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The Role of the School Environment in Building an Inclusive and Friendly Educational Climate for Student Diversity

Ihsan
University of Nahdlatul Wathan, Mataram, Indonesia

*Corresponding email: *ihsan878@gmail.com*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of the school environment in building an inclusive and welcoming educational climate for student diversity through the synthesis of previous research. The research uses a systematic literature review approach by analyzing 20 scientific journal articles that discuss school climate, inclusive classroom climate, inclusive education, cultural diversity, teacher support, school safety, discrimination, and school belonging. The analysis was carried out thematically by identifying the research focus, characteristics of the school environment, influence mechanisms, and implications on students' experiences. The results of the study show that the school environment plays a role through five interrelated dimensions, namely inclusive culture and policies, the quality of teacher-student and peer relations, physical and psychological safety, recognition of cultural diversity and identity, and participation and belonging to schools. The literature shows that the existence of demographically diverse students does not automatically result in inclusive education. Inclusivity is formed when diversity is translated into school norms, pedagogical practices, social relations, protection mechanisms, and decision-making. Studies also show that multicultural and pluralistic approaches are more supportive of students' positive experiences than assimilationist or color-blind approaches. Therefore, the development of an inclusive education climate requires a whole-school approach that integrates leadership, teacher capacity building, inclusive pedagogy, multicultural education, discrimination prevention, and students' experience-based evaluation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Schools are educational institutions as well as social spaces where students from various backgrounds interact, learn, form identities, and develop social skills. In this space, differences in academic ability, educational needs, socio-economic conditions, culture, language, ethnicity, and family experiences are unavoidable realities. Therefore, the quality of education is not enough to be judged by the school's ability to produce academic achievements, but also by its capacity to create an environment that allows all students to have opportunities to learn and participate fairly. This view places the school environment as an integral part of the quality of education, not just the administrative context in which learning takes place. (Wang & Degol, 2016)

In the educational literature, the concept of school climate develops as a multidimensional construct that includes the quality of social relations, safety, learning processes, norms, and the institutional environment of the school. It identifies four major domains, namely academic, community, security, and institutional environment. This multidimensional understanding is important because students' educational experiences

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are formed through the simultaneous interaction of various elements. Schools that have a good learning process, for example, do not necessarily provide a positive educational experience if students face discrimination or feel unsafe. Thus, school climate needs to be understood as an ecological experience that connects the academic and social dimensions of school life. (Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016)

This perspective has a strong relevance to inclusive education. Inclusive education does not stop at providing access to students who were previously excluded. Placing inclusion as a process of developing pedagogical practices that are able to expand learning opportunities for all students. Thus, inclusion should not be understood as a special program for a certain group, but as a principle of education implementation that places diversity as a normal condition in learning. The implication is that schools must be able to develop a flexible system for differences without using differences as an excuse to marginalize students. (Florian & Spratt, 2013)

The problem is that the presence of diverse students in one school does not automatically create inclusion. suggests that students with special educational needs may have lower levels of social integration than their classmates even if they study in the same educational environment. The findings show a difference between physical inclusion and social inclusion. The presence of students in the same classroom is only a structural prerequisite; substantive inclusion demands the formation of social relationships, acceptance, support, and real opportunities for participation. (Heyder et al., 2020)

The classroom climate is one of the main spaces where inclusion is realized. It shows that the development of an inclusive classroom climate is one of the important foundations in the development of inclusive schools because inclusive learning practices are ultimately experienced by students through daily interactions in the classroom. School policies that support inclusion can lose their meaning if learning practices still use an approach that ignores the diversity of students' needs. Therefore, school transformation needs to connect policy and organizational levels with classroom practices. (Margas, 2023)

