

From Access to Belonging: Teacher Agency, Universal Design, and Classroom Culture in Inclusive Education

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Abstract

Inclusive education has often been discussed in terms of access, placement, policy, and institutional reform. While these concerns remain necessary, they do not fully explain how inclusion is experienced by learners inside classrooms. A student may be physically present in a mainstream classroom and still remain socially distant, instructionally unsupported, or emotionally insecure. This paper examines inclusive education as a classroom ecology of belonging, participation, and shared learning. It synthesizes contemporary scholarship on inclusive pedagogy, teacher professional learning, Universal Design for Learning, peer relationships, school leadership, and psychosocial development. The paper maintains that inclusion becomes meaningful only when access is converted into participation and participation into belonging. Teacher agency plays a crucial role in this process, since teachers interpret policy, design instruction, regulate classroom interaction, and respond to learner diversity in everyday practice. Universal Design for Learning provides a useful pedagogical framework because it encourages teachers to anticipate variability rather than treat difference as an afterthought. At the same time, inclusive classrooms depend on peer culture, assessment flexibility, family collaboration, and leadership support. The review shows that inclusive education cannot succeed through placement alone. It requires a sustained classroom culture in which learners are recognized, supported, challenged, and valued. The paper proposes a learner-belonging framework built around four interrelated dimensions: relational security, pedagogical accessibility, participatory assessment, and collaborative support. By foregrounding the lived experience of learners, the study repositions inclusive education as both a pedagogical practice and an ethical commitment to dignity in schooling.

Keywords: inclusive education, learner belonging, teacher agency, Universal Design for Learning, classroom culture, inclusive pedagogy

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become one of the most significant ideas in contemporary educational thought. It is tied to the language of rights, equality, access, diversity, and democratic schooling. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and Sustainable Development Goal 4 have given inclusion a strong legal and ethical foundation. These frameworks have moved educational debate away from charity-based or deficit-based views of disability and toward a rights-based understanding of learner participation.

Yet the meaning of inclusion remains unsettled in practice. In many schools, inclusion is understood mainly as the admission of learners with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. This view is limited. Physical placement may widen access, but it does not guarantee learning, friendship, confidence, or dignity. A learner may sit in the same room as peers and still feel invisible. A student may receive a textbook and still be unable to engage with the lesson. A child may be present during group work and yet remain outside the social life of the class. These everyday situations reveal the gap between access and belonging.

This paper shifts attention from inclusion as placement to inclusion as classroom belonging. Belonging refers to the learner's felt sense of being accepted, recognized, supported, and able to participate meaningfully in the learning community. It is not a soft addition to academic work. It is part of the condition that makes learning possible. Students learn with greater confidence when they feel that the classroom has space for their voice, pace,

body, language, and mode of expression. A classroom that merely admits difference may still preserve old hierarchies. A classroom that builds belonging begins to reorganize teaching around human variability.

The role of the teacher is crucial here. Inclusive education depends on policy, funding, infrastructure, and institutional vision, but these wider structures enter the learner's life through classroom practice. Teachers decide how lessons are introduced, how questions are asked, how groups are formed, how assessment is designed, and how difference is spoken about. Their expectations can either widen or restrict learner participation. For this reason, inclusive education requires teacher agency, not simply teacher compliance. Teachers need professional knowledge, institutional support, reflective confidence, and collaborative networks.

Universal Design for Learning, or UDL, has gained importance in this context because it encourages educators to plan for learner variability from the beginning. Rather than modifying lessons after some students fail to access them, UDL asks teachers to offer multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. It changes the starting point of pedagogy. Diversity is treated as ordinary rather than exceptional. This approach is especially useful for inclusive classrooms because it reduces the need to identify some learners as problems before support becomes available.

The present paper synthesizes contemporary scholarship on inclusive education with a specific focus on classroom culture, teacher transformation, UDL, peer belonging, assessment, and family collaboration. It addresses three main concerns. First, it clarifies the movement from access to belonging as a necessary development in inclusive education. Second, it examines the pedagogical and relational conditions that support inclusive classroom culture. Third, it proposes a learner-belonging framework through which inclusive education can be understood as lived participation rather than administrative placement.

