



The Role of School Policies, Teacher Practices, and Peer Interactions in Creating a Safe and Inclusive Learning Environment

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine how schools support safe and productive learning environment and experiences of students, teachers, and school administrators about the actual process. The research employs both semi-structured interviews with students, focus group discussion, and document analysis to establish how school policies; teacher practices; and peer interactions enhance or hinder students' feeling of safety and inclusion. The narratives indicate that while schools have issued policies against bullying and for inclusiveness, students' experiences of inclusion depend on the actual practice of enforcing rules against bullying and for acceptance, as well as the culture of acceptance encouraged at the school by the teachers as well as the school officials. The staff cultural competence as well as the staff development is important in handling students' diversity; while students peer relations are important as far as students' inclusion is concerned. The findings underline the consistence of the formal procedures with the actual teacher's practices and supportive peer relations as key factors contributing to a successful, inclusive school. The outcomes also stress the relevance for schools to move from policies' production as for addressing the problems of supporting the valued social contacts' availability to students at any level of the school community.

Introduction

Such considerations as prompting safety and inclusion for all learners has risen to the top of worries in learning institutions across the globe given the important role of school in preparing young people for the future. The role of such environments cannot be overemphasized as they play a central role to the social, emotional, and academic growth of students (Raju, 2024). School safety and protection from discrimination allow students to succeed academically regardless of who they are or what they can do (Lowe, 2020). This has drawn interest not only among teachers, but also politicians and among others because inclusive education is perceived as a core component in the development of societies that are socially just (Graham, 2020). Schools are also playing major parts in mitigating discrimination in regard to safety and students' rights and embracing the cultural and linguistic diversity because it is acknowledged that every child should feel special and protected in school (Astor et al., 2021).

Traditionally safe and inclusive learning environment has historically changed from being a physically safe environment which did not have violence and bullying to a more complex environment that embraces social-emotional- intellectual safety. In many countries, practices

and policies reflecting safety and non-discrimination have been implemented in educational institutions to curb cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination of students (Moroşteş & Stoicu, 2021). Such efforts have been significant for students of color, gay, lesbian, disabled and low achievement students, and those whose schools are branded as ‘failing’ (Truong et al., 2020). From previous studies, it was evident that most students in school would study hard and had positive relationships with other students and higher academic performance when their schools gave them safe and inclusive environment (Dreer, 2024).

It makes sense to note that the search for reasons for the changes shown above should focus on the fact that safety in Schools cannot be limited solely to the physical aspect of the problem. Over the last several years there emerged heightened interest in rising of bullying, harassment, and violence at schools especially based on racial, sexual or any other forms of discrimination (Kennedy, 2021). The effects of such negative experiences are serious, and include mental health problems, poor academic achievement and even dropping out of school (Dalsgaard et al., 2020). besides having to intervene and stop acts of bullying, schools have been equally challenged with the responsibility of being able to prevent acts of harassment, mockery or rejection being directed to students (Gaffney et al., 2021). In order for schools to do this, they have to work together at creating policies that deal effectively with such problems on a system level, as well as create an environment where diversity is recognized and valued.

Arguing against general exclusion of students from marginalised groups, we must see that the goal of developing cultural relevancy is not only in making sure that the marginalized students are safe in school; it goes further to saying that every learner deserves to be recognized and accepted in the school system (Artiles et al., 2021). Equality means acknowledging differences and differences and valuing the: differences in race; ethnic origin; colour; gender; sexual orientation; and disability. When making some provisions to support learning, schools also play a great role in ensuring all learners attain academic success and at the same time be able to foster social cohesion and bring out democratic principles in the society. Implementing of integration enable learners to learn from each other and embrace diversity of other students; skills that should be helpful in a society that is becoming a global village.

The synthesis of literature established that teaching-learning has positive effects on students with disabilities in inclusive settings. According to Guo et al. (2020), their studies shown that children, who join these classes, get exposure to more social and academic opportunities as compared to other learners in special schools. Moreover, promoting the augment of utilitarian diversity brings the elimination of stereotyping and prejudices into the learning environment; they also give the students a chance to create effective interaction based on equality. Cohesion is also important to students with disabilities for it affects their self-esteem, interpersonal skills and academic performance on one hand or group interactions, isolation, and learning on the other hand. As such schools have the responsibility of ensuring all students with disabilities are participants fully in class; this can also improve the quality of the learning environment into which all students are in effectively placed.