Another problem arises in the context of cultural diversity. Schools are not only dealing with differences in learning abilities, but also with students who bring different cultural identities and social experiences. It shows that the climate of cultural diversity in the classroom is a complex construct and has several dimensions. This means that it is not enough for schools to provide interaction between students from different backgrounds. The way schools view and respond to diversity also determines the quality of those interactions. An environment that recognizes diversity can produce a different experience than an environment that seeks to eliminate differences. (Schachner et al., 2021)

The findings reinforce this perspective by showing the complexity of the school's racial climate which includes the experience of intergroup interaction and the process of cultural socialization. Schools are not only places where students learn academic materials, but also where they receive messages about social groups, identities, differences, and their position in the community. Therefore, hidden curriculum and daily interaction practices need attention in building an inclusive school environment. (Byrd, 2017)

In this context, the concept of school belonging is becoming increasingly important. School belonging refers to the experiences of learners when they feel accepted, valued, supported, and part of the school community. Finding a positive relationship between inclusive school climate and school belonging of students with immigrant backgrounds. The research also shows that multicultural educational practices can help build a more inclusive climate. (Choi et al., 2025)

Safety is another dimension that cannot be separated from inclusion. Schools that allow bullying, violence, or discrimination to flourish cannot be categorized as diversity-friendly educational environments. , through a multilevel study of 3,311 students in 94 schools in Sweden, showed that schools with better pedagogical and social climates had lower rates of bullying victimization. The findings indicate that bullying prevention is not solely a matter of individual behavior, but also related to the quality of the school climate. (Hultin et al., 2021)

The issue of discrimination also has a psychological dimension. It shows that experiences of ethnicity-based victimization and cultural identity conflicts can be oppressive experiences for students from minority groups. These conditions show that schools must provide an environment that allows students to negotiate their identities safely. An environment that imposes one form of identity as a normal standard can widen the psychological distance between majority and minority groups. (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2021)

In recent research developments, the relationship between diversity climate and educational outcomes is increasingly gaining empirical support. , through a meta-analysis of 79 studies, 56,552 learners, and 640 effect measures, showed that different forms of cultural diversity climate were related to intergroup, academic, and social-emotional outcomes. Climates that provided optimal contact conditions and multicultural climates showed relatively consistent associations with a wide range of positive outcomes, whereas colorblind climates showed no significant associations in general. (Bardach et al., 2024)

These findings are important because they show that the way schools treat diversity is not just a normative issue. Diversity management has implications for motivation, engagement, academic achievement, intergroup relationships, and student well-being. In other words, inclusive education does not need to be placed as an agenda separate from improving academic quality. On the contrary, a positive school climate can be one of the conditions that support educational achievement. (Bardach et al., 2024; Wang & Degol, 2016)

However, research on school climate still shows fragmentation. Some research focuses on students with special educational needs, some on cultural diversity, some on bullying, and some on school belonging. As a result, a synthesis is needed that connects these various dimensions in a single conceptual framework. It has shown the breadth of the scope of school climate research, but further research developments show that the issues of diversity, inclusion, and identity require more specific attention. (Thapa et al., 2013)

Based on these conditions, the research gap of this article lies in the need to integrate various findings about the school environment into a framework that explains how schools form an inclusive educational climate, rather than simply showing that the school climate correlates with student outcomes. Thus, this article not only inventories the results of the research, but synthesizes the mechanisms that connect policies, culture, pedagogical practices, social relations, security, recognition of diversity, and school belonging.

This research aims to analyze the role of the school environment in building an inclusive and diversity-friendly educational climate for students. The research questions asked are: (1) what dimensions of the school environment are most consistently related to inclusive education; (2) through what mechanisms the school environment influences the diverse experiences of students; and (3) how schools can develop institutional approaches to building an inclusive educational climate.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The approach was chosen because the research is directed to identify, compare, and synthesize previous research findings regarding the relationship between the school environment and inclusive education.

Literature search was directed to scientific journal articles with a combination of the keywords school climate, inclusive school climate, inclusive education, inclusive classroom climate, cultural diversity climate, school belonging, multicultural education, teacher attitudes, school safety, and student diversity. Articles are prioritized in peer-reviewed publications that have DOIs and directly discuss the relationship between the school environment, inclusion, diversity, social relations, safety, or belonging.

