



# Impacts of social and cultural inclusion in education

Rashida Pervaiz\*, Ijaz Ahmed Tatlah

Department of Education, Faculty of Social Science Arts & Humanities, Lincoln University College, Selangor, Malaysia

## Abstract

Over the past years, the role of social and cultural inclusion in education has become more and more important as schools and colleges attempt to create an equitable and diverse educational environment. The paper discusses the multifaceted implications of social and cultural inclusion on student engagement, academic achievement, and socio-emotional well-being. The study demonstrates how inclusive educational practices foster a sense of belonging and identity among diverse students based on such theoretical frameworks as the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky and the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner. It also looks at structural and systemic obstacles, such as implicit bias, language differences, and socioeconomic differences that do not allow inclusive education and how certain interventions can alleviate the problems. Culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive curricula are also examined in terms of their contribution to the minimization of achievement gaps, promotion of intercultural competence, and increased classroom participation among marginalized student populations. Besides, the paper assesses the ways in which inclusive education policies help decrease dropout rates, increase retention, and facilitate lifelong learning in pluralistic societies. By critically evaluating empirical studies and international case examples, the findings highlight the need for continued institutional interest, teacher readiness, and policy integration. The paper concludes that the acceptance of social and cultural diversity in education not only contributes to the academic and personal success of the students from the marginalized communities but also helps to develop democratic values, social cohesion, and collective well-being in the educational systems all around the world.

**Keywords:** Social inclusion, Cultural diversity, Inclusive education, Culturally responsive pedagogy, Equity in education

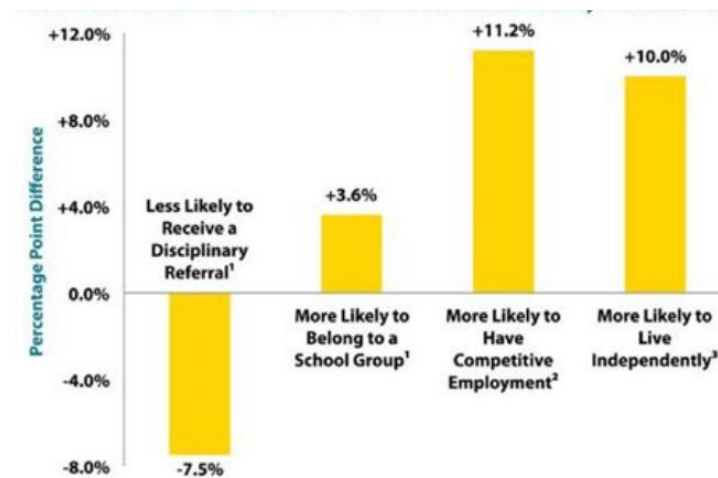
## 1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental instrument for promoting social cohesion, ensuring equity, and empowering individuals in diverse societies. As classrooms become increasingly multicultural and multilingual, the need for socially and culturally inclusive educational practices is more urgent than ever (Banks & Banks, 2019). Social and cultural inclusion in education is a proactive attempt to create learning conditions that make students of diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds feel respected, represented, and valued (Nieto, 2010). It is not merely the availability of education but emphasizes fair access, cultural recognition, and the dismantling of structural barriers that limit access and academic success among underrepresented groups (UNESCO, 2020).

Inclusive education philosophy is founded on the premise that diversity is a positive element in the educational process and that all students regardless of their backgrounds should have an equal chance of accessing high quality education that will affirm their identities and cultures. Theoretical approaches such as sociocultural theory of Vygotsky and ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner reveal the significance of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development and the influence of environmental systems on the experiences and learning of students respectively. These perceptions provide us with an effective insight into the effects of inclusive education practices.

The fact that inclusive classrooms not only assist in enhancing academic achievement of underrepresented students but also in fostering empathy, critical thinking, and intercultural competence in all learners is supported by the evidence of empirical research (Gay, 2010). An example is culturally responsive pedagogy that has proved to help narrow the achievement gap, decrease dropout rates, and enhance a sense of belonging and self-efficacy among diverse students (Sleeter, 2011). However, even with the increased awareness, such issues as implicit bias, inadequate teacher preparation, inflexible curriculum, and the absence of institutional support persist and still impede the establishment of truly inclusive learning environments (OECD, 2017).

