful participation only when students received a consequential role, their contribution was recognized, and support preserved a meaningful next move. Accessibility was event-specific rather than simply present or absent, and well-intentioned support sometimes displaced student agency. Divergence between adult reports and student experience therefore revealed a gap between provision and realization rather than simple measurement error. From the integrated findings, we propose a provisional Role–Recognition–Agency (RRA) lens and the Participation Realization Gap to explain how available opportunities become, or fail to become, experienced inclusion. The study argues that inclusion should be evaluated through the quality and function of participation, not placement or support presence alone.

Keywords: inclusive education, student participation, belonging, student voice, student agency.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is not secured by placement alone. A student with a disability may be physically present in a mainstream classroom yet remain peripheral to decision making, group work, peer recognition, or the academic activity that gives classroom membership its substance. This distinction between presence and meaningful participation is well established in inclusion research (Ainscow, 2020; Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2009), but it remains difficult to capture because “participation,” “belonging,” “access,” and “support” are often inferred from different sources as though they were interchangeable. The present study begins from a stricter proposition: opportunities are organized by adults, participation is enacted in interaction, and belonging is experienced by the student. These layers can align, but they need not.

The distinction is especially consequential in lower-secondary education. Students move across subjects, teachers, task formats, peer groups, and rapidly changing interactional demands. Reviews of secondary inclusion show that relationships, sensory and instructional accessibility, support practices, and school climate jointly shape students’ experiences (Horgan et al., 2023; Kasztelan Chapman et al., 2025; Subban et al., 2022). The social dimension is similarly multidimensional: being seated with peers does not guarantee friendship, acceptance, reciprocal interaction, or a positive social self-perception (Bossaert et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2025). Recent work reinforces this distinction. Walia et al. (2026) argue that participation does not automatically become belonging for autistic students, while Mariyam and Kurniawati (2022) show that teacher strategies can shape peer acceptance. These studies suggest that inclusion is produced through relational and pedagogical processes rather than through group membership alone.

Student voice is therefore not simply an additional source of data. It is epistemically necessary for claims about lived inclusion. Teacher reports can describe opportunities and supports they intend or observe; classroom observation can show whether a student holds materials, receives a turn,

or continues a task; but feeling recognized, peripheral, or genuinely part of the group must be accessed from the learner as directly as possible (Nguyen, 2026). This is consistent with student-voice studies showing that disabled learners identify barriers and relational dynamics that adults may not fully perceive (Dimitrellou & Male, 2020; Goodall, 2018; Woodcock et al., 2025). It also parallels Gelacio’s (2026) review, which found a persistent gap between formal inclusive provision and lived reality and identified student voice and belonging as central to meaningful inclusion. Although that review concerns higher education, the provision–experience distinction is equally pertinent to school settings.

The Vietnamese context makes this distinction timely. National legislation and education regulations establish inclusive education, individualized planning, and assessment adjustment as policy commitments (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018, 2021; National Assembly of Vietnam, 2010). Yet recent analysis of Vietnam argues that an implementation gap remains between rights-based commitments and uneven school-level provision, calling for stronger attention to accessibility, reasonable accommodation, participation, and learning progress (Nguyen & Vo, 2026). A policy entitlement, however, still does not reveal what a student experiences during a seven-minute group task, whether a peer waits long enough for a response, or whether “help” leaves the student with anything meaningful to do.

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides a useful mechanism-level lens. Autonomy concerns having meaningful choice and control; competence concerns experiencing oneself as able to act effectively; and relatedness concerns connection and social recognition. In inclusive classrooms, support can satisfy these needs when it opens access while leaving the learner as the actor. The same support can undermine them when another person takes over, publicly separates the student, or closes the next move. Research on autistic postsecondary students similarly underscores self-determination, self-regulation, and psychological empowerment as substantive educational capacities rather than

optional personal attributes (Lubin, 2024). We use SDT interpretively, not as a tested causal model.

