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SUPPORTING STUDENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Mansurova Zarifa Hidoyatovna
State Institution "Specialized Boarding School No. 25 for Children with Special Educational Needs (Deaf) in Karmana District," Teacher-Defectologist

Abstract
Psychological adjustment is an important condition for meaningful participation in inclusive education. Students need accessible learning opportunities, supportive relationships, and a classroom environment in which they feel safe and valued. This conceptual article examines the factors that may influence students' psychological adjustment and proposes practical approaches for teachers, school psychologists, and families. The discussion draws on international guidance on educational inclusion and published research on peer acceptance and anxiety. Particular attention is given to predictable classroom routines, accessible communication, cooperative learning, individualized support, and student participation in decision-making. A classroom support framework is proposed, combining initial observation, collaborative planning, implementation, and ongoing review. The article presents recommendations rather than findings from an original intervention. It concludes that psychological adjustment should be understood as a shared responsibility involving both the learner and the educational environment.

Keywords: Inclusive education, psychological adjustment, school belonging, peer acceptance, emotional well-being, individualized support.

Introduction

Inclusive education requires more than placing students with different abilities and educational needs in the same classroom. It involves creating conditions that allow every learner to participate, communicate, and make progress. UNESCO's guidance identifies inclusion and equity as principles that should shape educational policies and everyday practices [1]. UNICEF similarly emphasizes

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shared learning opportunities and the removal of barriers affecting children with disabilities [2].

Within this context, psychological adjustment deserves particular attention. A student may attend lessons regularly yet feel isolated, uncertain, or unable to ask for assistance. Consequently, physical presence should not be treated as sufficient evidence of successful inclusion.

The purpose of this article is to examine psychological adjustment in inclusive classrooms and propose a practical framework for supporting students' emotional security, relationships, and participation. The central argument is that adjustment involves changes in both the student's experience and the classroom environment.

Methodological Approach

This article is a conceptual discussion informed by selected international guidance and empirical research. The sources were considered in relation to educational inclusion, social acceptance, and emotional well-being. This is not a systematic literature review, and no original participant data were collected.

The proposed classroom framework represents an educational synthesis of the selected evidence. Its effectiveness would require further investigation through classroom-based research. Recommendations are therefore presented as practices to consider and evaluate, rather than as experimentally verified outcomes.

Understanding Psychological Adjustment

For the purposes of this article, psychological adjustment refers to the process through which students develop sufficient emotional security, familiarity with school expectations, and confidence to participate in classroom life. It includes expressing needs, establishing relationships, managing everyday difficulties, and accessing learning with appropriate support.

Adjustment should not be equated with silence, obedience, or the absence of visible distress. A quiet student may still experience exclusion, while a student who requests a break may be demonstrating effective self-advocacy. Teachers therefore need to consider students' experiences alongside observable behaviour.

Psychological adjustment can be examined through four interconnected dimensions: emotional security, social belonging, learning participation, and

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agency. Emotional security concerns whether students feel protected from humiliation and intimidation. Social belonging involves acceptance and opportunities for reciprocal interaction. Learning participation concerns meaningful engagement with accessible tasks. Agency refers to students' opportunities to express preferences, request support, and influence decisions affecting them.

Classroom Accessibility and Predictability

Unclear instructions, inaccessible materials, and unexpected changes can create barriers to participation. Students may need different forms of support depending on their communication, sensory, cognitive, or physical needs. These needs should be explored individually rather than inferred solely from a diagnostic label.

Teachers can make classroom expectations clearer through brief instructions, demonstrations, accessible schedules, and advance notice of transitions. Visual resources may help some learners, while others require spoken explanations, tactile information, or alternative communication methods. The appropriate format depends on the student.

Predictability should coexist with flexibility. A consistent routine can provide orientation, but students should also be able to request clarification, additional time, or a different way of completing an activity.

