

Every Voice Matters: Inclusive Classroom Management and the Journey from Diversity to Belonging

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Abstract: *This conceptual paper examines how inclusive classroom management can transform learner diversity into meaningful participation, student voice, and ultimately a stronger sense of belonging. Drawing on educational policy, literature on inclusion and student voice, and classroom observation, it argues that physical inclusion alone does not ensure meaningful participation. Particular attention is given to learners who participate less visibly because of differences in confidence, language, communication style, or learning needs. The paper contrasts traditional and participatory approaches to classroom management and proposes SHINE, a five-step framework centred on seeing every learner, hearing every voice, including different needs, nurturing participation, and encouraging belonging. The framework emphasises practical, low-cost strategies that can be implemented without dependence on additional technology or substantial resources. The paper concludes that inclusive classroom management requires sustained attention to how opportunities for participation are distributed and proposes future empirical research to examine students' perceptions of voice and belonging.*

Keywords: Student Voice; Inclusive Education; Inclusive Classroom Management; Diversity; Equity; Belonging; Participation.

1. Introduction

Ask a question in a classroom of forty students, and it is usually the same five or six hands that go up first. They are confident, quick to speak, and comfortable being watched by everyone else. The teacher, understandably pressed for time, often calls on one of them. The remaining students stay in their seats, and over a school year this pattern repeats itself often enough to feel normal.

But it is worth asking what happens to the rest of the room. One student may know the answer perfectly well but hesitates because a wrong guess feels riskier than staying silent. Another may need a few extra seconds to put a thought into words. A third may understand the concept in their own language but struggle to say it in the language of instruction. Someone else may express ideas far better through a drawing or a model than through a spoken answer. A few students may simply be new, or shy, or carrying something from home that makes classroom participation the last thing on their mind that day.

None of this makes a classroom badly run. It makes it ordinary. What separates an ordinary classroom from an inclusive one is not the absence of these differences, but whether the classroom is organised to notice and work with them.

This paper takes that question as its starting point. It is concerned less with grand policy statements about inclusion and more with what happens, or fails to happen, in the everyday running of a classroom - who gets asked to answer, who gets to lead a group, who is expected to speak up, and who is quietly allowed to disappear into the back rows.

1.1 Approach and Sources

This is a conceptual paper rather than an empirical study. Its argument is built from three complementary sources. The first is classroom observation: general, cumulative

impressions of how participation is typically distributed in Indian secondary-school classrooms. The second is policy, drawn principally from India's National Education Policy 2020 and from UNESCO's publications on inclusion, selected because they represent the current official framing of inclusive education at the national and international level. The third is the wider scholarly literature on student voice, participation, and inclusive education, selected for its direct relevance to the paper's central themes rather than through a systematic or exhaustive review process.

2. From Uniform Classrooms to Diverse Ones

Most classroom teaching in Indian schools still leans, at least in part, on a fairly old model: the teacher explains, the students listen, questions are asked and answered, and progress is checked through tests. This is not without value. A teacher does need to explain new material, keep order, and give some sense of direction to forty different young people at once. The trouble begins when this becomes the only mode of interaction, because a classroom run entirely on one-way instruction tends to reward the students who are already good at receiving information passively and quick to respond publicly - and it has comparatively little use for everyone else.

A participatory classroom does not abandon the teacher's authority; it simply puts it to different use. Instead of being the sole source of information, the teacher becomes something closer to a facilitator who creates openings for students to think aloud, disagree respectfully, work in groups, and occasionally shape what happens in the room. NCERT's guidance on inclusive schooling makes a similar point: diversity enters the classroom because it already exists in society, and every student, regardless of background, has something worth contributing if given the chance. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report goes further, framing learner diversity not as an inconvenience to be managed but as a resource that good teaching can draw on.

The useful question, then, is not how to make every student behave identically - that was never realistic to begin with - but how to build a classroom where different kinds of learners can genuinely take part.

3. What "Student Voice" Actually Means

The phrase student voice gets used loosely, so it is worth being precise about it. It does not mean students running the classroom, setting the syllabus, or overriding the teacher's judgement. It means something more modest and, in practice, harder to achieve consistently: that students are listened to, and that what they say is taken seriously enough to occasionally change something. de Leeuw, Little and Rix (2020) raise a related caution about the term itself: "voice" is used so broadly across educational writing that it can lose practical meaning unless it is tied to specific, describable actions, which is the approach this paper tries to take.

