



THE INTERPLAY OF EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT AND STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract:

Inclusive education increasingly emphasises the need to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students, particularly children and students with disabilities. Within this context, educational support and student participation emerge as central constructs shaping the quality and effectiveness of inclusive educational practices. This paper explores the interplay between educational support and student participation from a theoretical perspective, focusing on their role in promoting meaningful engagement and autonomy in inclusive settings. The study is based on a conceptual and analytical review of contemporary literature in inclusive and special education, complemented by an examination of relevant international policy frameworks. Educational support is conceptualised as an integral component of teaching that encompasses environmental adaptation, pedagogical accompaniment, and the facilitation of learner autonomy. Student participation is examined as a multidimensional construct, encompassing academic, social, and emotional engagement in the learning process. The analysis demonstrates that educational support and participation function as interdependent and mutually reinforcing processes. Supportive practices create the conditions for participation, while participation activates and gives purpose to support, particularly for students with disabilities. The paper argues that autonomy emerges as a developmental outcome of sustained participation within supportive learning environments. By conceptualising support and participation as inseparable elements of inclusive education, the study contributes to the theoretical foundations of special and inclusive pedagogy and offers insights for inclusive educational practice.

Keywords: inclusive education; educational support; student participation; children with disabilities; special educational needs

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has increasingly been recognised as a fundamental principle of contemporary educational systems, grounded in the right of every child to access quality education regardless of individual abilities, needs, or disabilities. Within this framework, the concepts of educational support and student participation emerge as central elements (Ainscow, 2020), shaping the effectiveness and authenticity of inclusive practices, particularly in the education of children and students with disabilities.

Educational support in inclusive contexts extends beyond compensatory measures or isolated interventions. It represents a pedagogical approach aimed at responding to learner diversity through purposeful adaptation of the learning environment, instructional strategies, and teacher-student interactions. At the same time, student participation is understood not merely as physical presence in the classroom, but as active academic, social, and emotional engagement in learning processes (Garbacheva, 2015; Fidosieva, 2025). The dynamic relationship between these two concepts forms the core of inclusive education, where support becomes a prerequisite for meaningful participation.

For children and students with disabilities, participation in inclusive educational settings is closely linked to the availability, quality, and coherence of educational support. Supportive practices enable learners to access learning content, engage in social interactions, and develop autonomy, while participation, in turn, validates and activates the supportive structures embedded in the educational environment. This interdependence challenges traditional views of teaching and learning and calls for a rethinking of the teacher's role - from transmitter of knowledge to mediator, facilitator (Fougeyrollas, 2010), and companion in learning processes.

In recent years, international policy documents and educational frameworks have emphasised the need for systematic support mechanisms to ensure equitable participation of all learners (UNESCO, 2019; UNESCO, 2024; OECD, 2024). However, the theoretical relationship between educational support and participation remains underexplored, particularly in relation to children with disabilities. Existing literature often addresses these concepts separately, without sufficiently analysing their interaction within these contexts.

The present paper aims to examine the interplay between educational support and student participation in inclusive education from a theoretical perspective. Through a critical analysis of contemporary pedagogical literature and normative frameworks, the article explores how support-oriented practices foster participation and how participation, in turn, contributes to the development of autonomy and learning outcomes for students with disabilities. By conceptualising support and participation as interdependent components of inclusive education, the paper seeks to contribute to the theoretical foundations of special and inclusive pedagogy and to inform educational practice.

2. Literature Review

The contemporary understanding of inclusive education is grounded in the recognition of learner diversity and the obligation of educational systems to respond to the individual needs of all students, including those with disabilities (Ainscow, 2020). Within this paradigm, educational support and student participation are increasingly conceptualised as interconnected pedagogical constructs rather than independent or sequential processes.