Inclusion criteria include: (1) the article is published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal; (2) it has a verifiable DOI; (3) the research focus is related to the school climate, inclusive education, student diversity, social relations, school safety, or school belonging; and (4) the article provides empirical findings or relevant conceptual contributions. An article is excluded if it does not have substantive relevance to the focus of the study or the bibliographic information is inadequate.

A total of 20 articles were selected as the main corpus of studies. The analysis was carried out through thematic analysis by grouping the findings into five categories: (1) school policies and culture; (2) teacher-student and peer relations; (3) safety and discrimination; (4) recognition of cultural diversity and identity; and (5) school participation and belonging. Furthermore, the findings were compared to identify consistent patterns, differences, and mechanisms of interdimensional relationships.

Because the design of the source research is heterogeneous and not all articles report the effect size that can be directly compared, the synthesis is carried out in a narrative-thematic manner. Thus, this study does not produce new effect estimates and does not use fictitious field data. All conclusions in the results section are the result of a synthesis of the research findings that become the study corpus.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the synthesis show that the school environment needs to be understood as an ecological system consisting of structural, social, pedagogical, and psychological elements. A multidimensional perspective on the school climate shows that the students' experience is shaped simultaneously by the quality of learning, social relations, safety, and the institutional environment. Emphasizing that the reduction of school climate to a matter of discipline or academic achievement will eliminate the complexity of the construct. It also shows that school climate research includes aspects of safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment. Thus, when the concept is applied in inclusive education, the school environment should be seen as a network of conditions that allow or hinder the participation of all students. (Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016)

Placing the classroom climate as an important component because the classroom is the closest place to the learner's experience. An inclusive school climate must be translated into inclusive learning practices. Thus, institutional change and pedagogical change are inseparable. This results in the first proposition of this study: the school environment becomes inclusive when policies, cultures, and learning practices result in a consistent experience of acceptance and participation opportunities. (Margas, 2023; Florian & Spratt, 2013)

School culture is one of the fundamental factors in determining whether diversity is treated as an asset or a problem. Schools can respond to differences with an assimilationist, colorblind, or multicultural approach. Each approach produces different social consequences. It shows that school diversity policies are related to the gap in belonging and achievement between minority and majority groups. The findings show that policies are not neutral. The way institutions define diversity can affect how students understand their position in the school community. (Celeste et al., 2019)

The colorblind approach seeks to treat all learners equally by ignoring identity categories. At first glance, this approach seems egalitarian. However, it shows that the colorblind climate does not have a significant relationship in general with the various outcomes analyzed in their meta-analysis. The findings do not mean that equal treatment is not important, but suggest that ignoring differences is not a sufficient strategy to create inclusion. Instead, the multicultural approach seeks to acknowledge the existence of different group identities and experiences. Such recognition does not mean treating groups separately, but provides legitimacy that diverse cultural experiences have a place in the school community. (Bardach et al., 2024; Schachner et al., 2021)

If school culture is a macro mechanism, then the teacher-student relationship is a micro-mechanism that translates these values into everyday experiences. It was found that students with special educational needs experienced lower social integration than students without special needs. These findings suggest that physical inclusion does not automatically result in social integration. Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are one of the contexts that can influence these gaps. (Heyder et al., 2020)

Shows the relationship between school climate, teacher efficacy, and teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. The findings show that teachers do not work in isolated spaces. Positive attitudes toward inclusion can be strengthened or weakened by the organizational context in which teachers work. It also shows the importance of a collegial climate in understanding the implementation of inclusive education. Professional support from fellow teachers can help teachers cope with the complexities of heterogeneous classrooms. Therefore, it is not enough for teachers' professional development to be done through individualized training; schools need to create a professional community where teachers can discuss, share strategies, reflect, and gain support. (Fu et al., 2021; Maeda et al., 2021)

