


Social Inclusion through the Eyes of Students: A Qualitative Study in Ethnically and Socioeconomically Diverse Schools

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Abstract

This study examines how students perceive and experience social inclusion in ethnically and socioeconomically diverse school settings. Using a qualitative methodology, it captures the perspectives of 12 students aged 12 to 15 from urban middle schools in Romania. Interviews, designed with open-ended prompts, served as the primary method for obtaining insights, which were then explored using a thematic lens. Four key themes emerged: a conditional sense of belonging, peer relationships characterized by both solidarity and subtle exclusion, the ambivalent role of teachers in promoting inclusion, and unequal access to extracurricular opportunities. The findings reveal that social inclusion is not merely an institutional objective but a lived, emotional, and relational experience shaped by everyday school interactions. The study emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive and equity-oriented educational practices, highlighting the value of incorporating students' voices in shaping inclusive school environments.

Keywords: equity in education, ethnic diversity, inclusive education, qualitative research, school participation, social inclusion, socioeconomic status, student perceptions

Introduction

Freire (1970) emphasized that genuine education originates from love and requires the courage to transform society. Grounded in this humanistic perspective, the present study investigates how students perceive and experience social inclusion in educational contexts shaped by ethnic and socioeconomic diversity.

Social inclusion has emerged as a central principle in both European and international education policies. It is considered essential for building democratic, cohesive, and equitable societies (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE], 2022; UNESCO, 2009). In this regard, schools are no longer viewed merely as institutions for knowledge transmission, but as dynamic social spaces where identity, belonging, and intercultural relations are continually negotiated (Putnam, 2000; Slee, 2011).

The role of education extends beyond physical access to classrooms. It includes enabling full, meaningful, and equitable participation in all aspects of school life, regardless of students' social, ethnic, or economic backgrounds (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Inclusion should be understood not simply as integration, but as the active recognition of difference and the ongoing transformation of school culture to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

Although policy frameworks and institutional reforms have addressed the structural dimensions of inclusion, the subjective and experiential dimensions remain underexplored. Students are not passive recipients of inclusive or exclusive practices; rather, they are active meaning-makers whose perceptions are shaped by daily school interactions (Devine, 2011; Lundy, 2007).

Theoretical Background and Related Literature

Social Inclusion in Education: A Multidimensional Concept

Social inclusion in education is a multidimensional concept situated at the intersection of pedagogical, social, cultural, and political dimensions. According to UNESCO (2009), inclusion entails ensuring, full, equitable, and meaningful participation for all learners – regardless of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, or other identity markers. It goes beyond mere physical presence in classrooms, requiring equal opportunities for learning, a strong sense of belonging, and cultural recognition.

Within this framework, schools are understood as spaces that cultivate not only academic knowledge but also empathy, civic engagement, and the capacity to coexist with diversity (Putnam,

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2000). Inclusive education is intrinsically linked to the broader concept of educational justice, which implies both the redistribution of resources and the recognition of diverse identities and perspectives in decision-making processes (Fraser, 2008).

Social Theories of Inclusion and Exclusion

From a sociological perspective, exclusion in education often results from structural inequalities embedded within institutional systems (Silver, 1994). Bourdieu and Passeron (1997) argue that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds often lack the cultural capital necessary to thrive in school environments that privilege dominant middle-class norms. Through the concept of *habitus*, these scholars explain how students internalize expectations that may conflict with their lived realities.

Labeling theory, introduced by Becker (1963), further illustrates how ethnic or socioeconomic stereotypes may lead to differential educational trajectories. These stereotypes – often internalized by teachers and institutions – can create self-fulfilling prophecies that negatively impact student motivation and academic success.

More recently, internationality has been proposed as a critical framework for understanding overlapping forms of exclusion. Coined by Crenshaw (1989), this approach emphasizes how dimensions such as race, class, and gender intersect to produce compounded marginalization – particularly in educational settings that fail to respond to students' diverse lived experiences (Walton et al., 2011).

Inclusion in Ethnically and Socioeconomically Mixed Schools

Schools characterized by ethnic and socioeconomic diversity offer valuable opportunities for intercultural learning, but they also face systemic challenges. Banks (2008) underscores the role of multicultural education in promoting equity and mutual respect. Nevertheless, the mere coexistence of diverse student populations does not guarantee meaningful inclusion. Instead, intentional, reflective, and inclusive pedagogical practices are essential (Floriano & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Research has shown that, in the absence of active inclusion strategies, students from marginalized groups may internalize societal hierarchies and forms of stigma. Studies by Gillborn (2005) and Vincent et al. (2015) suggest that such students are often directed into lower academic tracks – not due to their ability, but rather because of implicit teacher biases and systemic inequalities.

