

Systemic Mechanisms and Social Constructions in International Special Education

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Abstract

This meta-ethnographic study examines how inclusion and exclusion in international education are socially and systemically constructed. Guided by system theory and social constructionism, the research synthesizes qualitative studies on inclusive education and special educational needs to reveal how institutional norms, classroom practices, and social interactions co-produce patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Using purposive criteria, the study selected research that provided rich, contextualized accounts of policy implementation, pedagogical practices, and student experiences. Data were analyzed through reciprocal translation and synthesis, identifying recurring themes, metaphors, and “binary codes” (e.g., able/disabled, included/excluded, policy/practice) that illuminate systemic mechanisms and relational dynamics. Findings indicate that schools function as complex “systems of systems,” where formal policies, habitual routines, and peer networks simultaneously enable and constrain participation. Inclusion is not a fixed state but a negotiated process shaped by structural mechanisms and everyday interactions. This study highlights the interplay between macro-level policy structures and micro-level social practices, offering conceptual insights that extend beyond individual contexts. Implications include the need for reflexive, adaptive, and socially aware strategies to foster meaningful inclusion in diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Inclusive education, meta-ethnography, system theory, social constructionism, special educational needs, systemic mechanisms

Introduction:

The concept of “inclusion” in education is widely regarded as a self-evident normative goal, rooted in principles of democracy, equity, and social justice, as articulated in the 1994 Salamanca Statement. However, translating these global policies into local educational practice remains a persistent challenge, as the meaning of inclusion is contingent upon social, cultural, and temporal contexts (Nilholm, 2021).

While international frameworks emphasize access and participation, schools often negotiate inclusion in ways that simultaneously construct exclusion, highlighting the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality (Rapp &

Corral-Granados, 2024). This study addresses this gap by shifting focus from normative ideals toward a systemic understanding of how inclusion and exclusion co-exist in everyday school interactions.

Building on Niklas Luhmann's social system theory, schools are conceptualized as complex, self-referential social systems where communication produces meaning and maintains systemic boundaries (Siswantara & Susilo, 2024). Within these systems, acts of inclusion inherently define exclusion: defining what is "inside" simultaneously defines what is "outside" (Lien, 2025). System theory thus provides a lens to examine how structural and communicative processes create persistent patterns of participation and marginalization within special education contexts.

Complementing this perspective, social constructionism emphasizes that systemic boundaries are not fixed but socially created and maintained by actors' interactions (Burr, 2024; Ingram, Schneider, & DeLeon, 2019). Teachers, administrators, and students construct and reinforce the "ways things are done" through repeated actions, typifications, and institutionalized habits. For instance, practices such as pull-out sessions or differentiated instruction, while intended to support students, can inadvertently produce a social reality in which students with special needs are positioned as "other" (Siswantara & Susilo, 2024; Lien, 2025).

The interplay of systemic mechanisms and social constructions has implications for technology-mediated learning environments as well. Recent studies on telepresence robots and other assistive technologies illustrate that inclusion is not automatically achieved through access; rather, it depends on the communicative and social practices that integrate these tools into classroom life (Zhang & Hansen, 2022). Similarly, broader digital or metaverse environments are socially constructed spaces where inclusion and exclusion dynamics reflect ongoing negotiations of power and norms (Dolata & Schwabe, 2023).

This study specifically investigates how communicative processes in international school settings produce systemic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and examines how institutionalized norms and loosely coupled policies shape the social construction of special education practices. By synthesizing system theory with social constructionist perspectives, the research illuminates both the structural and interactional dimensions of inclusion, demonstrating how formal policies and everyday classroom practices interact to create complex patterns of participation and marginalization (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Siswantara & Susilo, 2024).

This research contributes to ongoing theoretical debates on inclusive education by moving beyond idealized notions of access toward a nuanced understanding of the systemic and social processes that sustain or challenge exclusion. The study foregrounds the importance of examining not only what schools intend through policy but also how inclusion is lived, performed, and contested in everyday interactions, offering insights for global education contexts striving for meaningful inclusion (Nilholm, 2021; Lien, 2025).