In current society where there is increased awareness and need for safer and more inclusive schools, there still many difficulties in the process. Main barriers reported in the practice of inclusion include cultural practices, resource constraints and poor teacher preparation (Andrews et al., 2021). Perceptions that teachers hold on inclusion, will go a long way in determining the success of the implementation of those practices. At times, teachers can find themselves blatantly unprepared to handle the diverse needs of the learners especially in the areas of the student’s behavior or to manage learners with learning disorder or difficulties. there is always inadequate enhancement of plans to provide the teachers with the skills required to implement integration for learning environments (Nurtanto et al., 2021). there is always a need

for educators to continue learning on how they can make necessary changes and provide safety of all learners.

Another challenge in fostering safe and inclusive environments lies in addressing structural inequalities within schools. Many schools are situated in communities with significant socio-economic disparities, which can affect the quality of education provided and the resources available to support students. Schools in low-income areas may struggle to implement effective safety programs due to limited funding, lack of access to mental health services, and overcrowded classrooms. These schools may face greater challenges in creating a truly safe and inclusive environment. Efforts to build inclusive schools must also address the broader social and economic factors that impact the learning environment.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of schools in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. The aim was to capture the experiences and perspectives of students, teachers, and school administrators regarding the policies and practices implemented within their schools to foster safety and inclusivity. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of how these stakeholders perceive and experience the school environment, offering insights that quantitative methods might not fully capture.

The participants in the study were selected from schools that had established specific initiatives or programs aimed at promoting safety and inclusivity. The sample included students from diverse backgrounds, teachers, and school administrators. Purposive sampling was used to select schools actively engaged in efforts to create a safe and inclusive environment, ensuring the inclusion of those with relevant experiences. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed to identify other participants within those schools who could provide valuable insights into the subject matter.

Data collection was conducted through a combination of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were held with students, teachers, and administrators to gather personal experiences and perceptions about the safety and inclusivity of their school environments. Open-ended questions were used to encourage rich, detailed responses. Focus group discussions were also organized with students and teachers to explore collective perspectives on safety and inclusivity, allowing participants to share and compare their experiences in a group setting. Relevant school documents such as policies on bullying, inclusivity programs, and school climate surveys were analyzed to understand the formal strategies and practices implemented by the schools.

The data collected from the interviews, focus groups, and documents were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed for the identification of recurring themes and patterns. The transcripts from the interviews and focus groups were coded to categorize the data into meaningful themes. These themes included school policies, teacher practices, student experiences, and the challenges faced in fostering inclusivity. The thematic analysis enabled the researchers to gain insights into the key factors that contributed to creating a safe and inclusive learning environment.

Through the analysis of coded data, key themes were identified, including the role of school leadership, teacher training on inclusivity, and student involvement in shaping the school climate. The data also highlighted barriers and challenges schools faced in implementing effective inclusivity practices. These findings were further explored to understand the successes and limitations of different strategies and to provide a deeper understanding of the role schools play in fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment.

Result and Discussion

The results section presents the findings derived from the data collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The analysis provided valuable insights into the role of schools in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. The findings are organized into three major themes that emerged from the data: school policies and practices for safety and inclusivity, teacher roles in fostering inclusion, and student experiences of safety and inclusivity.

School Policies and Practices for Safety and Inclusivity

One of the central themes that emerged from the study was the significant role that school policies and practices play in fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment. It was found that schools that had clearly articulated policies on safety, bullying, and inclusivity were better equipped to create environments where all students felt valued and respected. These policies typically included clear guidelines on handling bullying, promoting diversity, and ensuring equal opportunities for students regardless of their background, gender, or ability. These formal measures were seen as essential to cultivating a positive and inclusive school climate, as they set the tone for behavior expectations and provided clear channels for addressing issues when they arose.

