

Equity, Inclusion, and Learning: A Psychological Perspective on Educational Access and Outcomes

Bappaditya Adhikary¹, Dr Ramesh K Parua², Dr. Charly Daniel D L³,
Ridhima⁴, Dr Kritika Sharma⁵, Jay Singh⁶

¹Education, Teacher Education, Assistant Professor, Sikkim University, 737102, Gangtok, India, Email- bdakmg@gmail.com

²Education, Associate Professor, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong-793022

Email- drrkparua@gmail.com , ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/1137-1152-1137-1152>

³Professor & Principal, Orthopaedics, Dr NTR University of Health Sciences, 520008, Vijayawada , AP, India, ORCID ID: 1137-1152-1137-1152, Email ID: drcharlydaniel@gmail.com

⁴Research Scholar and Assistant Professor, Vivekananda Global University, English, Humanities And Social Sciences, 302004, Jaipur, India, ORCID ID: 1137-1152-1137-1152, Email ID: ridhimachhabra6@gmail.com

⁵Assistant professor, Television & Digital streaming platforms, Vivekananda global University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, Journalism and mass communication, 302020, ORCID ID - 1137-1152-1137-1152, Email ID: Ks.nokia00@gmail.com

⁶Research Scholar, Department of Education Training, Ch. Charan Singh degree college, Heonra, Etawah Uttar Pradesh, ORCID ID: 1137-1152-1137-1152, E Mail- jaysinghhansi@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT:

Educational equity and inclusion require more than admission to schools or placement in mainstream classrooms. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities may have formal access, but remain faced with limited participation, inaccessible teaching, social isolation, stigma and inequitable provision. The psychological processes through which access to education and conditions for education were found to influence academic, social, emotional, and developmental outcomes were examined. The literature review was conducted using a structured narrative approach to combine literature published between 2018–2025 on students with disabilities and special educational needs in school and higher education. The analysis was conducted on the following themes: belonging, psychological safety, self-efficacy, motivation, identity, stigma, emotional wellbeing, teacher attitudes, peer relationships, accessible instruction, family–school collaboration, and institutional barriers. The results showed that the quality of classroom relationships, accommodations, teacher self-efficacy, supportive school climates, and coordinated school systems were all important for meaningful inclusion. The mere fact that students were physically located did not guarantee their participation or achievement, as long as they were denied access to curriculum, decision-making, and/or social interaction. And inequities were exacerbated by intersectional factors including language, gender,

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disability identification practices, and poverty, as well as being rural. The article suggests that enrolment in special education is not the only measure of inclusion and that special education consider participation, belonging, well-being and opportunity for long-term inclusion. Psychologically responsive teaching, universal design, student voice, family partnership, and system-level accountability are all critical components to ensuring that access leads to sustained learning and development.

Keywords: educational equity, inclusive education, students with disabilities, psychological inclusion, educational access, learning outcomes

1. Introduction

The focus on educational equity and inclusion has grown in special educational importance because not everyone who enters into the education system is able to participate, to feel safe, and to learn. Students with disabilities can be mainstreamed but may still face limited participation, gaps in instruction, low expectations, social isolation, and inequitable supports. However, the placement of learners is not enough for equity, as each learner's educational needs, communication profile, mobility, sensory access, cognitive functioning and social experiences are different. Thus inclusive education needs to be conceptualised as a process that removes barriers to learning and increases participation and makes conditions in which all learners can learn academically, socially and emotionally. Research from around the world suggests that inclusion will not be achieved simply through individual decisions about placement, but through coordinated policy, school culture, classroom practice and leadership (Ainscow, 2020).

In fact, the evidence has shown around the world that exclusion can continue to exist in seemingly inclusive systems. Students can be assigned to the same classroom, but have restricted access to curricular content, less ability to interact with other students, and fewer accommodations. This blurs the difference between the presence and the real inclusion. Over time, the international policy space has been increasingly focused on the importance of access, participation, achievement and recognition throughout the education sector,

especially for learners who are historically marginalised (UNESCO, 2020). A broader understanding is particularly relevant to special education settings in which institutional settings can inadvertently result in segregation despite formal policies of inclusivity.