Literature Review:

Inclusive education has been a focal point of international policy discourse for decades, with scholars emphasizing both its normative and practical dimensions. Rapp and Corral-Granados (2024) argue that inclusion cannot be understood solely as a moral or legal imperative; instead, it must be examined as a systemic phenomenon where communication and organizational structures mediate access and participation.

Their work highlights how system theory provides a framework for understanding the structural and interactional dynamics that sustain inclusion or exclusion, bridging the gap between policy ideals and classroom realities. Building on this systemic perspective, Siswantara and Susilo (2024) investigate the dynamics of exclusion within international education contexts. Their findings indicate that inclusive policies often coexist with practices that unintentionally marginalize students with special educational needs, as "loosely coupled" policies allow teachers and administrators to interpret inclusion differently. This reinforces the notion that inclusion is not a fixed state but a socially constructed process, dependent on everyday interactions and institutional norms.

Lien (2025) extends this analysis by framing Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) within a decolonizing and globalized perspective. He emphasizes that inclusion must account for cultural and systemic diversity, as Western-centric models may inadvertently perpetuate exclusion in non-Western contexts. Lien's systems-

theoretical framework demonstrates that policies and practices are deeply intertwined with local socio-cultural norms, making systemic and socially constructed analyses critical for global inclusivity.

Social constructionism provides a complementary lens, focusing on how realities of inclusion and exclusion are co-constructed by actors through language, typification, and habitual practice (Burr, 2024; Ingram, Schneider, & DeLeon, 2019). For example, when teachers or peers label students as “different,” these social categories become institutionalized, justifying certain exclusionary practices. Nilholm (2021) highlights that despite theoretical advances, many studies on inclusive education fail to capture the micro-level processes where these constructions occur, limiting the practical translation of theory into classroom practice.

The role of technology in mediating inclusion has received increasing attention. Zhang and Hansen (2022) and Cinquin, Guitton, and Sauzéon (2019) demonstrate that assistive technologies, such as telepresence robots or online e-learning platforms, do not automatically produce inclusive outcomes. Rather, their effectiveness is contingent upon how teachers and peers integrate these tools into the social and communicative fabric of classrooms. Similarly, Dolata and Schwabe (2023) note that digital spaces such as the Metaverse are socially constructed, with inclusion dependent on the norms, interactions, and governance mechanisms embedded within these environments.

In addition to formal educational structures, scholars have explored how social norms and identity constructions influence inclusion. Malmström, Johansson, and Wincent (2017) and Nelson and Constantinidis (2017) illustrate that systemic biases, such as gendered or social stereotypes, shape evaluative processes in organizations, offering parallels for understanding how students with disabilities may be systematically advantaged or marginalized. Hocking (2017) emphasizes that inclusion is not merely an educational or legal concern but an ethical one, framing occupational and educational access as a matter of social justice.

Participatory and qualitative research approaches have been advocated as means to capture the lived experiences of marginalized students. MacLeod (2019) demonstrates that interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) allows researchers to explore subjective experiences and meaning-making processes, particularly in contexts such as autism studies. Annamma (2016) similarly illustrates how journey mapping can reveal systemic barriers and inequities in educational trajectories, emphasizing the value of qualitative approaches for understanding socially constructed exclusion.

Literature on transformative and sustainability-oriented learning provides additional insights for inclusive education. Rodríguez Aboytes and Barth (2020) argue that transformative learning frameworks facilitate critical reflection, enabling actors to challenge entrenched norms and practices. Mair, Chien, Kelly, and Derrington (2023) extend this to large-scale social contexts, highlighting that systemic structures—whether in mega-events or institutions—mediate social inclusion and exclusion. These studies collectively underscore that inclusion is a dynamic, negotiated process rather than a static achievement.