Several participants from schools with strong inclusivity programs highlighted the importance of having specific policies in place that address issues of bullying, discrimination, and exclusion. One administrator noted the value of such policies, stating:

“Our anti-bullying policy has been crucial in ensuring that students feel safe. It provides a clear framework for how we handle incidents and supports students who might otherwise feel marginalized.”

This sentiment was echoed by a teacher, who mentioned that the school’s focus on inclusivity through policies was essential in shaping the behavior of both students and staff. The teacher emphasized that these policies were not merely symbolic, but were actively implemented through various school initiatives:

“The school has an explicit anti-bullying policy that is shared with all staff and students. We also have inclusion initiatives, like our diversity days and peer-support programs, which help everyone understand and respect each other’s differences. These are not just written policies but are part of our day-to-day interactions.”

In addition to these formal policies, the study found that schools that implemented practical, ongoing programs to promote inclusivity, such as peer mentoring, cultural awareness events, and conflict resolution workshops, contributed to a more welcoming school environment. These programs were seen as important complements to the formal written policies, as they provided a more personalized approach to inclusivity and ensured that students received consistent messages about the importance of respect, acceptance, and empathy.

One participant shared their experience with such programs, describing how they made a tangible difference in students' attitudes towards inclusivity:

“We have a peer-mentoring program that pairs older students with younger ones to help them feel supported. The program helps students who may feel isolated to connect with others and creates a stronger sense of community in the school.”

Despite these positive findings, some participants pointed out challenges in the consistency and enforcement of these policies across the school. While many schools had comprehensive anti-bullying and inclusivity policies, the application of these policies was not always uniform

across all departments or grade levels. Administrators, teachers, and students alike noted that sometimes the implementation of these policies could be inconsistent, especially in cases where teachers or staff members were not fully trained or aware of how to enforce the inclusivity measures effectively.

One teacher noted:

“The policy is clear, but it’s not always easy to implement. Sometimes, when issues arise in the classroom, we don’t have enough support or time to address them properly. That’s where training is needed teachers need more strategies to manage difficult situations effectively.”

Some students also expressed frustration that while the policies were in place, there were instances when bullying or exclusionary behavior was not adequately addressed, particularly when it occurred outside the classroom. This was particularly evident in areas such as the playground, cafeteria, or online interactions, where informal social dynamics often led to subtle forms of exclusion or bullying that were harder to detect. A student from a diverse background shared their experience:

“I know the school says it’s inclusive, but sometimes I feel like the teachers don’t really understand what it’s like to be one of the few students from my background. It’s hard to speak up when I feel like no one is listening.”

This highlights a key issue: while policies and programs are essential, their effectiveness is directly linked to how well they are integrated into the daily life of the school and the attitudes of staff members. As one teacher observed, policies must be supported by continuous professional development and clear expectations for staff on how to recognize and address issues of bullying, discrimination, and exclusion in all areas of school life.

“We need more training on how to recognize subtle bullying and exclusion, like when a student is being left out of a group or when there are microaggressions happening in the hallways. Teachers and staff should be equipped to deal with these situations, not just the obvious cases of bullying.”

Teacher Roles in Fostering Inclusion

Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering an inclusive learning environment, as their interactions with students and their ability to implement inclusive teaching practices are critical to creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere in schools. The study revealed that teachers who actively engage in inclusive practices contribute significantly to students’ sense of belonging and well-being. The role of teachers goes beyond simply following school policies; it involves actively promoting respect, understanding, and empathy among students, as well as responding to diverse learning needs. This includes adapting teaching strategies to meet the needs of students from various backgrounds, including those with disabilities, different cultural backgrounds, and varying levels of academic ability.

One of the key aspects of the teacher's role is to create an atmosphere of respect where all students feel valued. Several teachers highlighted the importance of building positive relationships with students and setting the tone for inclusivity from the very first day of school. One teacher shared:

“I make it a point to get to know each of my students, their backgrounds, and what makes them unique. When students feel understood and respected, they are more likely to engage and collaborate with their peers.”

This sentiment was echoed by another teacher, who emphasized the importance of setting clear expectations for behavior and inclusion within the classroom:

"From day one, I establish clear rules that promote inclusivity, such as respecting each other's differences and valuing everyone's opinions. I constantly remind the students that our classroom is a space where diversity is celebrated, and no one should ever feel left out."