This study uses convergent mixed methods to examine participation, belonging, accessibility, and support in three lower-secondary schools in Hanoi. Rather than requiring teacher survey, student interview, and observation data to agree, we treat divergence as potentially substantive. This leads to the paper's central theoretical move: distinguishing participation opportunity from participation realization. From the integrated findings we develop a provisional Role–Recognition–Agency (RRA) lens. Meaningful participation is more likely to be realized when (a) a student has a consequential role before collective decisions are closed, (b) the student's contribution is recognized and used, and (c) support preserves the student's agency by leaving a meaningful next move. We call the discrepancy between available opportunity and experienced/enacted participation the Participation Realization Gap (PRG). The RRA lens and PRG are data-derived explanatory concepts, not validated scales.

The study addresses four questions: (RQ1) How do students with disabilities describe participation, peer relationships, belonging, accessibility, and support? (RQ2) How do teachers perceive participation opportunities and inclusive supports? (RQ3) What roles, interaction patterns, access conditions, and support functions are visible in classroom episodes? (RQ4) Where do the strands converge, complement one another, or diverge, and what do these patterns reveal about the realization of inclusion?

2. Methodology

2.1. Design and setting

A convergent mixed-methods design was used. Teacher surveys, student interviews, teacher interviews, and classroom observations were

collected during the same period (June 18–August 20, 2026), analyzed separately, and integrated after strand-specific analysis. Student accounts were given priority for claims about subjective participation and belonging; teacher surveys provided quantitative context regarding adult perceptions; and observation provided event-level evidence about visible roles, interaction, accessibility, and support. This source-specific division of inference prevented teacher perception from being used as a proxy for student experience.

The study was conducted in three lower-secondary schools in Hanoi with inclusive Grade 8–9 classes. Schools were randomly selected from the accessible set meeting eligibility and field-access criteria. Random selection reduced researcher discretion within that frame, but three schools cannot represent the Hanoi school system statistically. The design therefore supports contextualized inference about patterns and mechanisms rather than city-level prevalence estimates.

2.2. Participants and data sources

The teacher survey initially yielded 104 responses. Four cases were removed using prespecified data-quality criteria involving excessive missingness, implausibly rapid invariant responding, exact duplication, or ineligibility, leaving $N = 100$: 63 subject teachers and 37 homeroom teachers. Teachers had a mean of 9.59 years of experience ($SD = 5.17$, range = 1–20). The qualitative strand included 14 students with disabilities, 10 teachers, and 16 classroom observation episodes. Sampling sought variation across schools, classes, support needs, and reported experience while prioritizing safe and meaningful participation. Disability categories are not reconstructed here because the supplied manuscript did not report a sufficiently detailed participant table.

Table 1. Data sources and analytical roles

Data source	Size	Participants/unit	Analytical role
Teacher survey	$N = 100$	Subject/homeroom teachers	Context on opportunities and support

Data source	Size	Participants/unit	Analytical role
Student interviews	n = 14	Students with disabilities, Grades 8–9	Lived participation and belonging
Teacher interviews	n = 10	Teachers in study settings	Organization, support, adult reasoning
Classroom observation	16 episodes	Grade 8–9 lessons/activities	Roles, access, interaction, support function

2.3. Instruments and data collection

The teacher questionnaire used five-point items covering participation opportunities, teacher support, accessibility, inclusive climate, peer-interaction opportunities, coordination, and school support. These domains were treated as context-specific research indicators rather than standardized scales. Internal consistency for the seven focal domains ranged from Cronbach's $\alpha = .769$ to $.833$. Two supplementary indicator groups concerning individualized support planning and assessment adaptation had lower α values (approximately $.630$ and $.562$) and were therefore retained only as contextual information rather than used in the principal domain comparison.

Student interviews focused on learning and social participation, peer relationships, belonging, accessibility, and experiences of support. Three response modes actually documented in the source records were retained in reporting: spoken responses; speech combined with pointing/choosing; and writing combined with brief speech. No unrecorded communication method was added. The interview protocol used short, event-focused questions, allowed the participant's preferred response mode, and checked meaning with students rather than inferring from nonverbal responses alone, consistent with communication-accessible research recommendations (Dee-Price et al., 2021; Teachman & Gibson, 2018; Ward & Gormley, 2025).