Children's learning experiences of children with disabilities should also be considered within the context of the psychological impact it has had. Learners' participation and persistence when they are facing difficulty are related to belonging, self-efficacy, motivation, identity, emotional security, and perceived acceptance. Results from research on inclusive placement are inconsistent due to a variety of factors such as the quality of the implementation, supports provided and the social climate for the learner. When students are included in an appropriate manner, this can have a positive impact on their academic and socioemotional development; however, poorly structured inclusion can have a negative impact on well-being and achievement (Dalgaard et al., 2022). These differences highlight the need to look beyond enrolment data to gauge education attainment.

Another key question is how implementation will take place. International experts have pinpointed teacher preparation, working collaboratively, providing individualized support, making the curriculum accessible, involving families, and fostering positive school leadership as factors that positively influence effective inclusion. They argue that inclusive education will be successful when schools adopt a shared responsibility for all

learners and a focused reliance on specialist placement or separate provision (Kurth et al., 2018). Research interests have similarly evolved from access issues to participation, attitudes, technology, teacher competence, social integration, and culminating in learner outcomes, reflecting the psychological and organisational aspects of inclusion that have been gaining momentum (Liu & Potmėšil, 2024).

The challenge is still great. Participation in lower level schools, access to services and well-being indicators are even worse for children with disabilities in many regions, and data gaps frequently result in their experiences being less visible in policy decisions (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Disconnected health, education, and social services can have a disproportionate impact on children with developmental disabilities, limiting early services and interventions, continuity in school, and participation in the long term (World Health Organization & United Nations Children's Fund, 2023).

In this context, the present article sought to draw connections and summarise evidence to understand how access to equity and inclusive learning experiences affected learning and developmental outcomes for students with disabilities. It addressed three questions: What was the evidence for psychological factors related to access and inclusion and what to the outcomes, how did school and classroom context relate to these factors and what practices were identified as having a positive impact on equitable access and learning.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Scope

A narrative approach that is structured was used to analyse psychological aspects of equity, inclusion, educational access and learning outcomes for students with disabilities and special educational needs. The scope included schools and higher education institutions, in which participation, belonging, motivation, self-efficacy, emotional wellbeing and academic development were discussed. Research has been focused on works that correlated institutional conditions to

learners' experiences and outcomes. The method enabled conceptual, empirical and policy-based evidence to be woven together without losing the focus on the issues of special education and psychologically responsive inclusive practice.

2.2 Literature Search Strategy

Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, PubMed and Google Scholar databases of the literature for relevance to the study. The search was conducted for publications from 1137-1152. The following key terms were used: educational equity, inclusive education, special educational needs, disability, educational access, school belonging, self-efficacy, motivation, psychological safety, teacher attitudes, peer relationships, participation and learning outcomes. Related concepts were combined using boolean operators. Eligible publications were also used to create reference lists to search for other studies that focused directly on psychological experiences in inclusive educational environments.

2.3 Eligibility and Study Selection

Peer-reviewed articles, systematic evidence syntheses, theoretical papers, and reports from recognised international organisations were considered. Only publications that referred to students with disabilities or special educational needs, and dealt with issues of access, participation, inclusion, psychological processes or academic and developmental outcomes were included. Research only addressing educational inequality broadly, but not with a clear disability component was not included. Non-English publications, editorials, conference abstracts, duplicate records and sources that were insufficient in methodological and conceptual terms were also excluded. The articles were selected based on their relevance, credibility, recency and consistency with the objectives of the article.

2.4 Evidence Organisation and Synthesis

Thematic analysis was used as the method to organise the selected literature. Regarding the study context, information was extracted on the participant group, category of disability, educational level, psychological factor,

institutional condition and the reported outcome. Results were compared to uncover common patterns of relationships among access, inclusion, belonging, motivation, self-efficacy, stigma, emotional well-being, and learning. Finds were aggregated across more general themes including psychological pathways, educational contexts, structural disparities, and developmental outcomes. Contradictory evidence has been kept and understood in the context of different settings, populations served, types of support provided and measurement methods used for a balanced synthesis.