The paper is organized into five sections. The introduction establishes the need to move beyond placement-based approaches. The review of literature discusses teacher agency, Universal Design for Learning, peer culture, assessment, and collaboration. The discussion develops the idea of inclusive classroom ecology. The implications section identifies practical directions for policy and school practice. The conclusion brings together the argument that inclusive education must be judged by the quality of learner participation and belonging.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 From Access to Belonging

The history of inclusive education shows a gradual movement away from segregation. Earlier educational systems often separated learners with disabilities from mainstream schooling. This separation was supported by medicalized assumptions that viewed disability mainly as an individual limitation. Special institutions and separate classrooms were presented as protective or remedial spaces, but they often restricted social interaction, academic aspiration, and later participation in community life.

The integration movement brought many learners with disabilities into mainstream school buildings. This was a major change, but integration frequently preserved older structures. Learners were placed within mainstream settings while the curriculum, timetable, assessment pattern, and classroom culture remained largely unchanged. The learner had to adjust to the school. Inclusion, by contrast, asks the school to adjust to the learner. This shift is essential. It moves responsibility from the individual child to the educational environment.

Contemporary inclusive education scholarship places increasing emphasis on participation. Access answers the question: Can the learner enter the school? Participation asks: Can the learner take part in learning, relationships, and school life? Belonging goes further: Does the learner feel recognized as a valued member of the community? These three terms are connected, but they are not identical. A school may provide access without participation. It may permit participation without deep belonging. A stronger model of inclusion must hold all three together.

Ainscow (2020) stresses that inclusion and equity require schools to examine barriers that limit the presence, participation, and achievement of learners. This view is useful because it treats exclusion as something produced by systems and practices, rather than by learners themselves. Kefallinou, Symeonidou, and Meijer (2020) also show that inclusive education has value for academic learning and social inclusion when properly implemented.

Their review helps move the discussion away from fear that inclusion weakens academic standards. The real issue is the quality of support and teaching.

Belonging adds a more human measure to this debate. It asks whether the learner experiences the classroom as a place where difference is ordinary. A child with a mobility impairment, a learner with dyslexia, a student with autism, a slow writer, a first-generation learner, or a child facing language barriers may all need different kinds of support. But beyond support, each learner needs recognition. Inclusion becomes meaningful when support does not isolate the learner and recognition does not reduce the learner to a label.

2.2 Teacher Agency and Professional Transformation

Teacher agency is one of the central conditions of inclusive education. Policies may declare inclusion, but teachers enact it. Their beliefs, expectations, instructional choices, and relationships with learners determine how inclusion is felt in the classroom. Teacher agency does not mean leaving teachers alone to manage diversity. It means enabling teachers to make informed, reflective, and ethically grounded decisions within supportive systems.

Somma and Bennett (2020) show that teachers who move from segregated special education settings to inclusive classrooms often experience a shift in their professional identity. Their study describes teachers who had to rethink prior beliefs, classroom expectations, and methods of instruction. This transition was not merely technical. It involved emotional and intellectual change. Teachers began to see inclusive practice as a continuing process of reflection rather than a fixed set of strategies.

This point is important because inclusive pedagogy cannot be reduced to a checklist. Differentiation, cooperative learning, peer support, visual scaffolding, assistive technology, flexible grouping, and individualized planning are useful practices. Yet their effectiveness depends on the teacher's understanding of the learner and the learning context. A strategy becomes inclusive only when it opens participation without lowering dignity or expectation.

Teacher attitudes matter strongly. A teacher who views diversity as a burden may offer support reluctantly or mechanically. A teacher who sees diversity as part of normal classroom life is more likely to design instruction with flexibility. The difference can be subtle. It may appear in the tone of feedback, the patience given to a student's answer, the grouping of learners, or the decision to provide choices in task completion. Such classroom decisions accumulate and shape the learner's sense of self.

Professional learning for inclusion must therefore be continuous. One-day workshops cannot prepare teachers for the complexity of heterogeneous classrooms. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2022) presents inclusive teacher professional learning as a whole-school and community concern. This view is valuable because it avoids placing the entire burden on individual teachers. Teachers need mentoring, collaborative planning, specialist guidance, administrative backing, and time to reflect on practice.

Inclusive professional development should also address fear. Many teachers resist inclusion because they fear failure, workload, loss of control, or inadequate expertise. Such fears cannot be dismissed. They need to be addressed through practical support. Teachers require smaller planning communities, access to resource persons, examples of adaptable lesson design, and opportunities to observe inclusive classrooms. Confidence grows when teachers experience support and see learners respond positively.