In an ordinary school day, student voice can take several forms - asking students how they learn best, letting them suggest an activity, encouraging genuine (not rhetorical) questions, making space for peer discussion, or simply asking for feedback on how a lesson went. It need not be spoken. A student might express an idea through writing, a poster, a presentation, or an anonymous note left in a suggestion box. None of these is a lesser form of participation; they are simply different routes to the same destination.

This distinction matters because it is easy to mistake a quiet student for a disengaged one. A student who rarely speaks in class discussion is not necessarily a student with nothing to say.

4. Why It Matters Whose Voice Gets Heard

Students bring different experiences into the same lesson, and those experiences change what a topic actually means to them. A lesson on migration will read very differently to a student whose family has moved cities for work than to one who has lived in the same house their whole life. A discussion of water scarcity will mean something else again to a student from a drought-prone region than to one living near a river. If classroom discussion only ever draws on the experience of the loudest few, the lesson itself becomes narrower than it needs to be.

It helps to think of student voice as having a few overlapping dimensions rather than a single one. There is academic voice - the confidence to ask a doubt or explain one's own understanding. There is emotional voice - having a safe way to say that something feels confusing, isolating or unfair. There is social voice - the chance to take part in group work and build relationships with classmates. And there is a smaller but real decision-making voice - some say, however limited, in how a class project, a seating arrangement or a classroom rule is decided. Mager and Nowak's (2012) systematic review of student participation in school decision making found consistent, if modest, associations between this kind of participation and outcomes such as engagement and a sense of ownership over school life, which suggests that decision-making voice is not a

peripheral extra but a dimension worth cultivating deliberately. A classroom that only exercises the first of these, academic voice, is missing most of what student voice is meant to cover.

5. Two Ways of Running a Classroom

It is tempting to describe traditional and participatory classrooms as opposites, but that oversimplifies things; most real classrooms sit somewhere between the two, and both approaches have their place. A traditional classroom tends to run on one-way communication, fixed roles, and a fairly narrow definition of good behaviour as quiet compliance. A participatory classroom keeps a clear structure but treats two-way communication, flexible roles and shared responsibility as equally important to discipline.

The shift is less dramatic than it sounds. It does not require a teacher to relinquish control of the classroom; it requires the teacher to occasionally step back and let a silence sit long enough for students to fill it themselves. Some of the more useful classroom moments happen not when a teacher explains something well, but when a teacher stops talking and lets students work something out on their own.

6. How Exclusion Happens Without Anyone Intending It

Very few teachers set out to exclude anyone. Exclusion in most classrooms is not a decision; it is a habit that forms gradually and goes unnoticed because no single instance of it looks serious. The strongest students keep getting the harder questions. The same three or four students keep getting picked to present. Group leaders are chosen from a familiar shortlist. A mistake gets a laugh rather than a correction. A student who learns more slowly gets quietly labelled as weak, and starts to believe it. A student still building fluency in the language of instruction gets treated as though the difficulty is a lack of ability rather than a lack of familiarity. A student with a disability is present in the room but rarely actually involved in what is happening in it.

None of this requires unkindness. It only requires a classroom system that has not been built with these patterns in mind. UNESCO's framing is useful here: exclusion is often produced by systems and environments, not by the traits of the learners themselves, and the more productive response is to remove the barriers a system creates rather than to treat the student's difference as the problem to be solved. This matches findings from Subban, Woodcock, Sharma and May's (2022) systematic review of secondary students' experiences of inclusive education, which found that students frequently perceived themselves as present in a classroom without feeling meaningfully included in it, even where teachers had no intention of excluding anyone.

A teacher trying to notice this can start by asking a few plain questions: who is actually participating today? Who has stayed silent for the whole lesson, and is that because they chose to, or because no opening was offered to them?

7. Reaching the Students Who Rarely Speak

Every classroom has students who volunteer readily and students who almost never do. The first group becomes familiar to a teacher quickly; the second group can go an entire term without saying much at all, for reasons that have little to do with ability - shyness, past embarrassment, low confidence, or simply needing more time to think before speaking.

None of this requires expensive intervention. Several simple routines can substantially improve participation: giving students a minute to think and discuss with a partner before opening a question to the whole class; allowing questions or concerns to be submitted anonymously, whether on paper or in a box; rotating who leads a group discussion instead of defaulting to the same student each time; asking for a short written reflection at the end of a lesson - what was understood, what was confusing, what question remains; and pairing students so they can explain concepts to one another in their own words.

These are modest changes, but their effect compounds. A student who is given a low-stakes way to participate this week is more likely to attempt a higher-stakes one later in the year.