3. Conceptualising Equity, Inclusion, and Learning in Special Education

3.1 Equality, Equity, and Educational Justice

Equality ensures all children receive the same educational opportunities, while equity acknowledges differences in need, ability, background and access. Students with disabilities might need an adapted teaching method, assistive technology, flexible assessment, specialist support, and accessible learning materials in order to participate fairly. Disadvantage can be reproduced through uniform provision if it fails to recognise barriers and/or support needs. The educational justice therefore relies on differential resources and responsive institutional arrangements, not equal treatment. There is a need to ensure that both inclusive and special education address the issue of common participation and specialised support, particularly where learners need intensive or individual support. (Hornby & Kauffman, 2021) Furthermore, equity demands systems which actively seek to identify and overcome barriers (UNESCO 2021).

3.2 From Physical Access to Meaningful Inclusion

Physical access is about admission, attendance and placement but meaningful inclusion is about participation, recognition, acceptance and

belonging. A student can be in a classroom but still not be included by being taught by the teacher in a way that is not accessible, by being poorly engaged with by peers, by having low expectations or by not being included in decision making. In primary schools, barriers can arise because teachers are not adequately prepared, the curriculum is too rigid, there is not enough support, and teachers have negative attitudes toward active participation (Kurowski et al., 2022). Higher education poses comparable challenges, as students with disabilities might gain access without necessary accommodations and/or institutional support (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022). True inclusion occurs when learners feel a sense of belonging, a sense of respect and a sense of valued membership (Long & Guo, 2023).

3.3 Understanding Learning Outcomes Broadly

The learning outcomes that a student in special education should learn should not be limited to test scores or academic achievement. These include engagement, attendance, persistence, self-regulation, social participation, emotional well-being, independence and readiness for further education or employment. A single-minded approach to achievement may also fail to take into account whether pupils feel safe, motivated, connected, and able to take control of their learning. Therefore, research into inclusive education needs to consider what children are able to achieve, as well as how they develop, in relation to a range of outcomes, while acknowledging the gaps in conceptual and methodological evidence (Norwich, 2022). The outcomes also differ from system to system and placement to placement in Europe (Schwab, 2021). Digital access can enhance learning, however, inequitable technology design may exacerbate exclusion (UNESCO, 2023). The difference between equality, equity, physical access, meaningful inclusion and learning are captured in Table 1.

Table 1. Conceptual Distinctions Among Equality, Equity, Inclusion, and Learning in Special

Education

Concept	Core Meaning	Application to Students with Disabilities	Psychological Significance	Expected Educational Outcome
Equality	Provision of the same opportunities, resources, or rules to all learners	Students receive identical teaching, assessment, and support regardless of individual need	May overlook differences in ability, communication, mobility, sensory access, or prior disadvantage	Equal provision may produce unequal participation and achievement
Equity	Distribution of support according to individual barriers and educational needs	Adapted instruction, reasonable accommodations, assistive technology, specialist support, and flexible assessment are provided	Strengthens competence, confidence, autonomy, and perceived fairness	Improved access, participation, persistence, and academic progress
Physical access	Admission, attendance, or placement within an educational institution	Students enter mainstream classrooms or higher education settings	Presence alone may not create acceptance, safety, or belonging	Enrolment may increase without meaningful engagement
Meaningful inclusion	Active participation, recognition, acceptance, belonging, and access to the common curriculum	Students learn with peers while receiving appropriate individualised support	Supports identity, motivation, psychological safety, and school connectedness	Stronger academic, social, emotional, and developmental outcomes
Learning	Academic and developmental growth resulting from educational participation	Includes achievement, engagement, self-regulation, social participation, well-being, independence, and transition readiness	Reflects the interaction between educational conditions and psychological processes	Sustained learning, school completion, further education, employment, and social participation

The conceptual relationship developed in this article is presented in Figure 1. Structural and institutional conditions shape the quality of students' educational experiences, which influence psychological processes and, in turn, academic, social, emotional, and long-term outcomes. Intersectional conditions may strengthen or weaken each stage of this pathway.