2.1 Educational Support in Inclusive Education

Educational support has evolved from a compensatory mechanism addressing school failure to a core component of inclusive educational practice. Early conceptualisations framed support primarily as a response to learning difficulties and the risk of educational exclusion (Perrenoud, 1991). Over time, this understanding has expanded towards a pedagogical interpretation that emphasises responsiveness to diversity and proactive adaptation of teaching and learning processes.

International frameworks highlight educational support as an essential condition for inclusion and equitable access to education (UNESCO, 2019). Rather than being limited to additional resources or specialised interventions, support encompasses the organisation of learning environments, instructional strategies, and relational dimensions of teaching. Research in inclusive pedagogy emphasises that effective support is inseparable from differentiation and flexibility in teaching, allowing educators to respond to varying abilities, learning styles, and needs (Crono & Snow, 1986; Ducette, Sewell, & Poliner, 1996; Prud'homme, Ramel, & Vienneau, 2011).

Several authors underline the central role of teachers in designing and implementing support-oriented practices. Support is understood as embedded in everyday teaching through instructional choices, assessment practices, classroom climate, and interpersonal relationships (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Potgieter-Groot, Visser, & Lubbe-de Beer, 2012). From this perspective, educational support is not an external addition to teaching but constitutes teaching itself.

Recent theoretical work conceptualises educational support as a multidimensional construct that includes environmental adaptation, pedagogical accompaniment, and the development of learner autonomy (Prud'homme, 2020). This framework positions support as a dynamic and relational process, shaped by institutional culture and pedagogical values, rather than a purely technical intervention.

2.1 Participation as a Core Dimension of Inclusive Education

Participation has been widely recognised as a fundamental outcome and indicator of inclusive education. Drawing on broader social and educational frameworks, participation is defined as active involvement in academic, social, and emotional aspects of school life (Garbacheva, 2015; Garbacheva, 2018). In inclusive educational contexts, participation extends beyond physical presence in the classroom and reflects meaningful engagement in learning and interaction.

Educational research distinguishes multiple dimensions of participation. Academic participation refers to engagement in learning tasks, classroom activities, and instructional processes (Finn, 1989; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Social participation encompasses interaction with peers and adults, collaboration, and a sense of belonging within the school community (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Johnson & Johnson, 2019). Emotional participation relates to students' interest, motivation, and affective engagement in learning activities (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014).

For students with disabilities, participation is closely linked to the accessibility and responsiveness of the educational environment. Research highlights that participation cannot be achieved without intentional pedagogical planning and supportive conditions that address individual needs and remove barriers to learning and interaction (Ainscow, 2020). In this sense, participation functions both as a goal of inclusive education and as a process that reflects the quality of support provided.

2.3 Interplay between Educational Support and Participation

The literature increasingly points to a reciprocal relationship between educational support and participation. Support-oriented practices create the conditions for participation, while active participation reinforces learning processes and contributes to the development of autonomy and competence (Hattie, 2017). This dynamic interplay challenges linear models that position support merely as a preliminary stage preceding participation.

Prud'homme (2020) emphasises that educational support involves cultural and institutional transformation, requiring a shift from deficit-oriented approaches to pedagogical designs that value diversity. Within such frameworks, participation is not an outcome reserved for students who meet predefined criteria but a right ensured through adaptive and responsive educational practices.

In inclusive classrooms, the interaction between support and participation is particularly significant for students with disabilities. Adaptation of the learning environment, pedagogical accompaniment, and opportunities for autonomous action jointly contribute to sustained engagement and learning success (Fidosieva, 2025). These processes underscore the need to conceptualise support and participation as interdependent components of inclusive education rather than isolated pedagogical variables.

3. Material and Methods

The present paper is designed as a **theoretical and analytical study** focusing on the relationship between educational support and student participation within inclusive education, with particular attention to children and students with disabilities.

3.1 Type of Study and Research Approach

The study adopts a research design combining conceptual analysis, comparative literature review, and normative analysis. This approach is appropriate for examining

complex pedagogical constructs such as educational support and participation, which are embedded in broader theoretical, institutional, and policy frameworks.