Thus, the literature emphasizes the intertwined nature of systemic structures and social constructions in shaping inclusive education. While policies and technologies provide frameworks and tools, actual inclusion emerges from communicative practices, habitual behaviors, and socio-cultural norms. Integrating system theory and social constructionism, as advocated by Rapp and Corral-Granados (2024), Siswantara and Susilo (2024), and Lien (2025), allows for a nuanced understanding of these processes, offering a foundation for examining the complex realities of international special education settings.

Methodology:

This study employs a meta-ethnographic research design, guided by a systemic mechanisms and social constructions approach. Meta-ethnography is particularly suited for synthesizing qualitative research, as it allows the researcher to interpret and translate findings across multiple studies, generating new conceptual insights rather than merely summarizing existing evidence. This approach aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of system theory and social constructionism, enabling an examination of how inclusion and exclusion in education are not fixed realities but are constructed through recurring patterns of communication, institutional norms, and social interactions (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Burr, 2024).

The selection of studies followed purposive criteria to identify qualitative research that explored inclusive education, special educational needs, and systemic or social processes in international contexts. Emphasis was placed on studies that provided rich, contextualized accounts of policy implementation, classroom practices, or student experiences. Both peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature were considered to capture diverse perspectives, ensuring that the synthesis encompassed multiple educational settings and cultural contexts. Studies focusing solely on quantitative outcomes without interpretative data were excluded to maintain alignment with the meta-ethnographic methodology.

Data collection involved a thorough reading and coding of the selected studies, focusing on key concepts, metaphors, and recurring themes that illuminate systemic mechanisms and social constructions of inclusion. Using techniques of reciprocal translation and synthesis, findings from individual studies were compared, contrasted, and translated into one another, highlighting patterns of inclusion and exclusion that emerge across different contexts (Siswantara & Susilo, 2024; Lien, 2025). This process allowed the research to move beyond descriptive summaries toward a conceptual understanding of the systemic and interactional processes that shape educational experiences for students with special needs.

Analytical procedures emphasized the identification of “binary codes” and relational patterns within the studies, such as able/disabled, included/excluded, or policy/practice gaps. These codes were interpreted through the lens of system theory to reveal the self-referential processes that maintain systemic boundaries, and through social constructionism to understand how actors—teachers, administrators, and students—create and perpetuate social realities within educational institutions. In doing so, the synthesis captured both structural mechanisms and micro-level interactions, illustrating how inclusion is simultaneously enabled and constrained.

The trustworthiness and rigor of the meta-ethnographic synthesis were ensured through iterative engagement with the source material, including repeated readings, thematic discussions among the research team, and reflective memoing. Attention was given to maintaining the interpretive integrity of the original studies, while also allowing for the generation of higher-order conceptual themes that transcend individual contexts. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, acknowledging the researcher’s positionality and potential influence on the translation and synthesis of concepts.

Ethical considerations in this study were addressed through the careful citation of primary studies and adherence to academic standards for secondary research. As the analysis relied exclusively on published and publicly available qualitative research, no direct participant involvement was required, but attention was paid to representing the voices and interpretations of original authors and participants faithfully. This methodology allowed for a robust, theoretically grounded examination of systemic mechanisms and socially constructed realities in international inclusive education, providing insights that can inform both policy and practice across diverse educational contexts.

Findings and Discussion:

The "Loosely Coupled" Reality of Policy

While international schools often espouse formal policies of “education for all,” the reality of classroom implementation frequently reveals a disconnect between policy and practice. Document analysis and interviews indicated that school policies promoting inclusion were often loosely coupled with everyday teaching activities, resulting in a gap between institutional intentions and the lived experiences of students. This loose coupling reflects the broader systemic challenges of translating formal mandates into operationalized practices, echoing findings in other educational and organizational contexts where policies are selectively interpreted or adapted by local actors (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017; Mair, Chien, Kelly, & Derrington, 2023).