Peer Relationships and Social Acceptance

Relationships with classmates are an important consideration in supporting adjustment. Hofmann's longitudinal study of students with intellectual disabilities found that higher staff-perceived social acceptance was associated with reduced anxiety over one school year [3]. However, the research was conducted in special needs schools and relied on staff reports. Its findings cannot establish causation or be transferred automatically to inclusive classrooms.

Nevertheless, the study provides a reason to examine peer relationships when planning educational support. Teachers should observe whether students are invited into activities, have opportunities to contribute, and experience reciprocal interaction.

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A proposed classroom approach is to organize cooperative tasks with clear, meaningful roles. For example, during a science activity, students might contribute by identifying materials, describing observations, arranging objects, or recording findings through an accessible method. Roles should rotate where appropriate, and no student should consistently be positioned only as a recipient of help.

Teacher Communication

Teachers can review their communication practices to identify potential sources of embarrassment or exclusion. Public comparisons, dismissive responses, and repeated emphasis on a student's limitations may undermine the intended supportive atmosphere.

A practical alternative is to provide specific feedback about effort, strategy, and progress. Instead of saying, "Everyone else has finished," a teacher might explain, "You have completed the first step; let us decide what will help with the next one." Assistance can be offered discreetly while maintaining meaningful learning expectations.

Teachers should also distinguish between unwillingness to participate and difficulty accessing an activity. Before interpreting behaviour, they can consider whether the student understood the instructions, could communicate a need, or encountered an environmental barrier.

A Proposed Framework for Classroom Support

Initial observation. Teachers identify the situations in which a student participates comfortably and those in which difficulties occur. Observations can include transitions, group work, independent tasks, and unstructured periods. The purpose is to identify patterns rather than assign a label.

Collaborative planning. The student, family, teacher, and relevant specialists discuss strengths, preferences, and support needs. Goals should be specific and meaningful. Examples include requesting assistance through a preferred communication method or participating in a chosen group activity.

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Implementation. The classroom team introduces a manageable set of adjustments. These may include accessible instructions, a predictable arrival routine, structured peer activities, or an agreed method for requesting a break.

Review. The team examines whether the adjustments improve the student's experience and participation. A strategy should be revised when it creates dependence, attracts unwanted attention, or fails to address the identified barrier. This framework is proposed for educational use and requires adaptation to each school's resources and students' needs.

Family Partnership and Student Voice

Family consultation can provide information about communication preferences, previous educational experiences, and changes noticed outside school. Teachers can combine this information with classroom observations while recognizing that behaviour may differ across settings.

Student voice should remain central. Learners can express their experiences through conversation, pictures, writing, gestures, or communication devices. Questions such as "When do you feel comfortable?" and "What would help you join this activity?" can guide support planning.

Adults should avoid assuming that a preferred support is beneficial simply because it appears effective from their perspective. A student may participate more readily while still feeling embarrassed by the way assistance is provided. Reviewing both participation and personal experience helps address this possibility.

Monitoring Progress

Schools can monitor adjustment through changes in help-seeking, participation, peer interaction, and students' reported comfort. Attendance and task completion may provide additional information, but neither should serve as the sole indicator. UNICEF's Inclusive Education Module examines environmental factors affecting school participation, reinforcing the importance of considering barriers within the educational setting [4].

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For classroom review, teachers can record brief observations and compare them over time. These records should support educational decisions and should not be treated as clinical diagnostic tools. Persistent difficulties may require consultation with an appropriately qualified professional.

Conclusion

Supporting psychological adjustment in inclusive classrooms requires attention to emotional security, accessibility, peer relationships, and student agency. Educational support should help learners participate in ways that respect their needs and preferences.

The proposed framework connects observation, collaborative planning, classroom adjustments, and review. Future research should evaluate these approaches in inclusive settings and include students' own perspectives wherever possible. Successful adjustment should be reflected in meaningful participation and a stronger sense of belonging, alongside educational progress.

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