Figure 1: Benefits of inclusion of students with disabilities



Source: (OECD (2023). *Equity and Inclusion in Education*)

The bar graph is compelling evidence on the positive results of inclusive education. Students in inclusive settings are 7.5% less likely to be referred for discipline, which is an indicator of better behavior and engagement. They are 3.6% likely to be involved in school groups, demonstrating improved social integration. Long term benefits are also equally important because students are 11.2% more likely to get competitive employment and 10% more likely to live independently. These statistics are very persuasive in the argument of how inclusive education is not only enhancing academic and social experiences but also promoting more autonomy and life success away from school.

### **1.1 The Need for Inclusive Education**

Education serves as a vital mechanism for advancing social cohesion, equity, and empowerment within diverse societies. As classrooms continue to grow more culturally and linguistically diverse, the demand for socially and culturally inclusive educational practices has never been greater (Banks & Banks, 2019). Cultural inclusion in education refers to the creation of learning environments where students from all backgrounds feel respected, represented, and valued (Nieto, 2010).

This concept goes beyond ensuring access to education it emphasizes providing equitable opportunities, honoring students’ cultural identities, and eliminating the structural barriers that hinder academic success for marginalized learners (UNESCO, 2020).

#### **1.1.1 Defining Social and Cultural Inclusion**

Social and cultural inclusion in education refers to ensuring that all students regardless of their background are respected, included, and valued within the school environment. It extends beyond providing access to education by actively embracing all groups, affirming their cultural identities, and removing the systemic barriers that hinder the participation and success of marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2020).

#### **1.1.2 Demographic Shifts and Global Relevance**

More migration and different cultures worldwide have influenced how classrooms are set up. This demonstrates that schools should find inclusive ways to address the needs of all their students (OECD, 2023)

*Table 1: Indicators Highlighting the Need for Inclusive Education Across Selected Countries*

<b>Country/Region</b>	<b>% of Students from Multicultural Backgrounds</b>	<b>% Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies</b>	<b>% Academic Engagement Among Marginalized Groups</b>
USA	52%	78%	62%
UK	34%	81%	67%
Canada	48%	84%	70%
Germany	30%	76%	60%
Australia	45%	79%	66%

*(Source: OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020; National Education Statistics)*

## **1.2 Theoretical Foundations of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education contends that diversity in a classroom is beneficial to all students, and all students should receive an education that appreciates who they are and where they are coming from. According to the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, social interaction and cultural factors are important in the formation of thinking. The ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner also emphasizes the different environmental factors that may influence the learning of the students. Such perceptions enable us to observe the practice of inclusive education (Jandrić et al.,2022).

### **1.2.1 Sociocultural Theory**

Vygotsky theory concentrates on social interactions and cultural background in explaining how cognitive development occurs. This theory in inclusive classrooms describes that social interactions and inclusion of different cultural views influence learning.

### **1.2.2 Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory states that the development of a child depends on various environmental systems, including family, school, and society. The theory is used in inclusive education by considering all these different levels to help students learn.

## **1.3 Evidence-Based Impacts of Inclusion**

Research consistently demonstrates that inclusive classrooms benefit all learners. They not only improve the academic performance of underrepresented students but also foster greater empathy, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding among the broader student population (Gay, 2010). For example, culturally responsive teaching practices have been shown to reduce achievement gaps, decrease dropout rates, and enhance students' sense of inclusion and self-confidence (Sleeter, 2011).

Despite increased awareness, several challenges persist such as implicit bias, insufficient teacher preparation, rigid curricula, and limited institutional support which continue to impede the full realization of inclusive education (OECD, 2017).

### **1.3.1 Academic and Social Benefits**

Inclusive education has helped students with disabilities perform better academically and fit better socially. It is more likely that children in inclusive schools do better in school and develop better social skills than those in segregated schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

### **1.3.2 Ongoing Challenges and Barriers**

Although inclusive education has numerous positive arguments, it also has certain challenges. Part of the problems is that the teachers are not properly trained, resources are lacking, and some schools have difficulties in including all students (OECD, 2023).

## **2. Body of Paper**

### **2.1 Methods**

The section of the report clarifies the methodology used to investigate the impacts of social and cultural inclusion in education. Given that the research will be exploring and utilizing international literature, a qualitative-descriptive design was identified as the most appropriate.

### **2.1.1 Research Design**

The study employed a qualitative-descriptive approach to examine how social and cultural inclusion affects the achievement of learners in different places. This is how the researchers can study the details of educational processes without the need to use strict hypotheses (Sandelowski, 2000). The main method of research in the paper was document analysis where secondary data on international reports, policy documents, and scholarly research were analyzed. The Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) by UNESCO and Equity and Inclusion in Education (2023) by OECD were the key sources, although peer-reviewed articles on inclusive teaching and educational equity were also consulted (e.g., Sleeter, 2011). In this way, we could synthesize the information on the current trends, concerns, and best practice in inclusive education worldwide.