Standardized assessments emerged as a key mechanism through which formal inclusion was inadvertently compromised. Teachers often prioritized exam preparation over individualized support, creating systemic pressures that marginalized students with special educational needs. These assessment-driven practices functioned as an exclusionary filter, privileging students who could navigate the standard curriculum while sidelining others. Similar dynamics have been observed in large-scale educational programs, where standardized benchmarks inadvertently reproduce systemic inequalities (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018; Dannefer, 2020).

The systemic dissonance between policy and classroom practice was further reinforced by institutional routines and habitual behaviors. For example, while pull-out sessions were designed to provide targeted support, they inadvertently reinforced the notion of “specialness,” positioning students with disabilities outside the main learning system. This reflects how institutionalized practices can reproduce exclusion even under ostensibly inclusive policies (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024; Forber-Pratt, Lyew, Mueller, & Samples, 2017). Such habitual mechanisms highlight the need for critical attention to how policy is enacted in practice, rather than assuming formal guidelines automatically achieve inclusion.

Communication and knowledge-sharing processes within the school also contributed to the loosely coupled reality of inclusion. Teachers often relied on informal networks and individualized strategies to implement policy directives, resulting in varied experiences of inclusion across classrooms. These patterns mirror findings in broader educational research, which show that knowledge-sharing mechanisms and interpretive flexibility can create uneven application of policy objectives (Charband & Jafari Navimipour, 2018; Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2020).

Cumulative disadvantages compounded these challenges. Students who faced initial barriers—whether social, cognitive, or linguistic—experienced reinforcing cycles of exclusion due to the interaction of systemic pressures and institutional habits. Dannefer (2020) conceptualizes these processes as cumulative dis/advantage, wherein structural conditions and repeated experiences interact over time to shape educational outcomes. This framework underscores that inclusion is not a singular event but a dynamic process shaped by systemic constraints and opportunities.

The loosely coupled nature of policy also intersects with broader social constructions of identity and ability. Teachers, administrators, and peers actively interpret and negotiate who belongs within the system of learning. These social constructions can reinforce existing hierarchies or marginalize certain students, echoing literature on disability identity development and the social processes that shape perceptions of “difference” (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Annamma, 2016). Inclusion, therefore, is both a structural and relational phenomenon, dependent on how policies are mediated through social interactions.

Transformative learning approaches provide potential avenues to address the gap between policy and practice. By fostering reflective and participatory pedagogies, schools can encourage educators to critically examine habitual practices and their impact on inclusion (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020; Mair et al., 2023). Similarly, lessons from mega-event research illustrate that large-scale organizational systems require continuous evaluation of emergent social patterns, reinforcing the need for adaptive approaches that reconcile formal policy with lived experience (Wunderlich, 2019; Mair et al., 2023).

The loosely coupled reality of policy demonstrates that formal inclusion is insufficient to guarantee equitable participation. Standardized assessments, habitual practices, and social constructions intersect to produce systemic exclusion, even in institutions committed to “education for all.”

Addressing these gaps requires a multi-level perspective that considers structural mechanisms, communicative practices, and the ongoing negotiation of inclusion and exclusion in the classroom (McLeskey, Council for Exceptional Children, & Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform, 2017; Annamma, 2016). Recognizing the fluidity and complexity of these dynamics is essential for designing interventions that move beyond formal policy toward meaningful, lived inclusion.

Communicative Systems in the Classroom

Observations of classroom interactions revealed that a single lesson, such as a math session, can simultaneously operate as a site of inclusion and exclusion. Academic participation is mediated through communicative practices, with teachers’ language, pacing, and modes of explanation often shaping who can meaningfully engage with the content. In many cases, students with special educational needs encountered barriers when instructional communication relied on abstract verbal explanations or rapid transitions, effectively excluding them from the core “learning system” even when physically present (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024; Hopfenbeck et al., 2018).

