

LISTENING TO LEARNERS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSION IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

While inclusive education is widely discussed in terms of policy and pedagogy, the voices of students themselves are often underrepresented in research. This study explores how students experience inclusion in a secondary school setting through a narrative inquiry approach. Drawing on student interviews and reflective accounts, the paper examines how learners perceive participation, belonging, and support within their classrooms. The findings reveal that inclusion is not defined solely by access or instructional strategies but by the quality of relationships, recognition, and everyday interactions. The study highlights the importance of listening to student perspectives in shaping inclusive practices and contributes to the field by foregrounding lived experience as a critical dimension of educational research.

Keywords: Inclusive education, student voice, narrative inquiry, belonging, classroom experience.

Introduction

1. Beginning with Student Voices

Inclusive education is often described through the language of systems, policies, and teaching strategies. Yet for students, inclusion is experienced not as a policy but as a feeling—of being seen, heard, and valued within the classroom.

This study begins from a simple but often overlooked premise: students are not merely recipients of inclusive education; they are its most direct interpreters. Their experiences provide insight into how inclusion is actually lived.

2. Methodological Orientation

The research adopts a narrative inquiry approach, focusing on how students describe their own experiences of learning in inclusive classrooms. Rather than reducing responses to categories alone, the study attends to the meanings students attach to their experiences.

Participants included secondary school students with diverse learning profiles, including those who had experienced academic difficulties, language barriers, or challenges related to attention and participation. Data was generated through conversational interviews, allowing students to reflect on moments when they felt included or excluded.

The analysis focused on recurring themes while preserving the narrative quality of student accounts.

3. Results: Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion

Students consistently described inclusion in relational terms rather than technical ones. One student reflected that feeling included depended on whether the teacher “noticed when I didn’t understand and helped without making it obvious.” This comment highlights the importance of sensitivity in teacher responses, suggesting that inclusion is closely tied to how support is offered.

Another student spoke about group work as both an opportunity and a challenge. While collaborative tasks sometimes created a sense of belonging, they could also expose differences in ability. In such situations, the attitude of peers played a crucial role. Supportive peers made participation easier, while dismissive behavior led to feelings of exclusion.

Several students emphasized the importance of being able to participate in ways that suited their strengths. One participant described preferring oral explanations over written tasks, noting that this allowed them to demonstrate understanding more confidently. When such alternatives were available, students reported feeling more engaged and capable.

At the same time, there were accounts of subtle exclusion. Some students described situations in which they were physically present in the classroom but not actively involved in learning. This often occurred when tasks were not adapted or when instructions were difficult to follow. These experiences did not always involve explicit exclusion but resulted in a sense of disconnection.

4. Discussion: Inclusion as Lived Experience

The findings suggest that inclusion is experienced less as a structural condition and more as a relational and emotional one. While policies often focus on access and participation, students interpret inclusion through everyday interactions and classroom dynamics.

One important insight is that small actions can have significant effects. A teacher's decision to provide quiet support, adjust an explanation, or acknowledge a student's effort can influence how inclusion is experienced. These actions are often subtle, yet they contribute to a broader sense of belonging.

The role of peers also emerges as central. Inclusion is not solely the responsibility of the teacher; it is shaped by the social environment of the classroom. Positive peer interactions can enhance participation, while negative dynamics can undermine it.

The study also highlights the gap between formal inclusion and lived experience. Being present in an inclusive classroom does not guarantee meaningful participation. Inclusion requires attention to how students engage with learning, how they are supported, and how they perceive their place within the classroom.

5. Implications for Inclusive Practice

The findings point to the importance of incorporating student perspectives into educational practice. Listening to students can provide valuable insights into what works and what does not in inclusive settings.

Teachers may benefit from creating opportunities for students to express their experiences, whether through informal conversations or structured reflection. Such practices can help identify barriers that may not be immediately visible.

In addition, fostering a supportive classroom culture is essential. Inclusion depends not only on instructional strategies but also on the relationships that shape the learning environment.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that inclusion is best understood through the experiences of those who live it. Students offer perspectives that challenge simplified notions of inclusion and highlight its complexity.

By paying attention to student voices, educators can move beyond policy-driven definitions and develop practices that are responsive, relational, and meaningful.

Inclusion, in this sense, becomes not just a goal, but an ongoing process shaped by interaction and understanding.

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