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Beyond Co-Presence: Peer Contact, Acceptance and Psychosocial Experience of Students in Inclusive Classrooms in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Abstract:
Background: Inclusive education is judged not only by where students are placed but by whether they interact, are accepted and feel safe. The pandemic reduced informal peer contact, making these social conditions especially important to examine. Objective: To examine students' experiences of peer contact, peer climate, perceived benefits of inclusive learning and psychosocial well-being in inclusive classrooms after COVID-19. Method: A descriptive, cross-sectional survey of 600 students in Classes IX–XII (300 mainstream students and 300 students with disabilities) was conducted using stratified purposive sampling and a structured questionnaire. Fourteen indicators from the questionnaire's inclusive-experience and social–emotional sections were analysed in pooled form using frequencies, Wilson confidence intervals and one-sample t-tests against the scale midpoint. Results: Majorities reported comfort in inclusive classrooms (65.0%), respectful treatment (65.0%), acceptance by classmates (68.0%), active participation (65.0%), confidence (65.0%) and safety from bullying and discrimination (67.0%). Sixty-nine per cent believed that learning alongside peers of different abilities builds empathy and social skills. However, only 52.0% reported that students of different abilities always or often learn together, and 44.0% had observed exclusion from activities at least sometimes. Forty per cent felt isolated at least sometimes and 15.0% felt unsafe. Across the 14 indicators, 15.0–23.0% of students responded unfavourably. Mean scores were highest for perceived benefits and lowest for peer contact. Conclusion: Students endorse inclusion more strongly than they experience it in practice, and a persistent minority report exclusion, isolation or insecurity. Schools should convert goodwill into structured, cooperative contact and monitor the experiences of students at risk.

Keywords: inclusive education; peer relationships; social acceptance; belonging; isolation; school safety; post-COVID-19; students with disabilities.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education rests on the principle that all children, whatever their abilities, should learn together in ordinary schools (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2006). Experience has shown that this principle is not met by placement alone. A student can sit in the same classroom as peers and yet be ignored in group work, avoided in the playground or made to feel like an outsider. For this reason, the research literature increasingly treats social participation, comprising contact, friendships, acceptance and a sense of belonging, as a core criterion of successful inclusion (Koster et al., 2009; Poikola et al., 2024).

The post-COVID-19 period makes these questions pressing. Remote and hybrid learning reduced the incidental conversations, shared activities and peer help through which social bonds normally form, and evidence from the pandemic shows that students with disabilities and their families bore a disproportionate emotional and educational burden (Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2024; Hunt et al., 2024; Kauffman et al., 2022). As schools return to classroom-based and blended teaching, the quality of peer relationships has to be rebuilt deliberately, and doing so requires evidence from students themselves about how inclusion is experienced day to day.

The relevant evidence base is uneven. Many studies examine teacher attitudes, and those that include students often focus on a single group, either students with special educational needs or their classmates (Bates et al., 2015; Dell'Anna et al., 2019). Rarely are mainstream students and students with disabilities surveyed with the same instrument. This article draws on data from a doctoral survey of 600 students, half of whom have disabilities, to address four research questions: (RQ1) To what extent do students experience contact and cooperation with peers of different abilities? (RQ2) How do they perceive the peer climate in terms of respect, acceptance and exclusion? (RQ3) Do they believe that inclusive learning builds empathy and social skills, and how does that belief compare with their reported practice? (RQ4) What is their psychosocial experience in terms of participation, confidence, isolation, comfort and safety?