2.3 Universal Design for Learning and Pedagogical Accessibility

Universal Design for Learning provides an important framework for inclusive pedagogy. Its main strength lies in its starting assumption: learners vary. Since variability is normal, the learning environment should be designed with options from the beginning. UDL shifts attention from fixing the learner to designing the environment. This approach is closely aligned with the social model of disability, which identifies barriers in systems, spaces, materials, and attitudes.

CAST (2024) identifies three broad areas in the UDL framework: engagement, representation, and action and expression. Engagement concerns the learner's motivation, interest, persistence, and self-regulation. Representation concerns the ways information is presented and understood. Action and expression concern the ways learners respond, communicate, and demonstrate understanding. These areas are especially relevant in

inclusive classrooms because learners may differ in attention, language, sensory access, motor skills, memory, confidence, and expressive ability.

A UDL-based classroom does not require the teacher to prepare a separate lesson for every learner. Instead, it encourages flexible pathways. For example, a lesson may include oral explanation, visual mapping, key vocabulary, peer discussion, short reading, and a practical task. Students may be allowed to respond through writing, speaking, drawing, presentation, or structured worksheets depending on the learning goal. The standard is not abandoned. Rather, access to the standard is widened.

UDL also reduces stigma. When supports are built into the general design of the lesson, individual students do not have to be singled out repeatedly. Captions, graphic organizers, audio support, flexible seating, chunked instructions, and multiple response options can benefit many learners at once. This is one reason UDL is valuable beyond disability-specific provision. It supports students who are anxious, multilingual, absent due to illness, unfamiliar with academic language, or simply learning at a different pace.

However, UDL should not be treated as a fashionable term detached from classroom realities. Its success depends on teacher knowledge, time, resource availability, and leadership support. A teacher with seventy students in a classroom may find individualized flexibility difficult without institutional backing. UDL requires planning cultures, shared materials, and assessment reform. It should be understood as a pedagogical orientation rather than a decorative label.

Jardinez and Natividad (2024) emphasize that inclusive classrooms require collaborative pedagogies and flexible approaches. Their work supports the view that UDL must be connected with broader school practice. When classroom materials, assessment systems, and leadership expectations remain rigid, UDL becomes difficult to sustain. It works best when schools collectively accept that learner variability is a design responsibility.

2.4 Peer Culture and the Social Life of Inclusion

Inclusive education is often discussed through the relationship between teacher and learner, but peer culture is equally important. Students learn in the presence of other students. They compare themselves, cooperate, compete, imitate, and form social judgments. For learners with disabilities or other forms of marginalization, peer acceptance can influence confidence, attendance, participation, and self-concept.

A classroom may have inclusive teaching but an exclusionary peer culture. Students may mock a child's speech, avoid group work with a slow learner, speak over a student with communication difficulty, or treat support given to one learner as unfair advantage. Such moments can deeply affect belonging. The teacher's role includes regulating this social atmosphere. Inclusion requires explicit work on respect, cooperation, empathy, and shared responsibility.

Peer-supported learning can be powerful when carefully organized. Cooperative groups allow learners to contribute different strengths. Peer tutoring can support academic learning and social interaction. Circle discussions, collaborative projects, and mixed-ability tasks can reduce isolation. Yet peer support must be handled with care. A learner with a disability should not become permanently dependent on a "helper" peer. Nor should one student be turned into a charity object. The aim is reciprocal participation.

Belonging grows when students see each other as contributors. For this reason, classroom tasks should allow varied forms of competence. A learner who struggles with writing may be strong in oral explanation. A quiet student may be observant in group work. A student with limited reading fluency may have strong practical understanding. Inclusive pedagogy creates occasions where such strengths become visible. This visibility changes peer perception.

Julien (2025) links inclusive education with self-concept, belonging, autonomy, and competence. This connection is significant. Students internalize classroom messages. If a learner repeatedly experiences failure, pity, removal, or silence, the learner may begin to see school as a place of humiliation. If the learner experiences contribution, feedback, friendship, and progress, school becomes a place where identity can grow. Inclusive education is therefore psychological as well as instructional.

Bullying prevention is also part of inclusive culture. Kenny, McCoy, and O'Higgins Norman (2023) propose a whole education approach that treats bullying as a problem of the social environment rather than an isolated incident between individuals. This ecological view is useful for inclusive education. It reminds schools that belonging depends on the wider culture of care, supervision, family engagement, and leadership. A child cannot feel included in a classroom where ridicule is normalized.