The analysis is grounded in contemporary theories of inclusive and special education, drawing on pedagogical, psychological, and policy-oriented perspectives. Special emphasis is placed on literature addressing inclusive practices for students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and physical impairments.

3.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The primary sources for analysis include:

- peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books in the fields of inclusive education and special pedagogy;
- international policy documents and frameworks related to inclusive education and the rights of learners with disabilities (e.g., UNESCO).

The selection of sources was guided by the following criteria:

- relevance to the concepts of educational support and/or student participation;
- explicit focus on inclusive education and disability;
- theoretical or conceptual contribution to understanding pedagogical processes;
- academic credibility and publication in recognised scholarly outlets.

Recent studies emphasising participation-oriented inclusive practices and learner engagement were included to ensure alignment with current developments in the field (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2024; Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2015).

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three interrelated stages:

1. **Conceptual analysis** of educational support and participation as distinct but interdependent constructs in inclusive education.
2. **Comparative review** of theoretical models addressing learner diversity, support mechanisms, and participation across inclusive settings.
3. **Normative analysis** of policy-oriented literature to identify key principles guiding inclusive educational practice for students with disabilities.

Through this process, educational support was examined in relation to environmental adaptation, pedagogical accompaniment, and autonomy development, while participation was analysed across academic, social, and emotional dimensions. The interplay between these elements served as the analytical framework for the discussion.

4. Results

The theoretical analysis of educational support and student participation in inclusive education reveals several core conceptual findings that clarify their relationship and pedagogical significance, particularly in the context of educating children and students with disabilities.

4.1 Educational Support as a Structural Condition for Participation

The analysis demonstrates that educational support functions as a structural condition for student participation in inclusive educational settings (Oswal, et al., 2025; Nketsia, et al., 2025). Support is not limited to compensatory or remedial actions but is embedded within the organisation of the learning environment, instructional design, and teacher-student interactions (Fidosieva, 2025). Adaptation of physical, instructional, and communicative aspects of the classroom emerges as a fundamental requirement for enabling participation among students with diverse educational needs.

These findings indicate that when educational support is systematically planned and integrated into everyday teaching practices, it creates accessible learning contexts that allow students with disabilities to engage meaningfully in academic activities and classroom interactions.

4.2 Pedagogical Accompaniment as a Mechanism for Sustained Engagement

A second result highlights the role of pedagogical accompaniment as a key mechanism supporting sustained student participation. Accompaniment includes continuous guidance, feedback, emotional support, and encouragement, facilitating students' active involvement in learning processes (Thomas, 2024). This result emphasises the relational dimension of educational support, where participation is fostered through responsive and personalised teacher mediation.

The analysis shows that pedagogical accompaniment supports multiple dimensions of participation – academic, social, and emotional – by enabling students to make choices, express preferences, and take an active role in learning tasks (Alhassan, 2025). For students with disabilities, such accompaniment contributes to increased engagement and continuity of participation across learning contexts.

4.3 Autonomy as an Outcome of the Support–Participation Relationship

The results further indicate that autonomy represents a key outcome of the interaction between educational support and participation. Autonomy is understood not as independence from support but as a developmental process enabled through supportive and participatory learning environments (Zimmerman, 1990). When students are provided with consistent opportunities for participation within supportive structures, they develop self-regulation, confidence, and responsibility for their learning.

This finding underscores that educational support, when aligned with participatory practices, facilitates the gradual development of learner autonomy, including for students with disabilities who may require ongoing support.

4.4 Interdependence of Support and Participation in Inclusive Education

The final result confirms the interdependent nature of educational support and student participation. Support enables participation by reducing barriers and creating accessible learning conditions, while participation gives direction and meaning to support by activating learners' engagement and agency. This reciprocal relationship positions

support and participation as inseparable components of inclusive education rather than sequential stages.