### **2.1.2 Data Sources**

The data was obtained based on policy documents, OECD statistics, and scholarly papers that were reviewed by professionals. The corpus of data was composed of different secondary sources including:

- International policy frameworks and monitoring reports (e.g., UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2023),
- Regional and national statistics, such as those from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education,
- Peer-reviewed academic literature on inclusive education, multicultural pedagogy, and teacher preparedness (e.g., Gay, 2010).

This triangulation of data allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between social and cultural inclusion and educational outcomes, ensuring both breadth and depth in interpretation (Bowen, 2009).

### **2.1.3 Analytical Framework**

To identify, arrange, and interpret the patterns in the qualitative data, thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were identified using an inductive process and were explained with the help of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Vygotsky pointed out that learning is influenced by culture and social interaction, which helped researchers analyze how culture and classrooms impact teaching. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model was used to examine the different environmental factors that play a role in inclusion. By using these frameworks, I understood how inclusion is carried out in different schools.

## **2.2 Results**

The research and the outcomes from the secondary data are shown in the findings. The findings suggest that including all students in the same classroom helps them perform better, but there are still challenges and differences in how it is done. The data is grouped into important themes as shown below.

### **2.2.1 Increased Academic Engagement and Belonging**

Inclusive educational practices have been shown to significantly improve both academic engagement and students' sense of belonging particularly among those from ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds. According to OECD (2023),

academic engagement among minority students increases by up to 20% in schools that implement inclusive teaching strategies and culturally responsive pedagogy. This finding aligns with Gay (2010), who emphasized that when students see their cultural identities reflected in the curriculum and teaching practices, they are more likely to engage actively, show greater motivation, and report more positive school experiences.

Sleeter (2011) further supports these outcomes, noting that inclusive classrooms are associated with reduced absenteeism and stronger student–teacher relationships. These improvements foster emotional safety and encourage academic risk-taking. Such outcomes are directly linked to increased school connectedness a key factor correlated with higher academic achievement, lower dropout rates, and enhanced socio-emotional well-being (CDC, 2019).

### **2.2.2 Global Implementation Trends**

International implementation of inclusive education varies considerably, reflecting differences in national policies, cultural attitudes, and resource allocation.

- In countries like Finland and Italy, inclusive education is deeply embedded in policy and practice, with over 98% of students with disabilities educated in mainstream classrooms (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASIE], 2022).
- In contrast, nations such as Germany and Sweden still rely heavily on dual-track systems where students with special needs are educated separately which limits inclusive integration. Only 43% of students with disabilities in Germany and 7% in Sweden are included in mainstream education (EASIE, 2022).

*See Table 2: Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Mainstream Education by Country.*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Percentage of Students with Disabilities</b>
Finland	98%
Italy	98%
Canada	75%
Germany	43%
Sweden	7%

*(Source: EASIE, 2022; OECD, 2023)*

### **2.2.3 Barriers Identified**

A major barrier to effective inclusive education is the lack of formal training among educators in inclusive pedagogy. Many teachers lack the necessary knowledge and skills to address diverse learning needs, differentiate instruction, or foster culturally responsive classrooms. According to One of the greatest impediments to successful inclusive education is the absence of formal training of educators in inclusive pedagogy. Most educators do not have the knowledge and skills to meet diverse learning needs, differentiate instructions, or create culturally responsive classrooms. UNESCO (2020) reports that less than half of the teachers in low- and middle-income countries believe that they are well prepared to work in inclusive classrooms. This training disparity greatly restricts the capacity of schools to use inclusive practices in a consistent and equitable manner.

Implicit bias also remains a factor in the classroom environment, affecting the expectations and behavior of educators toward students based on race, language proficiency, or disabilities.

These prejudices may restrict the learning experiences and self-confidence of the marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gillborn, 2008). Students are usually deprived of challenging content or advanced coursework when teachers have low expectations of particular groups.

Conventional curricula and evaluation models also limit inclusion by not being able to support cultural and linguistic diversity. Such fixed frameworks tend to focus on the mainstream cultural values and learning patterns, thus isolating the students whose experiences are not mainstream (Banks, 2006). Consequently, numerous students are not able to relate to the curriculum and this causes low motivation and performance. To enhance equity, it is necessary to make curricula more inclusive and culturally relevant.