Safety is a non-negotiable dimension in inclusive education. Students cannot learn optimally if they experience physical threats, bullying, bullying, or discrimination. Provides evidence that schools with better climates have lower rates of bullying victimization. The study used data from 3,311 students in 94 schools and showed that the quality of the pedagogical and social climate is related to bullying experiences. (Hultin et al., 2021)

Shows that the classroom behavior climate is related to physical and psychological safety, teacher support, emotional experiences, and social inclusion. Thus, safety should not be reduced to the absence of violence. Safety also includes the feeling that students can express their opinions without fear of being humiliated or ostracized. Therefore, anti-bullying policies need to be integrated with the development of school culture. Handling cases after bullying has occurred is still necessary, but a preventive approach should be a major part of the school's strategy. (Hoffmann et al., 2021)

Cultural diversity presents its own challenges because students' identities are often related to family and community experiences. When certain identities are seen as less than normal, learners may experience pressure to hide or reduce their expression of identity. It shows that experiences of cultural conflict at home and ethnicity-based victimization can

be complex experiences for learners from minority backgrounds. These issues demonstrate the importance of schools as spaces that give legitimacy to diversity of identities. (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2021)

Develop a conception of the school's racial climate that pays attention to the experience of intergroup interaction and cultural socialization. These findings are important because discrimination is not always in the form of explicit actions. It can also appear through learning materials, cultural representations, language used, or stereotypes that are considered normal. Therefore, inclusive education needs to pay attention to hidden curriculum. Messages conveyed indirectly can have a great influence on students' perceptions of themselves and other groups. (Byrd, 2017)

Multicultural education is not just about including multiple cultures in the subject matter, but developing students' ability to understand differences, interact positively, and critically assess injustice. shows that a multicultural climate is positively related to intergroup attitudes, achievements, motivation, and belonging. shows that the climate of cultural diversity needs to be understood through several dimensions, including cultural pluralism and polyculturalism. The polycultural approach emphasizes that cultures do not develop separately, but rather influence and interact with each other. (Schachner et al., 2021; Bardach et al., 2024)

Provide specific evidence about learners with immigrant backgrounds. PISA 2018 data-driven research shows a positive relationship between inclusive school climate and school belonging, while showing that multicultural educational practices can contribute to the formation of such climates. In the context of schools, this approach allows learners to understand that cultural identity is not something completely closed. Intercultural interaction can actually generate new knowledge and experiences. (Choi et al., 2025)

One of the important contributions of literature is the placement of school belonging as an indicator of inclusive experience. Students who feel accepted, valued, and part of the school community tend to have a more positive educational experience. It shows the importance of the voice of students with special educational needs in understanding positive experiences at school. The findings confirm that schools cannot determine for themselves whether their practices are inclusive without listening to those who experience the practice directly. (Dimitrellou & Male, 2020)

Strengthening the position of belonging by showing that inclusive school climate is related to the sense of belonging of learners with immigrant backgrounds. Conceptually, belonging can be positioned as a mediation mechanism. School policies and culture shape the quality of the environment; the quality of the environment shapes social experiences; social experiences shape the sense of acceptance and value; then belonging influences learners' involvement in school life. Therefore, the evaluation of inclusive schools should use not only administrative indicators, but also learners' perceptions of acceptance, safety, support, and opportunities to participate. (Choi et al., 2025)

An inclusive environment requires leadership that is able to translate the value of inclusion into an organizational system. Leadership not only functions to produce policies, but also allocates resources, builds a professional culture, and ensures policies are implemented consistently. It shows the importance of school capacity in building an inclusive school climate. The concept of inclusive school climate places inclusion as an organizational capacity, not just an individual characteristic of teachers. (Emam & Al-Mahdy, 2022)