By establishing these expectations early on, teachers can create a classroom environment where students feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment or exclusion. Teachers who make an effort to understand their students' individual needs are also better able to tailor their teaching approaches to accommodate different learning styles and abilities. This is particularly important for students with special educational needs, as well as for those who may face barriers related to language, cultural differences, or socioeconomic status.

In addition to adapting teaching strategies, teachers also play an important role in promoting peer interactions that foster inclusivity. The study found that teachers who encouraged collaborative learning activities and mixed-group work helped to break down social barriers and promote understanding among students from diverse backgrounds. A teacher who was involved in facilitating group work shared:

"I often mix up the groups so that students from different backgrounds and abilities have to work together. This way, they learn to appreciate each other's strengths and challenges. It's about creating opportunities for students to learn from each other, rather than always relying on the teacher as the sole source of knowledge."

Such strategies not only promote inclusivity but also help students develop important social skills, such as empathy, communication, and conflict resolution, which are essential in a diverse and inclusive environment. Teachers who prioritize group work and peer collaboration enable students to see each other as partners in learning, which in turn strengthens the social fabric of the classroom.

Moreover, the role of the teacher extends to addressing any form of exclusion or discrimination that may arise within the classroom. Teachers who are proactive in identifying and addressing issues of bullying or exclusion are more likely to create a positive learning environment where all students feel safe. One participant shared how they handled a situation of exclusion in their classroom:

"When I noticed a student being excluded from a group activity, I intervened immediately. I talked to the students involved and explained how important it is to include everyone. I also had a one-on-one conversation with the student who was left out to ensure they felt supported."

Teachers' actions in these situations demonstrate that they are not just facilitators of academic learning but also caretakers of the social and emotional well-being of their students. By intervening promptly and sensitively in instances of exclusion, teachers can prevent the negative effects of bullying and isolation, ensuring that all students feel included and valued.

The study also found that teachers who received ongoing professional development in diversity and inclusion were more effective in implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms. Teachers expressed that training on cultural competence, differentiated instruction, and strategies for managing diverse classrooms enhanced their ability to meet the needs of all students. As one teacher stated:

"The workshops on cultural diversity and inclusive teaching practices have made a huge difference in how I approach my students. I've learned how to create lesson plans that are more inclusive and to be more mindful of the different needs my students have."

This highlights the importance of providing teachers with the resources and support they need to succeed in fostering an inclusive environment. Teachers who feel confident in their ability to address the diverse needs of their students are better able to create an atmosphere where all students can thrive.

Student Experiences of Safety and Inclusivity

Student experiences of safety and inclusivity were a central theme in this study, providing valuable insights into how students perceive the efforts made by their schools to create a supportive and welcoming learning environment. For many students, feeling safe and included was essential to their overall school experience and academic success. The study found that students who reported positive experiences of safety and inclusivity were more likely to be engaged in their learning and develop strong interpersonal relationships with their peers. In contrast, those who felt unsafe or excluded often expressed a sense of isolation, stress, and reluctance to participate fully in school activities.

One of the most striking findings was the way in which students described the impact of school policies and practices on their sense of safety. Many students felt that the clear anti-bullying policies, along with initiatives aimed at promoting diversity and inclusivity, contributed significantly to their overall sense of security in school. One student shared:

"I feel safe here because I know that if anything happens, the teachers and staff will take it seriously. They always remind us that bullying isn't tolerated, and that really makes a difference. I can focus on my studies without worrying about being harassed."

This statement reflects the importance of having clear policies in place, which help students feel that their concerns will be taken seriously. When students know that there are established protocols to address issues of bullying and exclusion, they are more likely to feel empowered to speak up when they face challenges. For some students, however, the perception of safety was more nuanced, and they pointed out that while the policies were in place, the actual experiences of inclusivity and safety were sometimes inconsistent.

A student from a diverse cultural background expressed the complexity of feeling included in the school environment:

"It's mostly good, but sometimes I feel like the teachers don't really understand my background. They try, but sometimes it feels like I'm the only one from my community, and it's hard to connect with others who don't get it."