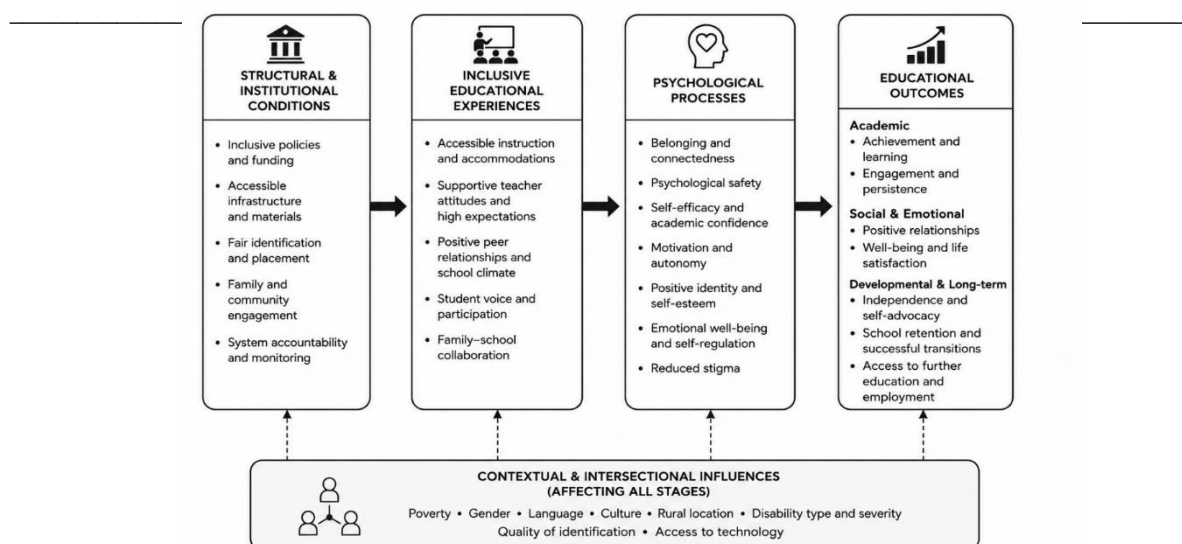


Figure 1. Psychological pathway linking educational access, inclusive experiences, and learner outcomes.

4. Psychological Pathways Linking Access to Educational Outcomes

4.1 Belonging and Psychological Safety

The concept of belonging and psychological safety drives student participation with confidence, the seeking of help, and staying involved in learning tasks for students with disabilities. Positive peer interactions, positive teacher behaviour, and prevention of bullying decrease fear and social isolation. A positive school climate can enhance mental health through trust and connectedness among students and staff and emotional security in the school environment (Long et al., 2021). Student's with SEN will also gain confidence and manage their exclusion and/or stress through peer-based emotional support (van der Meulen et al., 2021). Academic success is more likely to occur when institutions integrate support systems that are readily available alongside acceptance, participation and a true sense of belonging (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

4.2 Academic Self-Efficacy and Motivation

The academic self-efficacy is built up when students achieve success, get feedback, and feel that educational tasks are manageable. Support in the form of accessible teaching and/or supports can boost confidence, persistence and participation. Joint activities that involve students with and without disabilities can have positive effects on improving attitudes among peers, and

can contribute to more positive learning environments (Alnahdi, 2021). The teacher also plays a role in the formation of motivation by providing learning support, particularly when the teacher has competence in guiding the planning, monitoring, and reflection of learning (Dignath, 2021). Whilst inclusive interventions are most effective when supported by trained teachers, adequate resources and institutional commitment, rather than classroom adjustments alone (Mendoza & Heymann, 2024), the following classroom adjustments must be considered.

4.3 Identity, Stigma, and Stereotype-Related Experiences

Disability identity shapes the meaning of support, difference and participation for learners. Positive identity formation can help safeguard self-esteem, and stigma can create shame, hiding, and less engagement in class. For autistic people, autism is not necessarily a condition that comes before or after their identity, but is rather an integral element of it (Botha et al., 2022). Hostility, pity, overprotection or decreased expectations are all examples of ableist attitudes, which can limit autonomy and achievement (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019). Access to the provision can also be influenced by the decisions made about disclosure, especially if youth feel that disclosure

will lead to judgement or discrimination. These concerns can influence participation in education and then in employment (Lindsay et al., 2019).