The findings suggest that leadership works through organizational mechanisms. Principals who have a strong orientation towards inclusion need to build a work system

that allows teachers to work collaboratively. Teachers need to have time for discussions, support to deal with students with diverse needs, and access to necessary resources. Inclusive leadership also needs to open up spaces for participation for learners and parents. (Yada & Savolainen, 2023)

Attention to inclusion does not necessarily reduce the school's focus on academic achievement. through a meta-analysis of K–12 research, showing a relationship between classroom climate and school climate and academic achievement. It also shows that school climate is related to a wide range of learners' outcomes, including academic achievement, engagement, and social-emotional development. (Erdem & Kaya, 2024; Wang & Degol, 2016)

This relationship can be explained through several mechanisms. First, a safe environment reduces social disturbances that can hinder concentration. Second, teacher support increases student engagement. Third, belonging strengthens students' attachment to school. Fourth, positive relationships create psychological conditions that are more supportive of learning. Thus, inclusion and academic achievement are not two goals that should be opposed. Schools can improve both through the development of a supportive learning environment. (Wang & Degol, 2016)

One of the main challenges is the gap between school-level policies and classroom-level practices. Schools can declare a commitment to inclusion, but their implementation is highly dependent on teachers and classroom interactions. Placing the classroom climate as an important mechanism in connecting inclusive learning practices to school inclusion goals. Because the classroom is the environment closest to learners, changes at this level can have a direct effect on their experience. (Margas, 2023)

Therefore, schools cannot assume that the same policies result in the same experience for all learners. Inclusive climate evaluations need to be done at a multilevel: schools evaluate policies and culture at the institutional level, practices at the grade level, as well as experiences at the individual level. (Schachner et al., 2021)

The literature analyzed shows the importance of placing students as a source of knowledge about the quality of the school environment. Students experience firsthand how teachers treat them, how peers interact, whether schools are safe, and whether their identities are valued. Specifically, it shows the value of the voices of students with special educational needs in understanding a positive school experience. (Dimitrellou & Male, 2020)

It shows that school climate measurement based on student perceptions has a more consistent relationship with bullying victimization than measurement based on teacher perception. Thus, student surveys can be a tool for school improvement. Schools can periodically measure their sense of security, teacher support, peer acceptance, appreciation for diversity, and school belonging. The data needs to be used not to label schools, but as a basis for reflection and improvement. (Hultin et al., 2021)

A synthesis of 20 studies shows that interventions that target only one component of the school environment have limitations. Inclusive education requires a whole-school approach, which involves the entire school structure and actors. At the leadership level, schools need to have policies that explicitly protect diversity. At the organizational level, schools need to provide resources and support systems for teachers. At the pedagogical level, teachers need to use learning strategies that are responsive to diversity. At the social level, schools need to build anti-bullying norms and positive intergroup relationships. (Emam & Al-Mahdy, 2022; Maeda et al., 2021)

shows that school capacity is an important part of inclusive climate development. shows the importance of a collegial climate for the implementation of inclusive education. shows the role of teacher efficacy in the relationship between school climate and attitudes towards inclusion. If the three findings are synthesized, it appears that inclusion has an ecological and organizational character. Teachers are important actors, but teacher capacity is shaped by organizational contexts. Therefore, policies to increase inclusion need to move from an individual approach to a systems approach. (Fu et al., 2021; Maeda et al., 2021; Yada & Savolainen, 2023)

Based on a synthesis of 20 articles, this study formulates a conceptual model that an inclusive school environment is formed through a five-layer relationship. The first layer is inclusive leadership and policy. The second layer is the culture and norms of the school that determine how differences are understood. The third layer is pedagogical practices and social relations that translate norms into everyday experiences. The fourth layer is safety, nondiscrimination, and protection. The fifth layer is participation, acceptance, and school belonging. (Emam & Al-Mahdy, 2022; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016)