Students' Voices in Inclusion Research

Over the past two decades, the role of student voice has gained increasing prominence in educational research. Students are not passive recipients of inclusion policies but agents who construct meaning around their school experiences (Devine, 2011; Lundy, 2007). Numerous qualitative studies (e.g. Neumann et al., 2020; Osler & Starkey, 2006) demonstrate that inclusion is most acutely experienced in daily relationships – with peers, teachers, and school structures – through interactions that either affirm or marginalize identity.

Marginalized students often report subtle forms of self-exclusion when they perceive school environments as lacking empathy or cultural responsiveness. These experiences are deeply influenced by social power imbalances, unequal access to resources, and prevailing cultural norms of what is considered "normal" or desirable (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Slee, 2011).

Objectives

This study investigates how students perceive social inclusion within an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse school environment. Grounded in a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, the research aims to uncover the subjective meanings students attach to their daily interactions and the broader school climate. Rather than seeking generalizable results, the study emphasizes rich, contextual insights into the lived realities of students in multi-ethnic and socially heterogeneous educational settings.

General Objective

To explore how social inclusion is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated by students in ethnically and socioeconomically diverse middle schools.

Specific Objectives

Drawing from contemporary theories of inclusive education and qualitative inquiry (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018), the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To explore students' subjective perceptions of inclusion and exclusion in relation to peer relationships, teacher interactions, and school participation;
2. To examine how ethnicity and socioeconomic status intersect in shaping students' school experiences and sense of belonging;
3. To identify key relational and institutional factors that foster or hinder a sense of inclusion, with attention to emotional safety, visibility, and recognition;
4. To capture students' narratives of subtle exclusion, including symbolic marginalization and inequitable access to extracurricular opportunities;
5. To investigate how daily interpersonal dynamics and school culture mediate students' experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

Research Questions

The inquiry is guided by the following qualitative research questions, designed to generate in-depth, interpretative insights:

1. How do students perceive social inclusion within their school environments?
2. In what ways do ethnic background and socioeconomic status shape their experiences of inclusion or exclusion?
3. Which elements shape how students experience a sense of belonging in socio-culturally diverse schools?
4. What forms of subtle or symbolic exclusion do students report, and how do they respond to them?
5. How do peer interactions and teacher attitudes influence students' perceptions of inclusion?

Exploratory Propositions

Although hypotheses are not traditionally used in qualitative designs, the study was informed by the following interpretative prepositions:

1. Students from minority or low-income backgrounds may report lower levels of perceived inclusion compared to their peers from majority or higher-income groups;
2. Supportive peer relationships and equitable teacher attitudes play a critical role in cultivating students' sense of inclusion;
3. Social inclusion is more frequently experienced through daily interpersonal interactions and informal practices than through formal policies or institutional discourse.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach to examine students' lived experiences of social inclusion in educational settings characterized by ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. The focus lies in understanding how students construct meaning from their daily interactions, emphasizing the emotional, relational, and symbolic dimensions of inclusion and exclusion.

Research Design

The research follows an exploratory and phenomenological design, which prioritizes subjective interpretation over statistical. The aim is to gain in-depth, context-sensitive insights that reflect students' perceptions in their own terms (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Framework

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical norms widely endorsed for research involving children and adolescent participants. The study received ethical clearance from the designated academic ethics committee overseeing research involving human participants. To uphold ethical integrity throughout the study, the following steps were implemented:

1. Informed consent was secured from parents or guardians;
2. Each student provided a voluntary agreement to participate, following a clear explanation of the study's aims;
3. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality; data were securely stored;
4. All procedures adhered to GDPR guidelines and respected national legislation regarding the protection of personal data.

Students and their guardians were clearly informed that they could discontinue participation at any point without facing any negative implications. Sensitive themes were approached with empathy, care, and cultural sensitivity.

Participants and Sampling

Twelve middle school students (aged 12 – 15) from two public urban schools in Romania were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representativeness in:

1. Ethnic background: Romanian, Roma (Rroma), and Hungarian students;
2. Socioeconomic status: Primarily low – to moderate-income households;
3. Gender balance: Equal representation of boys and girls.