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framing

2.1 Contact, attitudes and acceptance

Contact theory holds that interaction between groups reduces prejudice under favourable conditions, namely equal status, common goals, cooperation and institutional support (Allport, 1954). A meta-analysis of more than 500 studies supports the general effect of contact on prejudice reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Within inclusive education, a review of 37 studies found that classmates generally hold positive attitudes towards peers with special educational needs and show empathy and acceptance, although some worry about effects on academic progress (Dell'Anna et al., 2019). A narrative synthesis of 14 qualitative studies was more cautious: typically developing students sometimes expressed unfavourable views of disabled classmates and were often unsure about the principles of inclusion, which the authors saw as a risk to its success (Bates et al., 2015). Comparative interviews showed that bullying was less common and student bonds stronger in inclusive than in special schools (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). Among 2,649 mainstream students, Caballero (2024) found a clear wish to share time, space and activities with peers

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who have special educational needs, together with dissatisfaction that such peers took part in few group activities and centre-wide events.

2.2 Belonging, well-being and risk

Belonging is a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and a driver of school motivation and engagement (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Koster et al. (2009) describe social participation in inclusive classrooms as having four components: friendships, interactions, acceptance by classmates and students' own perception of their social standing. Reviews report that inclusion helps communication, peer relationships and self-esteem, and fosters empathy and social awareness among typically developing students, while rejection, isolation and inadequate teacher preparation weaken those benefits (Aisy & Aprilia, 2025). For students with moderate, severe and complex disabilities, inclusive settings improve access to instructional time and peer contact, yet marginalisation during activities and isolation within the peer group persist (Dell'Anna et al., 2022). Students with physical disabilities describe barriers in everyday life and in educational participation (Sedláčková et al., 2025), and a study in Afghanistan found that although inclusive education benefited disabled students, all participants met obstacles in ordinary classrooms (Akramy, 2025). A survey of 1,158 Chinese primary students found that stronger teacher–student and student–student relationships in the class environment were associated with more favourable attitudes towards inclusion (Xu et al., 2022).

2.3 Conceptual framing

Building on this literature, the study analyses four dimensions of students' inclusive experience. Peer contact refers to how often students of different abilities learn, interact and work together. Peer climate refers to respect, acceptance, cooperation and the absence of exclusion. Perceived benefits refers to the belief that inclusive learning builds empathy and social and communication skills. Psychosocial experience refers to comfort, participation, confidence, freedom from isolation and safety. Contact theory suggests that contact and climate are linked, and belonging theory suggests that psychosocial experience depends on both. The distinction between perceived benefits and contact allows the study to ask whether students' endorsement of inclusion is matched by their experience of it.

3. Method

3.1 Design, participants and instrument

The study used a descriptive, comparative, cross-sectional survey design within a quantitative approach. Stratified purposive sampling was used to recruit 300 mainstream students and 300 students with disabilities from Classes IX–X and XI–XII (N = 600) after incomplete, inconsistent or duplicate questionnaires were excluded (Table 1). Participation was voluntary and subject to institutional permission. The 45-item structured questionnaire contained seven sections, and the same items were given to both groups. This article uses Section C, Experience of Inclusive Education (items 15–24), and Section F, Academic, Social and Emotional Experience (items 38–41). Items employed frequency, quality-rating and five-point agreement formats. Content and face validity were established through expert review in

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research methodology, educational psychology, inclusive education and general education, and the questionnaire was pilot-tested with students outside the final sample. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha with a criterion of 0.70 or above. The instrument did not record type or severity of disability.

Table 1 - Profile of the Sample (N = 600)

Characteristic	Categories, n (%)
Student group	Mainstream students 300 (50.0); students with disabilities 300 (50.0)
Age group	15–17 years 276 (46.0); 18–20 years 324 (54.0)
Gender	Male 312 (52.0); female 288 (48.0)
Class	IX–X 270 (45.0); XI–XII 330 (55.0)
Type of institution	Government 210 (35.0); government-aided 150 (25.0); private 180 (30.0); other 60 (10.0)
Area of residence	Rural 210 (35.0); semi-urban 174 (29.0); urban 216 (36.0)

3.2 Procedure and ethics

Institutional permission was obtained after the aims of the study were explained. Students were told that participation was voluntary, that responses were confidential and would be used only for academic purposes, and that they should answer from their own experience. Questionnaires were completed on paper or digitally with identical items and response options, and reasonable steps were taken to make them accessible to students with disabilities