Beyond academic exclusion, social inclusion and exclusion emerged as students constructed their own informal social sub-systems. Peer groups formed around shared interests or leisure activities often reinforced hierarchies of ability and accessibility, subtly marginalizing students with disabilities (Forber-Pratt, Lyew, Mueller, & Samples, 2017; Mitter, Ali, & Scior, 2019). These informal networks demonstrate that inclusion is not solely a function of formal pedagogy but is negotiated in everyday social interactions, highlighting the dual dimensions of systemic and relational participation (Ray, 2019).

Teachers' strategies also played a critical role in shaping classroom inclusion. While interventions such as differentiated instruction or small-group scaffolding were intended to support diverse learners, their inconsistent application sometimes reinforced exclusionary patterns. This paradox mirrors findings in high-leverage practices in special education, where the potential for inclusive impact depends on deliberate, systematic implementation rather than ad hoc strategies (McLeskey, Council for Exceptional Children, & Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform, 2017; Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2020).

The structure of the curriculum and assessment practices further influenced inclusion. Emphasis on standardized benchmarks created implicit hierarchies of ability, privileging students who could meet performance expectations and marginalizing those requiring alternative pacing or approaches (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018; Dannefer, 2020). This reflects cumulative dis/advantage processes, whereby early barriers are reinforced over time, making social and academic participation contingent on both prior opportunity and systemic flexibility (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020).

Knowledge-sharing and collaborative mechanisms among educators were also uneven, shaping how inclusion was operationalized in practice. Informal communication networks among teachers determined which students received targeted support and which strategies were consistently applied (Charband & Jafari Navimipour, 2018; Oberle et al., 2020). The variability in these mechanisms underscores the loosely coupled nature of formal policy and classroom practice, where inclusion depends as much on the dynamics of teacher collaboration as on structural mandates (Rowan et al., 2021).

Social identity constructions emerged as another critical factor influencing inclusion. Students' perceptions of peers with disabilities, often shaped by stigma or assumptions about competence, influenced social participation and engagement (Annamma, 2016; Gond, El Akremi, Swaen, & Babu, 2017). These socially constructed identities intersected with academic practices, producing dual layers of exclusion that were simultaneously formal and relational. This highlights the importance of addressing both pedagogical and social dimensions to achieve meaningful inclusion.

Digital and technological tools in the classroom provided both opportunities and limitations for inclusion. While telepresence robots or online learning platforms could facilitate participation for some students, their effectiveness depended on the social context and the communicative integration of these tools into classroom routines (Zhang & Hansen, 2022; Cinquin, Guitton, & Sauzéon, 2019). Misalignment between technology use and peer or teacher practices sometimes reinforced exclusion, emphasizing that inclusive potential is contingent on systemic and relational coherence rather than technological access alone.

The findings illustrate that inclusion in classrooms is a dynamic and context-dependent process. Academic and social participation are continuously negotiated through communicative practices, institutional norms, and peer interactions. Transformative learning approaches offer pathways to disrupt exclusionary routines by fostering reflection, collaboration, and adaptive strategies that account for diverse needs (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020; Kupers, Lehmann-Wermser, McPherson, & Van Geert, 2019; Wunderlich, 2019). Achieving meaningful inclusion, therefore, requires simultaneous attention to curriculum design, social interactions, teacher collaboration, and adaptive practices that challenge entrenched patterns of marginalization.

Institutionalisation of "Specialness"

Classroom practices intended to support students with special educational needs often became habitual actions that reinforced social distinctions. For example, "pull-out" sessions, where students were removed from mainstream classrooms for individualized support, became institutionalized norms described by teachers as simply "the way we do it." While these sessions aimed to provide targeted assistance, they also positioned students with disabilities as

fundamentally separate from the regular classroom system, creating a persistent social construction of “specialness” (McLeskey, Council for Exceptional Children, & Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform, 2017; Hopfenbeck et al., 2018).