Teacher interviews examined grouping, feedback, task accessibility, instructional adjustment, peer relations, and situations in which a student

became peripheral to the activity. Observations documented entry into activity, student role, peer interaction, modality of support, agency preservation, and moments in which support created separation or replacement. Each observation was treated as a bounded classroom episode; no single episode was used to label a teacher or school as globally inclusive or non-inclusive.

2.4. Analysis and integration

Survey data were screened before descriptive analysis. For the seven sufficiently consistent domains, means, standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals were reported. Confidence intervals represent uncertainty around sample means; because no omnibus inferential comparison across domains was specified, overlap was not interpreted as evidence of statistically significant differences. Quantitative findings therefore function primarily as a contextual map of teachers' perceptions.

Interview and observational data were analyzed using a controlled thematic approach with an audit trail. Analysis involved familiarization, initial coding, candidate-theme development, theme review, final theme definition, selection of illustrative extracts, and explicit linkage to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2023). Confirming, elaborating, and discrepant cases were retained. Observational description was kept distinct from claims about subjective experience.

Integration occurred after separate analyses using convergence, complementarity, and divergence. Convergence indicated strands pointing in a similar direction; complementarity indicated that

one source specified a mechanism not visible in another; divergence indicated different levels of the phenomenon rather than automatically being treated as measurement error. This follows mixed-methods integration principles that joint displays and meta-inference should explain relations among strands rather than merely present them side by side (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015).

2.5. Ethics

The source manuscript indicates research involving teachers and students with disabilities but does not provide the approving body, approval code, or consent/assent documentation. These details must be inserted from the actual study records before submission. The final report should specify institutional ethics approval, guardian consent where applicable, accessible student assent/consent procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and arrangements for withdrawing interview or observational material. No ethics identifier has been inferred or fabricated in this version.

3. Results

3.1. Teacher perceptions: direct classroom support was rated more positively than system-dependent conditions

Across 100 valid surveys, teachers rated direct classroom supports relatively positively. Teacher support had the highest mean ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.64$), followed by inclusive climate ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.78$), participation opportunities ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.68$), and peer-interaction opportunities ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.65$). Accessibility ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.75$), school support ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.79$), and coordination ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.66$) were more cautiously rated. All seven means lay above the midpoint of the 1–5 scale, but their confidence intervals overlapped substantially. The pattern is therefore descriptive: teachers reported stronger confidence in support enacted directly in classrooms than in conditions dependent on broader coordination or infrastructure.

Table 2. Teacher-perception domains and descriptive statistics (N = 100)

Domain	M	SD	α	95% CI
Teacher support	3.76	0.64	.833	[3.63, 3.89]
Inclusive climate	3.60	0.78	.821	[3.45, 3.75]
Participation opportunities	3.59	0.68	.812	[3.46, 3.72]
Peer-interaction opportunities	3.48	0.65	.769	[3.35, 3.61]
Accessibility	3.31	0.75	.806	[3.16, 3.46]
School support	3.22	0.79	.827	[3.06, 3.38]
Coordination	3.16	0.66	.784	[3.03, 3.29]

Note. Confidence intervals are descriptive and are not used as pairwise significance tests. Individualized support planning and assessment-adaptation indicators had lower internal consistency and are excluded from this focal-domain comparison.