Taken together, these results outline a conceptual framework in which educational support and student participation are positioned as interdependent and mutually reinforcing elements within the learning environment. Educational support, enacted through environmental adaptation, pedagogical accompaniment, and interaction, creates the conditions for academic, social, and emotional participation, leading to the formation of learner autonomy (Figure 1).

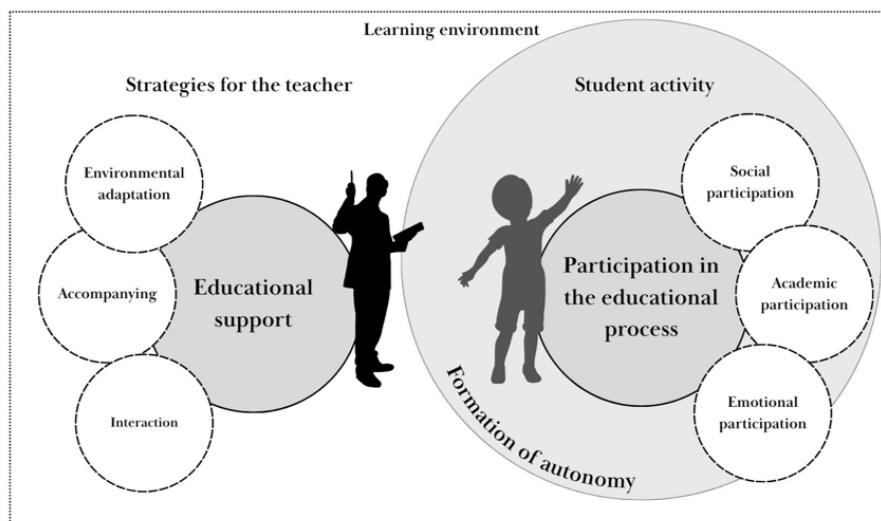


Figure 1: Educational support and participation in the educational process within the learning environment

5. Discussion

The results of the theoretical analysis reinforce the position that inclusive education cannot be meaningfully realised without a coherent integration of educational support and student participation. Rather than functioning as parallel or independent constructs, support and participation emerge as mutually constitutive processes that shape the quality and outcomes of inclusive educational practices, particularly for children and students with disabilities.

5.1 Educational Support Beyond Compensatory Models

The findings support a shift away from traditional compensatory models of educational support that focus primarily on remediating individual deficits. Consistent with earlier theoretical contributions (Perrenoud, 1991; Prud'homme, Ramel & Vienneau, 2011), the results indicate that support should be understood as an integral component of teaching. This aligns with contemporary inclusive pedagogy, which conceptualises support as embedded in instructional design, classroom interactions, and learning environments rather than as an external add-on.

Recent policy-oriented and theoretical literature further strengthens this perspective. UNESCO (2024) and OECD (2024) emphasise that inclusive education

requires systemic support structures that address barriers to participation at multiple levels, including curriculum design, assessment practices, and classroom organisation. From this standpoint, educational support functions as a means of ensuring equity and access, particularly for learners with disabilities, by enabling meaningful participation rather than merely facilitating attendance.

5.2 Participation as a Pedagogical and Ethical Imperative

The discussion of participation highlights its dual role as both a pedagogical outcome and an ethical principle of inclusive education. In line with the work of Garbacheva (2015, 2018), participation encompasses academic, social, and emotional engagement, reflecting the holistic nature of learning and development. The results underscore that participation is not an automatic consequence of inclusion but a process that must be actively cultivated through supportive pedagogical practices.

Contemporary research reinforces this interpretation by framing participation as a central indicator of educational quality and learner well-being (OECD, 2024). For students with disabilities, participation is closely tied to their sense of belonging, motivation, and agency within the school environment. This positions participation not as a conditional achievement but as a fundamental right that inclusive education must actively protect and promote.