8. Classroom Management Beyond Discipline

Classroom management is sometimes treated as a synonym for discipline - keeping order, preventing disruption, enforcing rules. That is part of it, but only part. It also covers building respectful relationships, setting expectations that everyone understands, managing disagreements without embarrassing anyone, and creating enough emotional safety that a student is willing to risk being wrong out loud.

An inclusive classroom is not a classroom without rules; it is a classroom whose rules are built around participation rather than around silence. A simple classroom norm such as "we disagree with ideas, not with people" does more work than it might seem to, because it tells a student in advance that disagreement will not be treated as an attack. Rules like "everyone gets a turn to speak" or "a mistake is part of learning, not something to be laughed at" quietly change the emotional temperature of a room over time.

9. Diversity, Equality and Equity

It helps to separate two ideas that often get treated as the same thing: equality and equity. Equality means giving every student the same thing. Equity means giving each student what they specifically need in order to have a fair chance at the same outcome.

Handing every student an identical worksheet is equality. Giving a student with a visual difficulty a larger-print version of that same worksheet is equity - it is not an advantage, it is the removal of an obstacle that the standard version would otherwise have placed in their way. UNESCO's own distinction is useful here: equality describes an outcome or a state to aim for, while equity describes the actions taken to get there. An inclusive classroom needs both

ideas in mind, because chasing equality alone, without attention to equity, can leave the same students behind every time.

10. What This Asks of the Teacher

Good intentions are not enough on their own; a teacher needs a few concrete habits to work with. Knowing students individually enough to notice when someone who is usually talkative has gone quiet, or when a usually quiet student suddenly wants to speak. Avoiding permanent labels - "weak", "lazy", "brilliant" - since students tend to live up to, or down to, the label given to them early on. Treating a genuine question as a sign of engagement rather than a nuisance. Mixing up teaching methods so that discussion, projects, storytelling, visuals and hands-on tasks each get a turn, rather than defaulting to lecture and worksheet every time. Rotating who gets called on and who gets to lead, so opportunity is not concentrated in the same handful of students all year. Giving feedback that explains how to improve rather than simply grading a student's effort as good or bad. And, perhaps most importantly, modelling the respect that is being asked of students - a class tends to treat differences the way its teacher visibly does.

11. What This Asks of Students

Inclusion in a classroom is not solely the teacher's responsibility; students shape the culture of a room as much as any adult does. A classmate who listens without interrupting, who does not joke about someone's accent or background, who includes a quieter student in group work, or who simply explains a concept to someone who missed it, is doing as much for that student's sense of belonging as any teacher policy could. Students, in fact, often remember how their classmates made them feel long after they have forgotten the exact content of a lesson. Student voice and student responsibility, in that sense, need to grow together rather than one waiting for the other.

12. The Role of School Leadership and Policy

A single teacher can change a classroom, but inclusion should not rest on the effort of one person working in isolation. It needs support from the school as an institution. India's National Education Policy 2020 places explicit weight on equity, inclusion and respect for diversity, and calls for teachers, principals, administrators and counsellors to be sensitised to these ideas rather than treating them as a checkbox exercise. The same policy asks that curriculum content itself build empathy, tolerance and respect for human dignity, rather than leaving inclusion to be addressed informally.

In practice, this can mean teacher training focused specifically on inclusive practice, accessible infrastructure, functioning anti-bullying measures, student feedback mechanisms, and a school culture where a teacher trying something new - a different seating arrangement, an anonymous feedback box, a rotation system for group leadership - feels supported rather than exposed if it does not work perfectly the first time.

13. A Note on Technology

Digital tools offer another route for participation, particularly for students who find public speaking difficult. An anonymous online poll, a discussion board, or a short digital response can let a student contribute an idea they would never have raised with a hand up in front of forty classmates. But this comes with an obvious caution: not every student has equal access to a device or a stable connection, and a classroom that leans too heavily on technology risks recreating, in digital form, exactly the exclusion it is trying to solve. Technology works best here as one additional channel among several, not as a replacement for the more basic, low-cost strategies described earlier.

14. From Voice to Belonging

None of this is really about participation for its own sake. The point of listening to students is what it produces over time, which is a sense of belonging - the difference between a student who is physically present in a classroom and one who genuinely feels part of it. Belonging shows up less in what a student says and more in small, quiet signs: whether they are willing to ask a doubt without embarrassment, whether they expect to be listened to, whether a mistake feels survivable rather than humiliating.

It is worth remembering that belonging and academic performance are not separate goals competing for a school's attention. A student who feels safe enough to ask a question learns more from that lesson than one who stays silent out of fear of being wrong.

15. A Simple Framework: SHINE

Based on the ideas discussed above, it is possible to describe inclusive classroom management as a five-step habit rather than a single policy decision.