4.4 Emotional Well-Being and Self-Regulation

Emotional wellness impacts focus, endurance, social interaction, and coping with academic demands. Children and adolescents with autism are at risk of having lower quality of life due to reduced participation and higher distress in daily contexts as a result of anxiety (Adams et al., 2020). Stigma at the family level can also impact children's confidence, socialization and access to

supportive opportunities (Kinnear et al., 2019). Disruptions to education can increase anxiety particularly when there are disruptions in specialist provision, routines and communication. Continuity, coping support and emotionally responsive educational planning were highlighted as important during the COVID-19 period, as families of learners with special educational needs reported significant levels of anxiety (Sideropoulos et al., 2022). Table 2 brings together the primary psychological mechanisms that could influence students' participation or achievement in education under inclusion/exclusion conditions.

Table 2. Psychological Pathways Connecting Inclusive Conditions with Educational Outcomes

Psychological pathway	Supportive educational conditions	Risks under exclusion	Expected educational influence
Belonging	Peer acceptance, supportive teachers, valued membership, participation in common activities	Isolation, loneliness, withdrawal, weak school attachment	Greater engagement, attendance, persistence, and social participation
Psychological safety	Protection from bullying, respectful communication, predictable support	Anxiety, fear of judgement, reluctance to seek help	Improved emotional regulation, classroom participation, and well-being
Academic self-efficacy	Achievable tasks, constructive feedback, accessible instruction, successful experiences	Learned helplessness, task avoidance, low confidence	Stronger motivation, persistence, self-regulation, and academic progress
Motivation and autonomy	Meaningful choices, relevant tasks, student voice, appropriate challenge	Passivity, dependence, reduced interest	Increased effort, ownership of learning, and sustained participation
Disability identity	Respectful representation, acceptance of difference, opportunities for self-advocacy	Internalised stigma, concealment, identity conflict	Stronger self-esteem, disclosure confidence, and participation
Perceived	Inclusive language, anti-ableist practices,	Shame, stereotype threat,	Influences well-being,

stigma	equal expectations	reduced help-seeking	accommodation use, and academic engagement
Emotional well-being	Stable routines, responsive support, family–school communication	Stress, anxiety, distress, disrupted self-regulation	Affects concentration, peer interaction, attendance, and quality of life
School connectedness	Positive relationships, shared activities, supportive climate	Detachment from school and psychological exclusion	Better mental health, retention, engagement, and belonging

5. Educational Environments Shaping Psychological Inclusion

5.1 Teacher Beliefs, Expectations, and Relationships

Student beliefs about teachers' attitudes to students with disability have a significant effect on how students with disability are perceived in mainstream classrooms, as either capable participants or burdens. Expectations can be negative or positive, and negative expectations can make challenging work, interaction with peers, and meaningful feedback difficult to access, while positive expectations can bolster confidence and persistence. Teachers may feel more concerned about including learners with SEND if they do not feel adequately prepared or have access to specialist support (Hind et al., 2019). Positive attitudes are more prevalent if educators are trained, experienced and supported by institutions (Saloviita, 2020). The attitudes of inclusive education are formed over time, depending on teacher efficacy, especially if the teachers think that they can adapt the teaching to be successful (Yada et al., 2022; Savolainen et al., 2022).

5.2 Peer Climate and Social Participation

Peer climate is the key to the experience of inclusion as acceptance or isolation. Shared learning experiences, informal communication, and cooperative involvement can help to minimize social distance between students with and without disabilities. Positive interactions promote understanding and increase students with disabilities' involvement in classroom activities with greater confidence (Alshahrani, 2023).

However, social participation differs depending on the education system and is influenced by friendship, peer acceptance, and participation in group activities (Bossaert et al., 2021). Empathy can enhance attitudes towards classmates with disabilities, particularly when within the context of strong friendship quality, meaningful contact is fostered (Ling et al., 2025). Schools need to therefore tackle issues of bullying, exclusion and token participation in a structured manner with peer-support.