The schools were selected for their ethnic and economic diversity, providing a rich context for understanding the dynamics of social inclusion in diverse learning environments.

The sample consisted of 12 students, selected to represent diversity in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. A demographic is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Socioeconomic status	School location
P1	12	Female	Romanian	Low-income	Urban School A
P2	13	Male	Rroma	Low-income	Urban School A
P3	14	Female	Hungarian	Moderate	Urban School B
P4	15	Male	Romanian	Moderate	Urban School B
P5	12	Female	Rroma	Low-income	Urban School A
P6	13	Male	Romanian	Low-income	Urban School A
P7	14	Female	Rroma	Moderate	Urban School B
P8	15	Male	Hungarian	Moderate	Urban School B
P9	12	Female	Romanian	Low-income	Urban School A
P10	13	Male	Rroma	Low-income	Urban School A
P11	14	Female	Romanian	Moderate	Urban School B
P12	15	Male	Hungarian	Moderate	Urban School B

Note. Socioeconomic status was approximated based on parental occupation and school welfare records. Ethnic identity was self-reported.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

The researchers recognize their own positionality and potential influence on data interpretation. As practitioners engaged in inclusive education, they approached the analysis with critical reflexivity and a commitment to ethically representing students' voices and realities.

Limitations of the Study

This study recognizes several constraints that may have influenced the findings:

1. Findings are context-specific and not statistically generalizable;
2. Responses may have been shaped by social desirability or hesitancy;

Data Collection

Information was gathered through guided, semi-structured interviews that facilitated an open and detailed discussion of students' lived experiences. The interview framework featured board, exploratory questions, including those focused on friendships and social interactions within the group:

1. Peer relationships and group dynamics;
2. Teacher behavior and classroom climate;
3. Participation in extracurricular activities;
4. Personal experiences of inclusion, exclusion, or invisibility.

Interviews were held in a comfortable and recognizable school environment, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Upon receiving informed consent, discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed word-for-word to preserve accuracy.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed the thematic approach by Braun and Clarke (2006), a method commonly employed in qualitative studies within the field of education. The process began with familiarization through multiple readings of the transcripts:

1. The research engaged deeply with the transcripts by reading them multiple times to gain an initial sense of the data;
2. Initial Coding: Identifying meaningful data units related to inclusion and exclusion;
3. Theme Development: Grouping codes into higher-order themes;
4. Refinement: Ensuring internal coherence and distinctiveness of themes;
5. Interpretation: Synthesizing findings with relevant literature and theoretical constructs.

This iterative and reflexive process allowed for a nuanced understanding of the emotional and social landscapes that shape students' school experiences.

3. The presence of adult researchers may have introduced reactivity;
4. The focus on urban schools limits insight into rural or vocational contexts.

Despite these constraints, the study offers rich, grounded insights into how students navigate inclusion and exclusion in real educational settings.

Results and Discussion

Through thematic analysis of interview data, four central themes emerged, capturing the complex and often ambivalent ways in which students perceive and experience social exclusion in ethnically and socioeconomically diverse school settings. These themes are interpreted in light of the theoretical frameworks and prior literature, with a particular focus on the emotional, relational, and symbolic dimensions of inclusion.

A Conditional Sense of Belonging

Most participants articulated a sense of belonging to their class or peer group. However, this sense was often perceived as conditional. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds or low-income families described feeling only partially accepted, frequently needing to conform to dominant group norms to gain social inclusion *"I feel okay in my class, I have good classmates, but sometimes it feels like not all of us are equally accepted"* (student, Roma background). This echoes Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and *cultural capital*, which suggests that marginalized students often internalize dominant expectations in order to gain acceptance, thereby experiencing what Slee (2011) termed *symbolic assimilation* rather than genuine inclusion.

Peer Relationships: between Solidarity and Subtle Exclusion

Interpersonal dynamics among peers were generally perceived as friendly, but students also described subtle, often implicit, forms of exclusion. These included being left out of social games, whispered teasing, or silent mockery linked to socioeconomic status. *"They don't say anything bad to me, but sometimes they don't invite me to play, or they laugh if my clothes are old"* (student from a low-income family). These experiences illustrate what Gillborn (2005) defined as *micro-exclusions* – covert social mechanisms that, while not overtly discriminatory, negatively affect students' self-esteem, visibility, and engagement. Peer inclusion appeared stratified along lines of economic or ethnic familiarity.