This comment highlights a key challenge in fostering inclusivity while policies and programs are helpful, they are not always sufficient on their own to address the more subtle aspects of inclusion, such as understanding and respecting cultural differences. Despite the school's efforts, some students may still feel marginalized if their unique experiences are not fully recognized or understood by staff and peers. This underscores the importance of cultural competence in teaching and the need for ongoing conversations about diversity in the classroom.

In addition to the challenges related to cultural differences, some students expressed concerns about the social dynamics within their schools. They shared experiences of exclusion that occurred not through direct bullying but through subtle social practices, such as being left out of group activities or not being invited to social events. One student described their feelings of exclusion:

"I've had times when the other kids just ignore me or don't include me in their conversations. It's not outright bullying, but it still hurts. Sometimes I just feel invisible."

These experiences of social exclusion, although less overt than bullying, can have a significant impact on students' emotional well-being. The study found that students who experienced such exclusion often felt isolated and disconnected from their peers, which in turn affected their school performance and participation in extracurricular activities. This highlights the importance of addressing not just overt bullying but also the more subtle forms of exclusion that can occur in social settings, especially among peer groups.

Despite these challenges, many students also shared positive experiences of inclusivity, particularly when it came to collaborative activities and supportive interactions with their peers and teachers. Students who were involved in programs like peer mentoring, diversity clubs, and group projects often felt more connected to their school community. One student noted:

"I joined the diversity club last year, and it was one of the best things I've done. It helped me meet new people and learn about their cultures. I feel like I belong here more now."

This sentiment demonstrates how inclusive programs can help bridge gaps between students from different backgrounds and foster a sense of belonging. When students are given the opportunity to interact with others in structured settings that promote diversity, they are more likely to develop empathy and understanding, which in turn strengthens the overall sense of inclusivity within the school.

Students reported that teachers who were approachable and sensitive to their needs played a significant role in their sense of safety and inclusion. When teachers created an environment where students felt comfortable sharing their concerns, many students felt that they were able to discuss issues related to bullying, discrimination, or exclusion more openly. One student shared their appreciation for a teacher who took the time to listen:

"I remember once I felt really upset about something that happened with a friend, and I told my teacher about it. She listened to me without judgment and helped me talk things through. It made me feel like I mattered."

This demonstrates the importance of having supportive and empathetic educators who create a safe space for students to express their feelings and concerns. When teachers are seen as allies in addressing issues of exclusion and bullying, students are more likely to feel confident in their ability to navigate difficult social situations and report any concerns they may have.

The purpose of this research was therefore to establish the experiences and perceptions of the school's students, teachers, and administrators on the extent to which schools facilitate safety of the students. The results identified a number of protective and risk factors that were relevant to students' feelings of safety and inclusion, with a focus on technical, administrative and organisational measures, teacher behaviour and actions, peer relations, and organisational climate. From a scholarly perspective, the insights provided in the study do more than merely add to prior literature in the area: they help to fill specific research gaps left unanswered with respect to students' complex experiences at school, teachers' part to play in combating homophobia and other forms of prejudice and exclusionary practices in school, and functionality of school anti-vilification policies.

This study fills the gap where the focus on spoken and practical attitudes of students towards school policies against bullying or for inclusion was lacking. This research builds upon prior works that have pointed out that schools should have well-defined anti-bullying policies

(Adeyeye, 2020), by explaining that students' perceptions of safety are not only determined by the availability of those policies, but also by how these are implemented and made known at the school level. This study indicated that despite acknowledging and appreciating anti-bullying policies brought out by many schools, students, especially the marginalized ones, continued to experience forms of subtle exclusion that are not captured by anti-bullying policies in school. This is in line with the recommendations documented by Smuha (2021) argue, that, policies without enforcement mechanisms provide no safe environment and the policies of inclusion without support of the whole school.