5.3 Accessible Instruction and Individualised Support

Teaching is accessible and students are not excluded from shared learning opportunities. Universal design for learning provides “flexible” methods of information delivery, engagement, and demonstration of understanding. There is evidence which suggests these will enhance access and participation if they are used regularly throughout curriculum and assessment (Almeqdad et al., 2023). The role of teacher confidence is still relevant as the lack of preparation can diminish the implementation of the principles of universal design (Capp, 2020). Technologies, materials that are adaptable, and multiple ways of learning are ways inclusive education can be strengthened (Marino et al., 2020). The design of innovative learning environments is best achieved when physical design, pedagogy, planning for individual learners and specialist support intersect and

complement each other (Page et al., 2023).

5.4 Family–School Collaboration

Family–school collaboration supports continuity between home, classroom, and specialist services. Families share the knowledge of how learners communicate as well as their strengths, routines, and support needs; and schools share the information about learners' progress and available support. Mixed feelings around education can be alleviated, along with building confidence in educational services, through strong partnerships and appropriate support that can improve family quality of life (Balcells-Balcells et al., 2019). Trust is built when parents are treated as partners rather than recipients of professional advice when making decisions (Francis et al., 2022). Communication and collaboration is a key element of maintaining continuity, emotional stability and access to support during disruption (Hedegaard-Sørensen & Tetler, 2023).

6. Inequities in Access and Participation

6.1 Structural and Institutional Barriers

Accessible buildings, specialist services, funding inequities, placement choices, and teacher preparation remained obstacles for students with disabilities. The data on civil rights revealed that there were inequities in access to advanced learning, access to support, and access to inclusive opportunities across educational settings (Center for Learner Equity, 2025). This was also found in South Asia, where disability-inclusive practices were hindered by disjointed policies, insufficient resources, and uneven application (Grimes et al., 2021). Additionally, HEIs were not always able to move from formal admission to genuine participation due to the lack of proper accommodations, staff awareness and institutional support (Márquez et al., 2021). Expertise and service availability were also a further problem for rural schools (Page & Davis, 2023).

6.2 Intersectional Disadvantage

The effect of disadvantage on the education of children was compounded by the additional impact of disability, combined with poverty,

gender, race, language, rural status, or migration status. Migrated from people at the margins, students were more likely to be identified later and to receive fewer opportunities for assessment, and unequal placement decisions. In the context of disability identification disparities, it had been shown that educational systems and systems could reproduce racial and social inequalities via seemingly neutral systems of identification (Artiles, 2019). Poverty also raised the risk of becoming excluded due to difficulties accessing healthcare, mobility, assistive devices and continued education, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LIMICs) (Banks et al., 2018). Therefore, an 'intersectional' approach was needed as disability and gender were likely to intersect and create different forms of exclusion and limited participation (Moodley & Graham, 2020).

6.3 Exclusion Within Inclusive Settings

Formal placement in mainstream classrooms was not always associated with meaningful participation. Students may be marginalized via access to limited curricula, separate activities, low expectations, disciplinary removal, or restricted avenues to voice their opinions. A few families of children with autism had a preference for home education due to the lack of flexibility in mainstream schools and their lack of appropriate response to the needs of their child's individual learning and sensory requirements (Goodall, 2019). These experiences highlighted the disconnect between the public rhetoric of inclusion and the lived experiences of students who continued to be socially and/or academically marginalised. The concept of inclusion became confused when it was considered as the same as being physically present, and not when it is about belonging, participation, support and educational quality (Pellicano et al., 2018).

7. Educational and Developmental Outcomes

7.1 Academic Engagement and Achievement

The appropriate provision of support to pupils with a disability in inclusive educational settings can lead to enhanced attendance, participation in

the classroom, academic confidence and progress. Access to common curricula, flexibility of teaching and individualised assistance can help to decrease barriers to achievement, but this will depend on the quality of implementation and the capacity of the system. Research on school outcomes from around the world has demonstrated that policy change is not enough to improve outcomes if no trained staff, accessible materials and ongoing support are available in the school (de Bruin, 2019). Additionally, naturalistic social skills training has the potential to enhance communication, participation, and theory of mind skills among preschool children with autism, aiding readiness for learning in the classroom and engaging with others cooperatively (Szumski et al., 2022).