5.3 Pedagogical Accompaniment and the Role of the Teacher

The findings related to pedagogical accompaniment emphasise the central role of teachers in mediating the relationship between support and participation. Teachers act as facilitators who design learning experiences, scaffold participation, and create relational conditions that sustain engagement (Fougeyrollas, 2010; Bruner, 1997). This interpretation resonates with Florian's (2015) inclusive pedagogical framework, which advocates for teaching approaches that anticipate diversity and avoid practices that segregate or label learners.

From this perspective, pedagogical accompaniment extends beyond instructional support to include emotional attunement, encouragement, and recognition of students' efforts. Such relational practices are particularly significant for students with disabilities, whose participation may be constrained by previous experiences of exclusion or marginalisation. The discussion thus reinforces the need to reconceptualise teacher professionalism in inclusive settings as inherently relational and participatory.

5.4 Autonomy as a Developmental Outcome of Inclusion

The discussion of autonomy further elaborates the results by framing this capacity as a developmental outcome emerging from sustained participation within supportive learning environments. In line with Hattie's (2017) emphasis on learner agency, autonomy is understood not as independence from support but as the capacity to engage in self-regulated learning within a structured and responsive educational context.

Recent inclusive education literature (UNESCO, 2024) highlights that fostering autonomy among students with disabilities requires intentional pedagogical design that

balances guidance and choice. The results of this study contribute to this discourse by illustrating how participation-oriented support enables learners to gradually assume responsibility for their learning while remaining connected to supportive structures.

Table 1 synthesizes the key dimensions of pedagogical support and their contribution to different forms of student participation and the development of autonomy.

Table 1: Pedagogical support and participation in inclusive education

Dimension of pedagogical support	Focus of teacher action	Contribution to participation and autonomy
Environmental adaptation	Structuring accessible physical, instructional, and communicative conditions	Enables academic and social participation
Pedagogical accompaniment	Guidance, feedback, emotional and instructional support	Sustains engagement and emotional participation
Interaction	Dialogic teaching and responsive communication	Strengthens social participation and learner agency
Autonomy-oriented practices	Offering choice and opportunities for self-regulation	Supports the development of learner autonomy

5.5 Implications for Inclusive and Special Pedagogy

Taken together, the discussion underscores the necessity of conceptualising educational support and student participation as core, interconnected elements of inclusive education. This has important implications for special and inclusive pedagogy, particularly in moving beyond deficit-oriented approaches towards participatory and strength-based frameworks.

inclusive classroom practices, teacher education, and policy development. By positioning participation as both a goal and a process sustained through educational support, inclusive education can better respond to the diverse needs of learners with disabilities and promote equitable learning opportunities.

6. Conclusion

This theoretical study examined the interplay between educational support and student participation within inclusive education, with a particular focus on children and students with disabilities. The analysis demonstrated that support and participation are not isolated or sequential components of inclusive practice but interdependent processes that jointly shape learners' engagement, development, and educational outcomes.

The findings highlight that educational support, when embedded in everyday teaching practices, functions as a structural condition for meaningful participation. Adaptation of the learning environment, pedagogical accompaniment, and the creation of supportive relational contexts enable students with disabilities to engage academically, socially, and emotionally in the learning process. Participation, in turn, activates and gives purpose to supportive practices by fostering engagement, agency, and continuity in learning.

The study further emphasised autonomy as a key developmental outcome emerging from the dynamic relationship between support and participation. Autonomy was conceptualised not as independence from support, but as a gradual process enabled through sustained participation within responsive and inclusive learning environments. This perspective challenges deficit-oriented approaches and reinforces strength-based models in special and inclusive pedagogy.

Overall, the analysis contributes to the theoretical foundations of inclusive education by conceptualising educational support and student participation as core, inseparable elements of inclusive practice. Recognising their interplay provides a conceptually framework for rethinking inclusive classroom pedagogy, teacher roles, and educational policies aimed at ensuring equitable participation and learning opportunities for children and students with disabilities.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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