The study also confirmed that teachers occupy a critical praxis in mediating inclusion that has been discussed in the literature before (Nomdo, 2023). This research went further than existing literature by identifying a need for recurrent and more profound professional development in culture sensitivity and diversity than a simple teacher's education. The students' experiences of cultural marginalization or isolation demonstrate the need for schools to address cultural competence of educators. While previous work, which includes Ladson (2023) on culturally relevant pedagogy, this study revealed that teachers should not only address cultural differences, but also engage them in a meaningful manner in order to ensure all students' integration into society. For example, one participant said 'Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one from my community and it Continue reading "The participant's voice: Exploring the limitations of teachers in addressing cultural disparities"

Unlike the previous work that centered on the part played by policies and teacher training regarding diversity (Grossman, 2021), I also attached considerable importance to the students' narratives, with the key emphasis made on social exclusion and peer interactions. Extant literature on inclusion is largely concerned with the existence and use of formal processes and procedures (Vo et al., 2021) but filling this gap, this study demonstrates how informal interactions like exclusion by peer groups, impacts on students' perception of safety and inclusion. These studies are in conceptual harmony with those by Weinberg (2023) who postulated that exclusion in peer groups negates formal classroom perceived school climate belongingness.

In addition, the findings of this study provide evidence that supports the view of the complexity of the integration of homosexual characters in education to argue that using the concept of diversity, which implies a 'civilising' process of democratisation of culture as an analytical framework is problematic. All this participation that the students engage in through diversity clubs, peer mentorship, and intergroup projects was seen to boost the students' belongingness in the college. This conclusion accords with the study of Conrad et al. (2022) who noted the absence of effective positive interaction between students as a resource that hinders construction of positive inter-student relationships. It also emphasizes on peer relations; a factor that has not been well addressed in the previous research on inclusive education. In another way, using of the learning opportunities for interaction of students in inclusive manner can contribute to school climate and create a positive, supportive context for learning.

One more research void filled in this study relates to the effects of gentle discriminations, including social exclusion or exclusion from group tasks, on students' psychological profile and learning processes (Emmer et al., 2024). Compared to prior research, which relied mostly on observing intense forms of bullying behaviors (Liu et al., 2024), this study shows that even the less discernible acts of exclusions are equally dangerous to students, especially those in minority. One of the students said, 'I have had moments in learner interactions where the rest of the class just ignores me or does not invite me to join them to discuss with other students. As and such not fit the legal definition of bullying but they still can cause just as much distress.' This finding supports the study by Nadal (2013) who concluded that generalised behaviours

which may include microaggression and exclusion predict negative students' mental health and academic outcomes (Adedeji et al., 2023).

The present research adds to the current body of knowledge on school inclusiveness by offering a systematic understanding of how policies, teachers, and students work in concert to determine inclusive school climate (Rowan et al., 2021). Unlike most prior work, this study combines these elements and underscores how they interrelate; where prior work may look at how well implemented and student involvement in anti-bully strategies work, or even how prepared teachers are in training to support diversity and overcome prejudice, this study recognizes how all of these components are related (Tan & Wei, 2023). There is a need for the consideration of both structural and resultative dimensions of inclusion in line with academic provisions at the school level as well as the social relations at peer group level.

The work under discussion demonstrates the continuous nature of the practices and concerns in promoting diversity in schools and can be useful for educators, policymakers, and school managers (Mlambo et al., 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to find out the strategies that may help schools to become more inclusive not only educators' behavior, the policies, and written material but also students' interaction, and school climate, which may support the integration of students with disabilities into the classroom. Consequently, this approach depends on continuous practice, enhancing professional learning, and support for an environment fostering diversity and success for all students.

Conclusion

As documented in this research school brings about a safe zone for learning by focusing mainly on the students', teachers', and administrators' experiences. The study shows that besides policies and practices, true meaning of inclusiveness, requires the commitment of teachers and learners to create a worthy school climate at Rinella. Teachers' cultural knowledge and their continuous learning are the areas that affect diversity within the learning needs of students, and the interaction of students contribute to the safety and inclusion of all the children. In this research, I also argue that for organisational inclusiveness, NDyarande has strengths in both existing policies, as well as practices which had not been previously researched by other scholars. It lays down the process of creating an inclusive school by the integration of policies, teaching style and social interactions, and confirms that all learner must be valued, respected, and supported in their learning process.

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