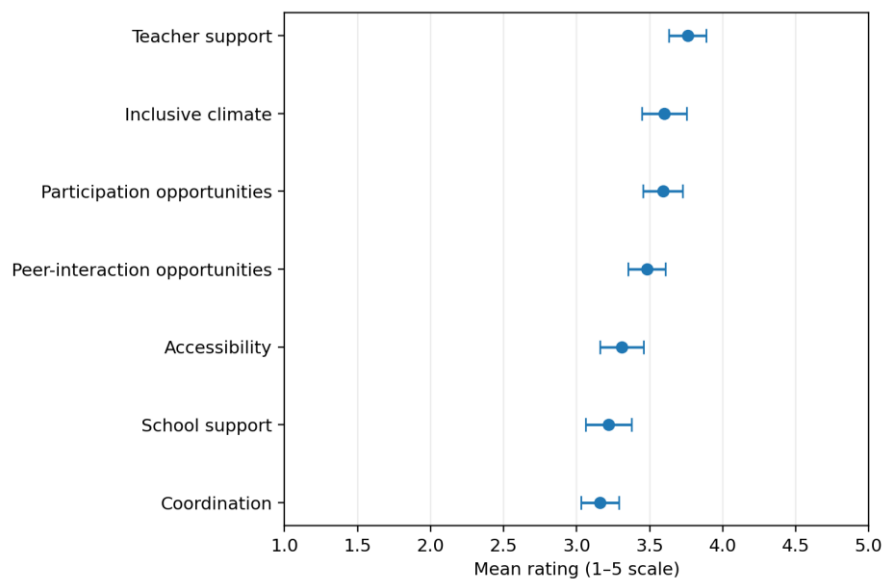


Figure 1. Teacher-perception domain means with 95% confidence intervals (N = 100)

These scores are adult perceptions, not direct measures of student belonging. They are used as a contextual layer against which student accounts and episodes can be read. This distinction became important because several qualitative findings did not contradict the teacher ratings so much as reveal what those ratings could not show: whether an available opportunity became an actionable role, whether a contribution mattered to the group, and whether support preserved the student's ownership of the activity.

3.2. Participation became meaningful when opportunity was converted into a consequential role

Students distinguished being placed in a group from having a part that mattered. S001 described having a specific responsibility—writing key words or checking examples—and being consulted before the group finalized an answer. By contrast, S003 remained physically within the group but was invited only to “look over” the work after roles and decisions had largely been settled. The difference was temporal and functional: a role created participation when it was allocated early enough to influence the shared activity, not when it was added after the consequential work was over.

S001: “I have my own part in the group, such as writing key words or checking examples. When the group asks me

before finalizing the answer, I feel that I am working together with them.”

Observation supported this distinction. In OBS01, each group member selected a role before beginning; the focal student chose to record main ideas, asked for clarification of a word, and remained active. In OBS06, the group shifted rapidly between subtasks without checking roles; the focal student stayed seated with peers but made no observable contribution for approximately seven minutes. The same nominal structure—group work—therefore produced different participation quality. Teacher reports of available opportunities and student reports of peripheral participation can both be accurate if opportunity is realized unevenly at the episode level.

3.3. Belonging was experienced through recognition, not social proximity alone

Students' accounts linked belonging less to the number of peers nearby than to whether their contributions entered the social and academic life of the group. S002 described belonging when even a brief comment was incorporated into the shared product. S007 reported having friends yet being forgotten in larger groups, while S011 attributed missed turns not to peer hostility but to the pace of exchange, which made it difficult to “get into” the conversation. Friendship, proximity, and

belonging therefore overlapped without being equivalent.

S002: "I feel that I belong when my idea is used in the group work, even if I only say one sentence. Then I think, 'Oh, what I said was useful.'"

Micro-interactions clarified how recognition was produced. In OBS08, a peer waited about 12 seconds before prompting, allowing the student to complete an answer that the group subsequently used. In OBS13, the student was invited to check an answer, identified an error, and had that contribution acknowledged. In OBS16, by contrast, the student raised a hand slightly but lost the turn as nearby peers competed to speak and the teacher did not intervene. These episodes show that an apparently positive inclusive climate can coexist with momentary exclusion. Belonging was enacted through wait time, turn allocation, solicitation, and uptake of contribution—small interactional moves through which a learner becomes consequential to the group.