These relationships are dynamic. Policies shape culture; culture influences teacher and learner behavior; behavior shapes social experiences; social experiences form belonging; and learners' perceptions of the environment can be feedback for policy improvement. The model suggests that inclusion cannot be achieved through a single program. Multicultural education programs without school culture change can be symbolic activities. Teacher training without organizational support can result in limited change. Anti-bullying policies without strengthening social relationships can be reactive. (Bardach et al., 2024; Celeste et al., 2019; Hultin et al., 2021)

Theoretically, this study expands the understanding of school climate by integrating the perspectives of school climate, inclusive education, multicultural education, and school belonging. The literature shows that these four perspectives should not be treated as completely separate fields. School climate provides an ecological context; inclusive education provides a normative orientation regarding equality and participation; multicultural education provides strategies for managing cultural diversity; while school belonging provides indicators of students' subjective experiences. (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Schachner et al., 2021; Wang & Degol, 2016)

The integration of these four perspectives allows for a more complete understanding that inclusive schools are not just schools with a diverse composition of learners. Inclusive schools are organizations that are able to transform diversity into equitable and meaningful learning experiences. Conceptually, the success of inclusion can be seen as the result of a fit between structures, cultures, practices, and learners' experiences. (Bardach et al., 2024; Choi et al., 2025)

Based on the results of the synthesis, schools need to conduct inclusive climate audits on a regular basis. The audit uses not only the perspectives of principals and teachers, but also students. Teachers' professional development needs to be directed at pedagogical and social competencies, including differentiated learning, heterogeneous classroom management, multicultural education, and discrimination prevention. Schools also need to develop anti-bullying and nondiscrimination policies that have clear implementation procedures. (Fu et al., 2021; Maeda et al., 2021)

Curriculum and teaching materials need to be reviewed to ensure that cultural diversity and identity are proportionately and not stereotypically. Schools need to strengthen professional support systems between teachers. Students' voices need to be part of decision-making, particularly regarding safety, discrimination, social relations, and

learning. Finally, the success of inclusion needs to be assessed through broader indicators than access, including participation, social integration, belonging, safety, well-being, and academic achievement. (Choi et al., 2025; Hultin et al., 2021)

4. CONCLUSION

The school environment has a fundamental role in building an inclusive and welcoming educational climate for student diversity. Based on a synthesis of 20 journal articles, inclusion cannot be understood only as the existence of students with diverse characteristics in one educational institution. Inclusion is an environmental quality that allows all students to feel safe, accepted, appreciated, supported, and have the opportunity to participate meaningfully. (Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016)

Five main dimensions are found as the foundation of an inclusive school climate. First, inclusive leadership and policies provide institutional direction for respect for diversity. Second, school culture and norms determine how differences are perceived and treated. Third, teacher-student relationships and pedagogical practices translate the principles of inclusion into everyday learning experiences. Fourth, safety and nondiscrimination provide physical, psychological, social, and identity protection. Fifth, participation and school belonging are important indicators of whether these policies and practices are truly felt by students. (Emam & Al-Mahdy, 2022; Dimitrellou & Male, 2020)

The synthesis also shows that diversity does not automatically lead to inclusion. Multicultural approaches and recognition of diversity tend to yield more positive results than approaches oriented towards assimilation or identity abandonment. Therefore, schools should not seek to eliminate differences, but rather manage differences through the principles of equality and respect. (Bardach et al., 2024; Celeste et al., 2019; Schachner et al., 2021)

The main implication of the research is the need for a whole-school approach. Inclusive education cannot be imposed only on special education teachers or teachers. Principals, teachers, education staff, students, parents, and communities need to be placed as part of the inclusion ecosystem. Thus, inclusive schools are not just schools that accept diversity, but schools that are able to organize the entire education system so that diversity does not turn into exclusion. (Emam & Al-Mahdy, 2022; Yada & Savolainen, 2023)

Further research can test this conceptual model through empirical research in the context of Indonesian education, especially by comparing schools based on regional characteristics, education level, school status, and the level of diversity of students.

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