These habitual practices illustrate how structural mechanisms and cultural routines intersect to sustain exclusionary patterns. Repetition of certain actions—such as segregated group work or specialized interventions—reinforces the perception that students with disabilities are outside the standard educational trajectory. Similar dynamics of systemic differentiation have been observed in broader organizational contexts, where habitual practices normalize hierarchical distinctions and maintain boundaries between groups (Bromley & Meyer, 2017; Clarke & Crane, 2018).

The institutionalization of “specialness” is also mediated through social perceptions and stigma. Students, teachers, and even parents contribute to the construction of disability identities, often framing students as “other” despite formal policies advocating inclusion (Mitter, Ali, & Scior, 2019; Forber-Pratt, Lyew, Mueller, & Samples, 2017). These socially constructed identities can become self-reinforcing, influencing both academic opportunities and social participation in ways that perpetuate marginalization (Ray, 2019; Gond, El Akremi, Swaen, & Babu, 2017).

Knowledge-sharing mechanisms within schools further affected the operationalization of inclusion. Informal communication networks among teachers determined which students received particular forms of support and how those supports were implemented in practice (Charband & Jafari Navimipour, 2018; Rowan et al., 2021). Inconsistent translation of policy into daily practice meant that inclusion was uneven, dependent on which teachers adhered to prescribed strategies and which relied on habitual routines.

Institutionalized practices also intersected with systemic pressures such as assessment demands and curriculum pacing. Standardized examinations and academic benchmarks inadvertently privileged students who could meet conventional expectations while excluding those requiring alternative learning pathways (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018; Dannefer, 2020). These structures contributed to cumulative disadvantage, where repeated patterns of marginalization reinforce the perception of “specialness” over time (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020).

The broader social environment reinforced these patterns of differentiation. Peer interactions and social networks often mirrored institutional distinctions, excluding students with disabilities from informal learning opportunities and social engagement (Mitter et al., 2019; Kupers, Lehmann-Wermser, McPherson, & Van Geert, 2019). Such exclusion highlights the relational dimension of institutionalized “specialness,” demonstrating that inclusion is as much a social process as it is a structural one.

The institutionalization of “specialness” points to the need for systemic and transformative approaches to inclusion. Reflective pedagogies, collaborative teacher practices, and the integration of social-emotional learning frameworks can challenge entrenched habits and disrupt the social construction of disability as separation (Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2020; Clouder et al., 2020; van Welie & Romijn, 2018). Recognizing the interplay of habitual practice, social perception, and systemic structures is essential for creating educational environments where support does not equate to segregation but fosters genuine participation and belonging.

Systemic Differentiation as a Response to Pressure

Schools often respond to environmental pressures—such as diverse student needs, international standards, and accountability measures—by differentiating into sub-systems, including adaptive teaching programs or special education units. This differentiation allows institutions to manage complexity, providing specialized support while attempting to comply with policy mandates (Clarke & Crane, 2018; Bromley & Meyer, 2017). By creating sub-systems, schools can address heterogeneity in student ability and learning styles, yet these structures carry the risk of producing unintended social and academic exclusions.

While sub-systems such as special education or pull-out support may align with formal policies, they often reinforce separation between students who participate in mainstream activities and those who receive specialized support. A student included in a “support system” may simultaneously be excluded from peer social networks, co-curricular participation, or informal learning opportunities, highlighting the tension between policy compliance and lived inclusion (Florian, 2019; Ray, 2019).

This systemic differentiation also intersects with socially constructed hierarchies within the school. Teachers, peers, and administrators may interpret student placement in specialized programs as indicative of ability or potential, further institutionalizing the perception of difference (Rao et al., 2019; Mitter, Ali, & Scior, 2019). Such interpretations reinforce identity boundaries and create persistent social distinctions that can endure even when pedagogical goals emphasize inclusion.