3.4. Accessibility was an event-level accomplishment

The comparatively lower teacher rating for accessibility was clarified by concrete barriers at the student–task interface: seating position, font size, number of instructional steps, text density, transition pace, and response modality. S005 explained that changing seat position could substantially reduce visual fatigue. T002 described a student who did not initiate work after three oral instructions were delivered in sequence but was able to begin when the steps were separated and written down. Accessibility in these data was therefore not a stable property that a classroom simply “had”; it was repeatedly produced or narrowed through task design.

S005: "Where I sit, the font size, and how the worksheet is presented matter to me. On some days, simply changing seats makes the board much less tiring to look at."

This event-level interpretation also helps avoid a deficit reading of non-participation. Difficulty entering a task sometimes changed when representation, pacing, or response options changed. The relevant analytic question became not “Can the student participate?” in the abstract,

but “What does this particular activity currently make possible, and what small adjustment changes the point of entry?”

3.5. The support paradox: assistance was inclusive when it preserved a meaningful next move

Teacher support was the highest-rated survey domain, yet student accounts differentiated sharply between support that enabled continued action and support that displaced it. S010 valued receiving a partial prompt and then completing the work independently, with the teacher returning later to monitor progress. OBS10 showed a similar pattern: the teacher provided discreet desk-side feedback, moved away, and the student made the correction and continued. OBS15 showed agency-preserving choice when the learner selected between additional processing time and hearing the instruction again. In these episodes, support was calibrated to open a route forward without taking over the route itself.

S010: "I like getting one hint and then continuing by myself. When the teacher comes back and asks which step I am on, I know she is still following me but not doing it for me."

The opposite pattern occurred when support removed the student from the action sequence. S004 described losing the connection to the task after a peer took the pen and completed the work. In OBS03, a peer repeatedly answered on the student’s behalf; the focal learner gradually stopped looking at the worksheet and spoke less. In OBS14, the teacher moved the student to a separate desk while the group activity continued; the student repeatedly looked back toward the group and rejoined only near the end. These episodes do not show that individual support or peer assistance is inherently exclusionary. They show that support presence and support function are different constructs.

S004: "I do not like being called out separately in front of the whole class or when a friend takes the pen. Once a friend finished it for me very quickly, and afterward I did not know how to join in again."

3.6. Mixed-method integration: three gaps in the realization of inclusion

Placing the strands together produced three recurrent gaps. First, an opportunity–experience gap appeared when teachers reasonably reported that group work, questioning, and participation opportunities were available, while students reasonably reported lacking a role in particular episodes. Observation located the conversion point in the timing and consequentiality of role

allocation. Second, an intention–function gap appeared when support was clearly present and well intended but either enabled student action or replaced it. Third, a macro–micro gap appeared when teachers described a broadly inclusive climate while students and observations documented missed turns, rushed pacing, or momentary peripheralization. None of these patterns requires one source to be “wrong.” They refer to different levels of inclusion: provision, enactment, and experience.

Table 3. Mixed-methods joint display: from provision to experienced inclusion

Concept	Teacher-perception signal	Student-voice mechanism	Observation evidence	Integrated inference
Participation	Participation opportunities rated positively	A real role must arrive before decisions close	Clear role supports action; missing role yields peripheral presence	Opportunity–experience gap: provision does not guarantee realized participation
Belonging	Inclusive climate / peer interaction generally positive	Belonging linked to being waited for, invited, heard, and used	Both recognition and missed turns occurred	Positive climate can coexist with micro-exclusion
Accessibility	Rated more cautiously than direct support	Access depends on seat, font, pace, steps, response mode	Small adjustments opened entry; dense design interrupted it	Accessibility is dynamically accomplished in tasks
Support	Teacher support was highest-rated domain	Students distinguish hints that enable from takeover/separation	Both agency-preserving and agency-displacing support observed	Intention–function gap: support quality depends on post-support agency

These integrated patterns generated the provisional RRA lens. Accessibility provides a gateway into activity, but available opportunity becomes experienced inclusion only when a student obtains a consequential role, receives recognition for contribution, and remains an agent

after support. When opportunity is available but one or more of these interactional conditions fail, a Participation Realization Gap emerges. The gap is not proposed as a numerical discrepancy score; it is an analytic relation to be examined across sources and episodes.