7.2 Social and Emotional Outcomes

Social and emotional outcomes are key measures of meaningful inclusion because students are more likely to learn when they feel accepted, feel safe and feel connected. Children and youth with disabilities can benefit from positive school relationships in gaining a positive self-concept, a decrease in feelings of isolation, and emotional adjustment. This is particularly significant, as school connectedness has been shown to be associated with greater mental health, engagement, and belonging (Santarossa et al., 2021). The evaluation of inclusive settings should therefore be assessed not only in terms of grades and/or placement rates, but also in terms of peer acceptance, emotional security, behaviour, and participation. Low levels of social integration can result in a student's presence in school but not in the mind.

| 7.3 Retention, Transition, and Long-Term Participation

Long term outcomes are school completion, further education, employment, independence and social participation. There is a need for coordinated planning, self-advocacy skills, accessible career information, and information about accommodations for students with disabilities. Concerns about disclosure of disability can impact support in the workplace and stigma can prevent young people from seeking help. Organisational culture, confidence, previous

experiences and rights knowledge are indicated by evidence as factors that influence the disclosure and accommodation processes (Lindsay et al., 2018). Planning for transition, therefore, needs to link educational preparation to the employment system, support self-determination and secure support after transition (school/university).

8. Implications for Special Education Research and Practice

8.1 Psychologically Responsive Inclusive Practice

Learners' psychological needs need to be met in addition to academic access in inclusive practice. Teachers need to design classrooms that promote students with disabilities' sense of belonging, competence, autonomy, emotional safety and respect for identity. Instruction should include choices, challenges, feedback, and voice. Group support and cooperative experiences can lessen feelings of isolation and build confidence. High-leverage practices provide a starting point for planning instruction, behaviour support, collaboration, and assessment in inclusive classrooms, given their link to evidence-based teaching and the needs of diverse learners that daily occur (McLeskey et al., 2019). Psychological inclusion needs to be considered as an integral part of learning.

8.2 School and System-Level Action

Inclusion must be supported at school, not by individual teachers but in a coordinated way. Essential elements include teacher preparation, inclusive leadership, accessible learning environments, multidisciplinary teamwork, family partnerships, and fair allocation of resources. The anti-bullying procedures must ensure students are not subjected to stigma, exclusion or peer harassment. School leaders should ensure that a consistent approach to school accommodation is applied and specialist support is linked to classroom teaching. Families to be involved in planning and decision making and students to be consulted regarding their learning needs. Consideration of participation, belonging and wellbeing as well as enrolment and achievement should be analysed at the system level to uncover other forms of exclusion. The key actions required at the classroom, school, family and

system levels are described in Table 3.

Table 3. Evidence-Informed Actions for Psychologically Responsive Special Education

Level of action	Priority actions	Psychological purpose	Expected outcomes
Classroom instruction	Use accessible materials, flexible representation, multiple response formats, and individualised support	Strengthen competence and reduce task-related barriers	Improved engagement, confidence, participation, and achievement
Teacher practice	Maintain high expectations, provide constructive feedback, support autonomy, and build trusting relationships	Promote self-efficacy, motivation, and psychological safety	Greater persistence, participation, and willingness to seek help
Peer environment	Use cooperative learning, peer-support structures, empathy-building activities, and anti-bullying practices	Improve belonging and reduce stigma or isolation	Stronger friendship, acceptance, social participation, and well-being
Student participation	Include learners in goal-setting, accommodation planning, and classroom decisions	Support autonomy, identity, self-determination, and voice	Increased ownership, self-advocacy, and engagement
Family–school partnership	Share decisions, maintain regular communication, and recognise family knowledge	Build trust and continuity across settings	Stable support, reduced family uncertainty, and stronger participation
School leadership	Coordinate specialist services, monitor accommodations, and support teacher development	Create consistent and reliable inclusive conditions	Better implementation, staff confidence, and institutional accountability
Education system	Ensure equitable funding, accessible infrastructure, fair identification, and transition support	Address structural and intersectional disadvantage	Improved access, retention, transition, and long-term opportunity
Research and monitoring	Measure belonging, well-being, participation, and	Make psychological inclusion visible in	More accurate identification of

	student-reported experiences alongside achievement	evaluation	hidden exclusion and effective practices
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As illustrated in Figure 2, psychologically responsive inclusion requires aligned action across education systems, schools, classrooms, and

individual learner experiences. Weakness at any level may limit the effectiveness of support provided at the other levels.