3.3 Analysis

Ordered categories were scored from 1 (least favourable) to 5 (most favourable). Items measuring negative experiences (observed exclusion and feelings of isolation) were reverse-scored so that higher scores always indicate a more inclusive experience. For each indicator, "favourable" combines the top two categories and "unfavourable" the bottom two. For the item on learning together (item 15), 48 students (8.0%) answered "don't know"; the mean for this item is based on the remaining 552 students, whereas percentages in the text are expressed over all 600. Wilson score intervals (Wilson, 1927) are given for proportions. One-sample t-tests compared means with the midpoint of 3, with Cohen's (1988) d as the effect size. Dimension-level scores are unweighted averages of the item means within each dimension. Because the ordinal response categories are treated as interval scores, means are interpreted alongside the full distributions (Norman, 2010). Analyses used pooled data, and summary statistics were derived from item-level frequency distributions.

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4. Results

4.1 Peer contact

Peer contact was moderate. Just over half of the students (52.0%) said that students with different abilities and learning needs study together always (24.0%) or often (28.0%) in their institution, 20.0% said sometimes, 20.0% rarely or never, and 8.0% did not know (Table 2; Figure 1). Interaction was more frequent than formal co-learning: 32.0% interacted with peers of different learning abilities daily and 29.0% several times a week (61.0%, 95% CI [57.0, 64.8]), although 23.0% did so only occasionally or never. Participation in group activities with such peers was always or often reported by 56.0% (95% CI [52.0, 59.9]), and 22.0% reported rarely or never. Group activities (M = 3.51) and learning together (M = 3.52) had the lowest means of the 14 indicators, while interaction frequency was somewhat higher (M = 3.62); the dimension mean for peer contact was 3.55.

Table 2 - Students' Experiences of Peer Contact, Peer Climate, Perceived Benefits and Psychosocial Well-Being

Indicator	n	M (SD)	95% CI for M	Fav. %	Neut. %	Unfav. %	d
Peer contact							
Students of different abilities learn together[1]	552	3.52 (1.25)	[3.42, 3.63]	56.5	21.7	21.7	0.42
Frequency of interaction across abilities	600	3.62 (1.29)	[3.52, 3.72]	61.0	16.0	23.0	0.48
Group activities across abilities	600	3.51 (1.23)	[3.41, 3.61]	56.0	22.0	22.0	0.41
Peer climate							
Peers treat each other with respect	600	3.76 (1.14)	[3.67, 3.85]	65.0	20.0	15.0	0.67
Acceptance by classmates	600	3.81 (1.15)	[3.72, 3.90]	68.0	17.0	15.0	0.71
Cooperation among students	600	3.58 (1.16)	[3.49, 3.67]	59.0	22.0	19.0	0.50
Exclusion observed (reverse-scored)	600	3.56 (1.27)	[3.46, 3.66]	56.0	22.0	22.0	0.44
Perceived benefits							
Inclusive learning builds empathy	600	3.82 (1.14)	[3.73, 3.91]	69.0	16.0	15.0	0.72
Inclusive learning builds social skills	600	3.81 (1.14)	[3.72, 3.90]	69.0	16.0	15.0	0.71
Psychosocial experience							

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Comfort in inclusive classrooms	600	3.71 (1.17)	[3.62, 3.80]	65.0	18.0	17.0	0.61
Participation in class activities	600	3.71 (1.13)	[3.62, 3.80]	65.0	19.0	16.0	0.63
Confidence in participating	600	3.71 (1.11)	[3.62, 3.80]	65.0	20.0	15.0	0.64
Feelings of isolation (reverse-scored)	600	3.65 (1.25)	[3.55, 3.75]	60.0	20.0	20.0	0.52
Safety from bullying and discrimination	600	3.77 (1.13)	[3.68, 3.86]	67.0	18.0	15.0	0.68

Note. N = 600 except where indicated. Fav. % = top two categories; Neut. % = middle category; Unfav. % = bottom two categories (for the reverse-scored items, favourable = never/rarely). [1]n = 552 for means and tests; the 8.0% "don't know" responses are excluded and percentages are of valid responses. All t-tests against the midpoint of 3 were significant at $p < .001$. d = Cohen's d.