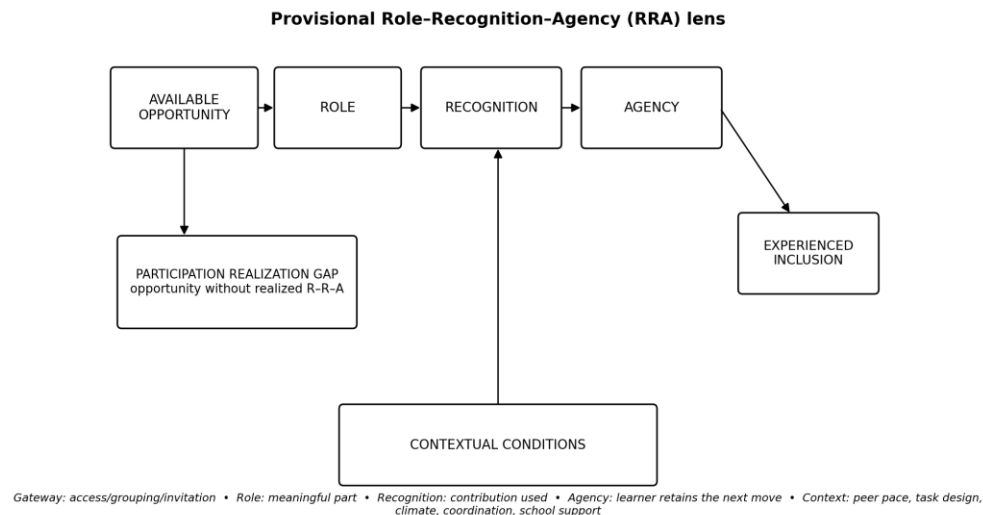


Figure 2. Provisional Role-Recognition-Agency (RRA) lens and the Participation Realization Gap

4. Discussion

4.1. The main contribution: from participation opportunity to participation realization

The study's central contribution is to move the analytic unit from whether participation is offered to whether it is realized. Much inclusive-education research appropriately asks whether students are placed in mainstream settings, have access to activities, interact with peers, or receive support. Yet the present findings show that these conditions can exist while the learner remains peripheral in the moment that matters. The RRA lens specifies three interactional conversion points. Role asks whether the learner has a consequential part before decisions are closed. Recognition asks whether the learner's contribution is solicited, noticed, and allowed to affect the joint product. Agency asks whether assistance leaves the learner as the person who can still perform a meaningful next move. Together, these conditions make participation empirically more demanding than presence or opportunity.

This distinction extends the social-participation literature without replacing it. Reviews have long shown that physical inclusion does not automatically yield peer acceptance, friendship, interaction, or positive social self-perception (Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2025). Recent evidence likewise shows that teaching strategies can influence peer acceptance (Mariyam & Kurniawati, 2022) and that

participation in an activity does not by itself secure belonging (Walia et al., 2026). The present study adds a micro-process explanation: participation is realized when a learner occupies a socially consequential position inside the unfolding task. This helps bridge a gap between macro indicators of inclusion and the interactional moments through which inclusion becomes experientially real.

PRG is narrower than a policy implementation gap. It operates close to the learner: even when a school and teacher provide an inclusive structure, the opportunity may still fail to become an experienced role. A group task can exist, support can be available, and the learner can nevertheless miss the consequential turn.

4.2. Belonging as recognized contribution

A second theoretical contribution is to sharpen the relation between participation and belonging. The students did not describe belonging simply as being liked, having friends, or being physically included. Belonging became visible when a contribution had social consequence: an idea was used, a turn was protected, an error was successfully detected, or peers waited long enough for the student's response to enter the group's work. This suggests the notion of recognized contribution as a bridge between social participation and belonging. A student may have peers and still feel peripheral if the group does not

create a viable pathway for their contribution to matter.