Teacher Attitudes: Support, Indifference, and Uneven Expectations

Students' views of teachers were ambivalent. While some teachers were described as fair and supportive, others were seen as indifferent or applying double standards. Subtle bias was implied through different expectations or attention based on perceived background:

"The Romanian teacher treats everyone equally. But in PE, some students can be late and nothing happens, others get scolded"

"Teachers don't say bad things, but sometimes you feel they look at you differently" (student, Roma background). These reflections align with the work of Banks (2008) and Vincent et al. (2015), who emphasize that teacher attitudes, whether explicit or implicit, significantly influence the relational climate of the classroom. The notion of *symbolic positioning* – how students are perceived and classified in subtle ways – remains a powerful influence on inclusion.

Unequal Participation and Symbolic Visibility

Many students highlighted that extracurricular activities, school performances, and field trips were contexts in which social inequality became highly visible. Limited financial resources prevented some students from participating fully, leading to feelings of exclusion:

"Everyone is invited to the show, but not all of us are put in the front"

"Those with money go on trips: We can't always afford it" (student, Roma background)

These findings reflect Silver's (1994) concept of indirect exclusion, where socioeconomic disadvantage manifests in limited symbolic visibility and unequal cultural participation. Even when students are physically present in school spaces, their inclusion in social and performative aspects of school life remains constrained.

Conclusion

Grounded in the study's findings and aligned with international research on inclusive education, this section proposes targeted recommendations and outlines future research directions. Emphasis is placed on actionable practices, policy relevance, and the importance of extending research into underexplored educational contexts.

Foster Reflective and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Educational institutions should invest in sustained teacher training programs focusing on intercultural competence, implicit bias awareness, and equity-driven classroom practices. Teachers should be encouraged to reflect critically on their own assumptions and relational positioning in diverse classroom environments. Inclusive pedagogy is not static – it demands responsiveness, empathy, and a commitment to educational justice (Banks, 2008; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Actively Involve Students in School Governance

Students must be recognized as active agents in shaping inclusive school cultures. Mechanisms such as student councils, participatory audits, or peer-led focus groups provide structured opportunities for young people to express concerns, evaluate the school climate, and suggest improvements. Promoting student voice reinforces democratic engagement and a sense of ownership over school life (Lundy, 2007; Osler & Starkey, 2006).

Identify and Address Symbolic and Micro-Exclusion

Schools must go beyond formal non-discrimination policies to address symbolic marginalization and social invisibility. These may manifest through seating hierarchies, exclusion from school events, or peer labeling. Anti-bullying initiatives should be expanded to include cultural and economic stereotyping. Educators must be trained to recognize and challenge subtle patterns of inequity (Gillborn, 2005; Slee, 2011).

Ensure Equitable Access to Extracurricular Participation

Extracurricular activities often reinforce socioeconomic divides. To counter this, schools should create dedicated solidarity funds or community sponsorships to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Equity in participation, including school trips, performances, and clubs, must be treated as a core inclusion issue, not a peripheral concern (Putnam, 2000; Silver, 1994).

Use relational and Emotional Indicators to Monitor Inclusion

Institutional inclusion audits should extend beyond enrollment or attendance data to include qualitative dimensions such as student well-being, perceived fairness, and emotional security. Tools such as school climate surveys, storytelling interviews, or social network mapping can complement qualitative tracking (Devine, 2011; Walton et al., 2011).

Policy Impact and Practical Implications

The study's findings can inform policy in several concrete ways:

1. **Teacher Training Modules:** Ministries of education and teacher training colleges can incorporate case-based learning on implicit bias and cultural responsiveness, using real-world narratives such as those revealed in this study;
2. **Inclusive Budgeting:** Local school authorities could be encouraged to allocate earmarked budgets for inclusion, ensuring extracurricular access is not financially exclusionary;
3. **Student Inclusion Indexes:** Develop localized inclusion indexes that combine demographic, emotional, and participatory indicators – reflecting both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of school life.

Future Research Directions: Urban – Rural Comparative Analysis

While this study focused on urban middle schools, future qualitative inquiry should prioritize rural settings, vocational education contexts, and multi-age classrooms – where inclusion may be shaped by other intersecting dynamics such as geographic isolation, community cohesion, and labor-market orientation. A comparative rural-urban lens would deepen our understanding of how context mediates students' experiences of inclusion and exclusion (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013).

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