2.5 Assessment, Achievement, and Flexible Evidence of Learning

Assessment is one of the most difficult areas in inclusive education. Many classrooms attempt to diversify teaching while preserving narrow forms of assessment. This creates a contradiction. Learners may be taught through flexible methods, but they are finally judged through a single mode of performance. When assessment remains rigid, inclusion loses strength.

Inclusive assessment asks what the learner has understood and how that understanding can be fairly demonstrated. It does not mean abandoning academic expectations. It means separating the learning goal from unnecessary barriers. For example, if the goal is to test comprehension of a story, a learner may respond orally, through guided writing, or through visual sequencing. If the goal is spelling accuracy, then written form becomes necessary. Inclusive assessment requires clarity about what is being assessed.

Academic standards are often used as an argument against inclusion. The assumption is that inclusive classrooms will reduce rigor. Research does not support such a simple fear. Kefallinou et al. (2020) review evidence indicating that inclusive education can support academic and social outcomes when implementation is strong. The determining factor is not the presence of diverse learners but the quality of teaching, resources, collaboration, and expectations.

Flexible assessment also supports teacher insight. When learners are allowed multiple ways to express understanding, teachers gain a fuller picture of learning. A student who performs poorly in a written test may reveal strong conceptual understanding during oral explanation. Another learner may need assistive technology to show competence. These differences should guide future teaching. Assessment should not merely classify learners; it should inform instruction.

Inclusive classrooms also need formative assessment. Short checks, feedback cycles, peer review, learning journals, observation, and self-assessment help teachers identify barriers early. Such practices reduce the pressure of high-stakes testing as the only measure of achievement. They also help learners understand their own progress. For students who have experienced repeated failure, small visible gains can build confidence.

However, assessment flexibility requires policy support. Teachers may hesitate to adapt assessment if school systems reward uniform testing alone. Examination boards, school leaders, and curriculum designers need to provide legitimate pathways for reasonable accommodation and varied evidence of learning. Otherwise, inclusive assessment remains dependent on individual goodwill.

2.6 Family Collaboration and Community Support

Families play a vital role in inclusive education. Parents and caregivers often understand the learner's needs, communication patterns, anxieties, strengths, and history more intimately than the school does. Yet schools sometimes treat families only as recipients of information. A stronger inclusive model treats families as partners.

Family collaboration is especially important for learners with disabilities, chronic health needs, language barriers, or emotional difficulties. Teachers can learn from families about triggers, routines, assistive devices, preferred communication, and successful strategies used at home. Families, in turn, need to understand classroom expectations and support plans. When communication is respectful, the learner receives more consistent support.

Collaboration should avoid blame. Teachers may feel that families are demanding too much. Families may feel that schools are indifferent or defensive. Inclusive education requires trust between both sides. This trust is built through regular communication, clear documentation, shared goals, and honest discussion of constraints. Schools should invite parental voice before problems become crises.

Community support also matters. Health professionals, therapists, counselors, social workers, special educators, and local organizations may all contribute to inclusion. A classroom teacher cannot provide every form of support alone. Interdisciplinary collaboration helps schools respond to complex learner needs without isolating the learner from the mainstream classroom.

The whole education approach discussed by Kenny et al. (2023) is relevant here because it views inclusion as a network of relationships rather than a classroom technique alone. The learner's life crosses home, school, peer group, community, and policy structures. Inclusive education becomes stronger when these spaces communicate with one another.

3. Discussion: Inclusive Education as Classroom Ecology

The reviewed literature suggests that inclusive education should be understood as a classroom ecology. An ecology is made of relationships, spaces, habits, expectations, resources, and forms of interaction. In a classroom, inclusion is produced through the relationship between teacher design, learner agency, peer culture, assessment, and institutional support. No single element can carry the whole burden.

The access model of inclusion is insufficient because it measures only entry. The systemic reform model is necessary, but it can remain distant from the learner's everyday experience. A classroom ecology approach connects the two. It recognizes that policy must finally become lesson design, seating arrangements, peer interaction, feedback, assessment, and emotional safety. Inclusion is experienced in small, repeated moments.

Four dimensions are especially important in this ecology.

The first is relational security. Learners need to feel safe enough to attempt, ask, fail, and try again. This security depends on teacher warmth, predictable routines, respectful language, and protection from ridicule. It also depends on peer culture. A learner who fears humiliation will withdraw even when materials are accessible.

The second is pedagogical accessibility. Lessons should provide multiple routes into learning. UDL is central here because it gives teachers a way to anticipate learner variability. Accessibility includes language clarity, visual support, assistive technology, pacing, examples, task options, and meaningful scaffolding. It also includes high expectations. Accessible teaching should open challenge, not remove it.