This interpretation aligns with research linking student participation to recognition and wellbeing (Anderson et al., 2022) and with Walia et al.'s (2026) argument that belonging is socially constructed through teacher, peer, and contextual processes rather than automatically produced by engagement. It also complements Gelacio's (2026) finding that formal inclusive provision can coexist with a gap in lived reality. The present study adds student-level interactional detail: lived inclusion is not simply the subjective response to an objective setting; it is partly produced through repeated recognition events. Such events may be small—waiting twelve seconds, asking before finalizing, using a one-sentence contribution—but they redistribute who counts as a participant.

This matters for measurement. A peer-relationship scale or teacher rating of inclusive climate may correctly describe a generally supportive environment while missing whether a particular student's contribution was recognized in a particular task. Belonging therefore should not be inferred solely from social proximity or climate. Where feasible, student voice and event-level indicators should be used together.

4.3. Support quality should be judged by post-support agency

The support findings reveal a paradox: a classroom can contain abundant help and still restrict participation if help substitutes for student action. The useful distinction is not support versus no support, but enabling support versus substitutive support. This is consistent with Self-Determination Theory: support is more likely to sustain motivation and participation when it protects autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Lubin's (2024) study similarly highlights self-determination and psychological empowerment as important educational capacities for autistic students. The present data operationalize this principle at the episode level by asking what remains possible for the learner after assistance.

We therefore propose a post-support agency test: after help is delivered, does the student still have a

meaningful next move? If the answer is yes, support may have reduced a barrier while preserving authorship of action. If the answer is no because a peer has taken the pen, the teacher has completed the sequence, or the learner has been physically separated from the joint task, support may improve immediate completion while weakening inclusion. This criterion is deliberately functional. It does not classify one-to-one assistance, prompting, or separate-space support as inherently good or bad; it asks what those arrangements do to participation in context.

This distinction also helps interpret the high teacher-support rating. The survey result need not be discounted. Teachers may indeed provide frequent and caring support. The qualitative evidence asks a different question: whether the support converts into student-owned participation. The intention–function gap is therefore a substantive mixed-methods finding, not a reason to privilege one source and dismiss another.

4.4. Accessibility is dynamically accomplished, not merely provided

Accessibility emerged as a dynamic feature of tasks rather than a fixed characteristic of the school. Seating position, visual density, step sequencing, pace, and response modality changed whether students could enter or sustain activity. This finding supports reviews emphasizing accessibility and instructional practice as central to students' inclusive experiences (Paul et al., 2022; Sedláčková et al., 2025; Subban et al., 2022), but it also reframes access as event-level accomplishment. A classroom may be generally accessible while a particular worksheet, transition, or oral instruction temporarily closes participation.

This event-level view has a practical advantage: it shifts problem solving away from broad judgments about student capacity toward the adjustable relation between learner and task. Small design changes can create a new entry point without lowering the academic goal. In the RRA lens, accessibility is therefore a gateway condition: it enables entry, but does not guarantee

meaningful participation unless role, recognition, and agency are also realized.

4.5. Divergence between sources is evidence about levels of inclusion

Methodologically, the study shows why mixed-method divergence should not automatically be treated as failure to triangulate. Teacher survey, observation, and student voice were not measuring the same thing from different angles. They had different epistemic strengths. Teacher ratings were strongest for describing available opportunities and perceived support at a general level. Observations were strongest for documenting what was enacted in bounded episodes. Student interviews were indispensable for interpreting recognition, peripheralization, and belonging. When these sources diverged, the mismatch often identified the location of the Participation Realization Gap.

We describe this as a provision–enactment–experience architecture of evidence: provision concerns what is available, enactment what happens in the task, and experience what the interaction means to the learner. This guards against treating adult intention as student experience or a single episode as a global judgment on a teacher or school.