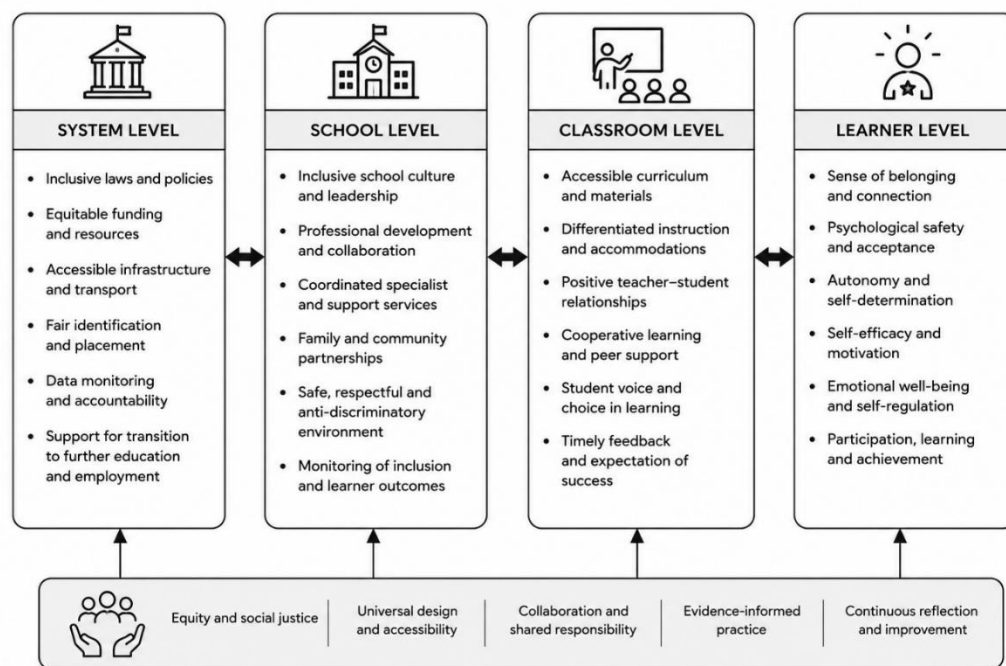


Figure 2. Multilevel framework for psychologically responsive inclusive education.

8.3 Priorities for Future Research

Further studies should go beyond simply describing what happens after inclusion and investigate the impact of inclusion over time. There is a need for longitudinal research to track changes in belonging, self-efficacy, motivation, emotional well-being and achievement. Intervention studies need to be conducted to determine what strategies within the classroom and school setting are effective for what disability groups in terms of lasting impacts. Greater cultural sensitivity is needed in low-income, rural, and multilingual environments. Intersectionality, student reported experiences and underrepresented disabilities should be emphasized in research. More robust indicators of psychological inclusion would facilitate the understanding of how access and participation impact academic, social and developmental outcomes.

9. Conclusion

Educational access is meaningful when students with disabilities can participate, belong, learn and grow within a supportive environment. The formal placement does not ensure inclusion when students experience inaccessible instruction, poor peer relationships, low expectations, stigma, and inconsistent support. Belonging, self-efficacy, motivation, feeling safe emotionally, feeling a sense of identity, and school connectedness are all psychological factors. Factors such as teacher beliefs, peer climate, family–school partnerships, institutional practices, and the availability of appropriate accommodations shape these factors. Equity demands responsive support, allowing for recognition of differences in need and barriers to participation, rather than equal provision. Schools need to integrate the teaching, planning,

relationships and services they offer to make it possible for students to have both academic success and social acceptance. Further consideration should also be given to intersectional disadvantage, low resource and rural settings, transition planning and student voice. Future research should focus on the longterm benefits of inclusive practice and which psychological and organisational circumstances

are conducive to long term benefits for various groups of disabled children. A psychologically oriented perspective can enable special education to move further than the mere act of providing physical access to the achievement of real participation, wellness, success, and future educational possibilities.

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