The third is participatory assessment. Inclusive education requires assessment practices that allow learners to show understanding fairly. This involves formative feedback, reasonable accommodation, flexible response modes, and clarity about learning goals. Assessment should support growth rather than merely document deficiency.

The fourth is collaborative support. Teachers require professional learning, specialist input, leadership backing, and family partnership. Inclusion becomes fragile when teachers are left alone. Collaboration turns inclusion from an individual struggle into a shared professional responsibility.

This framework helps distinguish genuine inclusion from superficial inclusion. A school may have ramps, admission policies, and inclusive slogans. These are valuable, but they do not complete inclusion. The deeper test is whether learners participate with dignity and develop confidence. Classroom ecology makes this test visible.

The framework also avoids treating inclusion as disability provision alone. Disability remains a major concern, but inclusive classrooms also respond to poverty, language difference, caste and community marginalization, gender norms, trauma, migration, and varied learning histories. The principle is the same: schools must identify and reduce barriers that restrict participation.

4. Implications for Policy and Practice

The first implication is that inclusive education policy should include belonging as a measurable concern. Attendance and enrolment data are necessary, but they do not reveal the quality of participation. Schools need ways to examine student voice, peer relationships, classroom interaction, and psychosocial safety. Learner surveys, teacher reflection logs, parent conversations, and classroom observation can provide useful evidence.

Second, teacher education must move beyond awareness. Pre-service and in-service programs should include practical work on UDL, differentiated lesson planning, inclusive assessment, peer-supported learning, classroom communication, and collaboration with families. Teachers should also study disability through rights-based and social-model perspectives so that they do not reduce learners to diagnostic labels.

Third, school leaders need to create conditions for inclusion. Leadership should provide time for collaborative planning, reduce unnecessary paperwork, support teacher experimentation, and allocate resources fairly. UNESCO's work on leadership in education shows that leadership matters at multiple levels. In inclusive schools, leadership is visible in timetables, budgets, classroom visits, mentoring systems, and the seriousness with which student dignity is protected.

Fourth, curriculum and assessment bodies must allow flexibility. Teachers cannot sustain inclusive practice when external examinations reward only one form of performance. Policies should provide clear guidelines for reasonable accommodation, alternative formats, assistive technology use, and formative assessment. Flexibility should be standardized enough to ensure fairness and open enough to respond to context.

Fifth, schools should build peer culture intentionally. Inclusion should be discussed with students in age-appropriate ways. Cooperative learning, anti-bullying work, classroom agreements, disability awareness, and mixed-strength group tasks can reduce stigma. Students need to learn that fairness does not always mean identical treatment. Fairness often means giving each learner the support needed to participate.

Finally, family collaboration should become routine. Schools should not contact families only when difficulties arise. Regular dialogue helps create continuity between home and school. Individual education planning, progress meetings, and informal communication can help families feel respected and involved.

5. Conclusion

Inclusive education has moved far beyond the question of where learners are placed. The deeper question concerns how learners participate and whether they experience school as a place of dignity. Access is essential, but access alone cannot define inclusion. A learner who enters the classroom without meaningful participation remains only partially included. A learner who participates without recognition may still feel insecure. True inclusion requires belonging.

This paper has examined inclusive education through the interconnected concerns of teacher agency, Universal Design for Learning, peer culture, assessment, family collaboration, and school leadership. The review shows that inclusive education is lived through classroom ecology. It is formed in lesson design, teacher language, group work, feedback, classroom routines, and the social treatment of difference. The teacher is central to this process, but the teacher cannot carry it alone. Sustainable inclusion requires institutional support, professional learning, flexible assessment, and collaborative networks.

The proposed learner-belonging framework identifies four key dimensions: relational security, pedagogical accessibility, participatory assessment, and collaborative support. These dimensions help move inclusive education from policy language to classroom life. They also offer a practical way to evaluate whether inclusion is becoming meaningful for learners.

Inclusive education should finally be understood as an ethical and pedagogical commitment. It asks schools to treat learner diversity as ordinary, valuable, and expected. It asks teachers to design classrooms where students can enter learning through different routes and still pursue meaningful standards. It asks peers to recognize one another as members of a shared learning community. Most importantly, it asks education systems to judge success not only by enrolment or examination results, but by the extent to which every learner is able to belong, participate, and grow.

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