4.6. Implications for Vietnamese inclusive education and school practice

The findings are consistent with the broader Vietnamese policy context. Nguyen Thi Thanh Phuc and Vo Van Dung (2026) identify a continuing tension between rights-based inclusive commitments and uneven implementation and call for measurable attention to accessibility, accommodation, participation, and learning progress. The present study suggests that implementation indicators should include the quality of participation, not only whether accommodations or group activities exist. Coordination and school support were among the more cautiously rated domains, and the qualitative data showed that participation must be sustained across rapidly changing tasks rather than secured once.

For classroom practice, the RRA lens can be converted into a brief participation check. Before or during group work, teachers can ask: Does the student have a real part before the answer is decided? Is there a viable way for the student's contribution to be noticed and used? Does the support leave the learner with the next step? Is the task currently accessible in its pace, representation, and response mode? These questions are more diagnostic than the general question "Is this student included?" because they point to modifiable interactional conditions.

Peer practices also matter. Mariyam and Kurniawati (2022) found that teacher strategies were associated with peer acceptance in inclusive classrooms. The present findings suggest mechanisms that teachers can explicitly teach to peers: wait before replacing an answer, invite before closing the decision, offer a clue before taking over, and use the student's contribution when it advances the task. Such routines can make relational inclusion visible in ordinary academic activity rather than confining it to social-skills interventions.

Student voice should inform adjustment through accessible, private opportunities to indicate what helps, what makes participation harder, and what should change. Asking whether an adjustment preserved the student's role can prevent well-intentioned accommodation from becoming separation.

4.7. Limitations and future research

Several limitations constrain inference. Only three schools were included, so school selection does not yield statistical representativeness for Hanoi. The 14 student interviews were purposively selected for variation and should not be interpreted as prevalence estimates. There was no student-level survey, and the data sources were not individually linked across all cases; therefore, teacher ratings cannot be correlated directly with particular students' belonging. Observations were brief and may be affected by reactivity. Teacher survey data were self-reported, and two supplementary indicator groups concerning individualized planning and assessment adaptation showed lower internal consistency.

Finally, the ethics record supplied for manuscript development is incomplete and must be finalized before submission.

Future studies can test the RRA lens and Participation Realization Gap with repeated observations linked to individual student voice over time. Event-contingent interviews could follow episodes of successful entry, missed turns, or support takeover. Quantitative development should avoid reducing PRG to a single discrepancy score before its components are validated; multilevel designs could instead model opportunity at classroom level and realized role/recognition/agency at episode and student levels. Longitudinal work is especially important because a momentary peripheral position may be repaired, while repeated micro-exclusion may accumulate into weaker belonging. Comparative research across cultural and institutional contexts could determine which RRA mechanisms are general and which are context-sensitive.

5. Conclusion

This study shows why inclusion should not be inferred from placement, opportunity, or support presence alone. In three Vietnamese lower-secondary schools, teachers generally reported positive direct classroom support and inclusive climate, but student voice and observation revealed that meaningful participation depended on what happened inside particular interactions. Students participated more substantively when

they had a consequential role, when their contribution was recognized, and when assistance left them able to continue as an actor. Belonging was described through being waited for, invited, heard, and used in shared work; accessibility changed with task design; and help sometimes enabled participation while at other times replacing it.

The mixed-methods contribution is to treat disagreement among sources as information about different levels of inclusion. Teacher reports describe provision, observation shows enactment, and student voice reveals experience. Their divergence identified three recurrent gaps: opportunity versus experienced role, support intention versus support function, and positive general climate versus micro-exclusion in specific episodes.

The provisional Role–Recognition–Agency lens organizes these findings into a middle-range account of participation realization. Accessibility opens the door to activity; role gives the learner a consequential place; recognition makes contribution socially meaningful; and agency-preserving support ensures that the learner remains the actor after help. The Participation Realization Gap names the point at which available inclusion fails to become experienced inclusion. The practical question is therefore not only “Was the student included?” but “What could the student actually do, influence, and continue doing within the shared activity?”

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