See every learner - notice who makes up the room, including the students who are easy to overlook.

Hear every voice - build more than one channel through which a student can express an idea, spoken or otherwise.

Include different needs - adjust for differences in confidence, language, ability and communication style rather than expecting everyone to fit one mould.

Nurture participation - treat leadership, communication and decision-making as skills to be developed over time, not traits some students simply have and others lack.

Encourage belonging - make sure participation, once given, actually feels meaningful and connected to the rest of school life, rather than a one-off exercise.

The five letters spell SHINE, which is a convenient way to remember the sequence, but the underlying idea is simple: recognition has to come before participation, and participation has to be sustained before it turns into belonging.

16. A Few Practical Ideas for Classrooms

Several specific, low-cost activities illustrate how the SHINE approach might work day to day. A classroom wall divided into three sections - I Like, I Wonder, I Suggest - where students can post anonymous notes. A one-minute written check at the end of a lesson: one thing understood, one thing that felt confusing, one question still unanswered. A rotating leadership system for small-group work, so leadership is not reserved for the highest scorers by default. A weekly slot deliberately set aside for the quieter students in the class, offering a safe, low-pressure way to contribute rather than forcing anyone into the spotlight. And a small student committee that works with the teacher on practical classroom issues - seating, noise, group formation, welcoming new students - so that participation extends beyond academic content into the everyday running of the room.

17. Why This Is Harder Than It Sounds

None of this is easy to sustain in a real school. Large class sizes make it genuinely difficult to reach every student individually. A fixed syllabus and looming examinations leave little room for open-ended discussion. Marks tend to dominate what both students and teachers pay attention to, which crowds out space for anything that does not show up on a test. Inclusive practice also asks more of a teacher's planning time, and not every teacher has that time to spare. Some students, when first given the chance to participate more actively, will resist it out of habit or discomfort. And some teachers, not unreasonably, worry that more open participation will come at the cost of classroom discipline.

That last worry deserves a direct answer: participation and discipline are not opposites. A classroom where students feel some ownership over what happens in it often needs less external control, not more, because responsibility tends to replace the need for constant correction.

18. Recommendations

A few recommendations follow reasonably directly from the discussion above. Schools and teachers might consider building multiple, genuinely different ways for students to participate rather than relying on one format for everyone. Regular, low-stakes feedback from students - what is helping them learn, what is getting in the way - can catch problems earlier than a term-end survey would. Students can be involved, in a limited but real way, in shaping certain classroom expectations rather than only receiving them. Teacher training would benefit from including inclusive pedagogy as a standard component rather than an optional add-on. Peer support structures can turn classmates into partners rather than only competitors. Schools might also reconsider how freely labels such as "weak" or "bright" get applied to students, given how sticky such labels tend to be. Talents outside the academic register - creativity, sport, art, leadership, technical skill - deserve recognition alongside marks. And, ultimately, schools might treat belonging itself as something worth measuring and discussing, not only as a pleasant side effect of good teaching.

19. Scope for Future Research

This paper draws on classroom observation, existing literature and policy documents rather than on data collected from students directly, and that is a genuine limitation rather than a stylistic choice. The natural next step is a school-based study that actually asks students - through a short questionnaire and a small number of interviews - whether they feel heard in the ways described here, and whether they connect that feeling to a sense of belonging in the classroom. Such a study would need ethical clearance, informed consent from parents or guardians, assent from the students themselves, and safeguards ensuring that participation carries no bearing whatsoever on grades or a student's standing with their teachers. It would be particularly informative to compare how differently placed students - by confidence, by language background, by prior academic performance - actually experience the strategies proposed in this paper, since a strategy that works well for one group of students may do little for another. Until such data are available, the ideas here should be read as a reasoned argument grounded in existing research, not as a set of proven findings.

20. Conclusion

Inclusive classroom management requires more than placing diverse learners within the same physical space. It requires classroom practices that provide meaningful and varied opportunities for participation, recognise differences in communication and learning needs, and ensure that student contributions are treated with respect. The progression from diversity to participation, voice, and belonging therefore depends on repeated everyday decisions concerning questioning, feedback, leadership, collaboration, and responses to mistakes. The SHINE framework offers a practical way of organising these decisions around recognition, voice, responsiveness to different needs, sustained participation, and belonging. Although the present discussion is conceptual and requires empirical examination, it highlights how relatively small and feasible classroom practices can contribute to more inclusive learning environments. Future school-based research should examine how students with different backgrounds and participation patterns experience these strategies and whether they strengthen their perceived voice and sense of belonging.

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