Another issue that is critical is the unequal distribution of educational resources. In schools that serve under-resourced regions, assistive technologies, multilingual materials, support staff, and professional development are frequently inaccessible. This deficiency makes it difficult to accommodate students with disabilities, language or socio-economic disadvantages (OECD, 2023). Inclusive education is especially challenging to provide in marginalized communities, where there is no adequate infrastructure and support in terms of instruction.

## **2.3 Discussion**

In this part, the findings are described in their impacts on education and major theories. Inclusive education has been found out to be advantageous to students as well as the society and can go a long way in helping with equity, cohesion of society and democracy.

### **2.3.1 Theoretical Implications**

The findings support the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky which believes that learning occurs as a result of social interactions and the assistance of tools and culture. Increased academic engagement and a sense of belonging in marginalized students indicate the psychological benefits of a culturally diverse classroom. When learning is connected to society and culture, inclusive education helps students work together, mentor each other, and think critically.

Likewise, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is supported by studying the various factors that hinder or promote inclusion in schools. For instance, teacher preparedness (microsystem), school policy (mesosystem), and national legislation (macrosystem) collectively shape the quality of inclusion experienced by students. This systems-based understanding affirms the necessity of integrated interventions across individual, institutional, and societal levels to support meaningful educational inclusion.

### **2.3.2 Policy and Practice Recommendations**

In light of the findings, the following policy and practice recommendations are proposed to operationalize social and cultural inclusion effectively:

1. Integrate Culturally Responsive Pedagogy into Teacher Education: Teacher preparation programs should incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy that enables educators to validate diverse student identities, differentiate curriculum to diverse cultural contexts, and acknowledge implicit biases (Sleeter, 2011). Case-based learning, community involvement, and reflective practices should be involved in both pre-service and in-service training to develop cultural competence.

2. Invest in Inclusive Infrastructure and Multilingual Resources: Schools and educational institutions are supposed to be provided with physical and teaching materials that can support the needs of students with different backgrounds. This comprises of assistive technologies, differentiated instructional materials, and powerful language support systems. The adoption of multilingual education policies is especially important when it comes to students with immigrant and refugee backgrounds (UNESCO, 2020).
3. Encourage Collaborative Governance: The promotion of inclusive education presupposes participatory governance that is not limited to the classroom walls. Engaging the major stakeholders such as teachers, parents, students, and community leaders in decision making process makes educational policies culturally appropriate and sustainable (Epstein, 2011).
4. Monitor and Evaluate Inclusion Practices: Governments and educational facilities ought to have powerful monitoring systems to trace inclusion indicators and adjust strategies depending on evidence. Gender, ethnicity, and disability disaggregation of data is necessary to take specific action (OECD, 2023).

### **2.3.3 Long-Term Impacts**

Beyond immediate academic performance, inclusive education contributes significantly to long-term life outcomes. Students educated in inclusive environments are more likely to complete secondary education, access higher education, and secure employment (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). They exhibit higher levels of independent living, community involvement, and civic engagement, suggesting that inclusive schooling fosters not only intellectual growth but also social responsibility.

Research by the OECD (2023) shows that inclusive education reduces the risk of social exclusion later in life, especially for students with disabilities or those from marginalized communities. Promoting empathy, cooperation, and respect among students at an early age helps them succeed in diverse societies and take part in democratic life (European Commission, 2023).

Inclusive education should be considered a basic part of quality education and sustainable development, not only as a special arrangement. What students learn in school continues to be useful in life, helping to create fair and respectful communities.

## **3. Conclusion**

Socially and culturally inclusive education is not merely an aspiration it is a foundational requirement for equitable and effective learning in today's diverse societies. Drawing on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this study has shown that inclusive education supports the cognitive, emotional, and academic development of students from marginalized backgrounds, while fostering a broader culture of belonging.

The findings clearly demonstrate that strategies such as culturally responsive pedagogy and differentiated instruction plays a key role in closing the achievement gaps, minimizing the number of dropouts, and preparing students to live in multicultural societies. The world research evidence supports the idea that inclusive education can change the life of a person and a whole community by increasing the level of engagement and long-term success.

Nevertheless, there are still considerable obstacles. Issues like the lack of teacher training, implicit bias, fixed curriculum, and school resources remain a barrier to achieving fully inclusive education. The example of successful implementation of policy with students with disabilities in Finland and Italy demonstrates the necessity of context-specific, systemic changes in the global context.

Moving forward, policymakers, educators, and communities must collaborate to create more inclusive learning spaces. This demands long-term investment in teacher preparation, inclusive infrastructure, multilingual resources, and participatory governance. It is only with this kind of concerted and comprehensive work that education systems will progress not only to the point of offering access, but also to the point of real participation and success of all learners.

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