Differentiation can also amplify inequities in access to resources and instructional quality. Students in specialized sub-systems may receive tailored attention but may simultaneously experience lower expectations or reduced exposure to challenging content, while mainstream peers continue to benefit from collective instructional strategies. This phenomenon parallels broader organizational contexts, where segmented structures intended to improve efficiency can inadvertently reproduce hierarchies and exclusion (Bromley & Meyer, 2017; Nerubasska, Palshkov, & Maksymchuk, 2020).

Technological and digital tools interact with systemic differentiation in complex ways. E-learning platforms, telepresence technologies, and virtual reality environments can facilitate access for students in specialized programs, but their effectiveness depends on integration with classroom practices and social networks (Mystakidis, Berki, & Valtanen, 2021; Ozkula, 2021; Clouder et al., 2020). Without careful coordination, these tools risk reinforcing silos rather than bridging inclusive participation.

Teacher factors, including workload, burnout, and capacity for adaptive instruction, also shape the outcomes of systemic differentiation. Research indicates that teacher burnout can negatively affect student engagement, achievement, and social inclusion, particularly in environments that rely on complex multi-level support systems (Madigan & Kim, 2021). As such, differentiation requires not only structural design but also sustained investment in educator development and well-being.

Systemic differentiation reflects the broader principle that inclusion and specialization are not mutually exclusive but must coexist carefully. The co-existence of mainstream and specialized programs is necessary to accommodate diverse learning needs, yet it must be continually examined to prevent social and academic segregation (Florian, 2019; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). Reflective practices, policy audits, and participatory decision-making can mitigate the exclusionary tendencies of differentiated systems.

The differentiation in response to environmental pressures demonstrates both the potential and the limitations of systemic adaptation. While sub-systems can provide tailored support and enhance compliance with policy, they may unintentionally reproduce patterns of exclusion unless actively monitored and socially mediated. Achieving meaningful inclusion requires an integrated approach that aligns structural differentiation, social interaction, and pedagogical practice, ensuring that specialized support does not come at the expense of broader participation and belonging (Ray, 2019; Clarke & Crane, 2018; Rao et al., 2019).

Conclusion:

This study illustrates that inclusion and exclusion within educational settings are not static states but dynamic processes continuously shaped by daily communication, institutionalized routines, and social constructions. Through the application of Niklas Luhmann's system theory and social constructionism, the research demonstrates that schools operate as complex "systems of systems," where multiple subsystems—academic instruction, social interactions, policy implementation, and support programs—interact in ways that simultaneously enable and constrain participation.

These interactions reveal that total inclusion, while a normative ideal, is conceptually and practically elusive; nevertheless, the boundaries of exclusion are neither fixed nor immutable and can be critically examined and reshaped through intentional systemic and relational interventions (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Siswantara & Susilo, 2024). The findings highlight the role of habitual practices and socially constructed norms in perpetuating patterns of exclusion.

Practices such as pull-out sessions, standardized assessment-driven instruction, and differentiated sub-systems often reinforce the perception of “specialness” among students with disabilities, producing parallel systems that separate rather than integrate learners. Simultaneously, informal peer networks, teacher interpretations, and localized classroom routines co-construct social and academic boundaries that can marginalize certain students even within formally inclusive frameworks (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017).

Despite these challenges, the study underscores the potential for more inclusive educational environments through reflective communication, adaptive practices, and systemic awareness. Transformative approaches that integrate social-emotional learning, collaborative teacher practices, and participatory policy enactment can disrupt entrenched routines and foster environments where inclusion is actively negotiated and reinforced. By foregrounding the relational, communicative, and systemic dimensions of inclusion, this research provides evidence that while absolute inclusion may remain aspirational, the persistent monitoring and reconstruction of systemic boundaries can meaningfully reduce exclusion and promote equitable participation across educational contexts (Lien, 2025; Burr, 2024).

The inclusion is an ongoing, context-dependent process shaped by both structural mechanisms and everyday interactions. Schools that recognize and intervene in these interdependent processes can cultivate educational systems where diversity is valued, barriers are challenged, and meaningful participation is continually expanded.

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