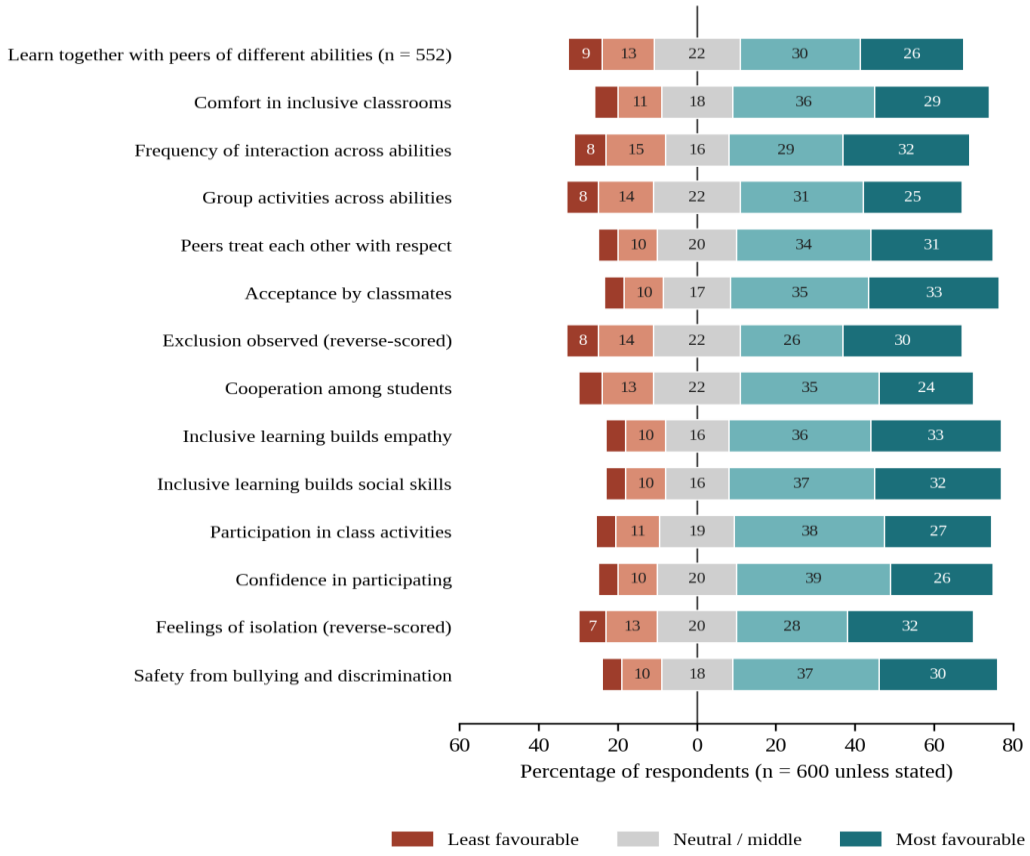


Figure 1. Distribution of responses on 14 indicators of inclusive experience (N = 600 unless stated). Bars are centred on the middle category; darker shades show the extreme categories. Response labels differ by item (see Table 2). Percentages below 7 are not labelled.

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4.2 Peer climate

The peer climate was generally positive. Respectful treatment regardless of ability was reported as happening always or often by 65.0% (95% CI [61.1, 68.7]), and 68.0% felt completely or mostly accepted by classmates (95% CI [64.2, 71.6]; M = 3.81, the highest peer-climate mean). Cooperation among students of different abilities was rated high or very high by 59.0%, though 19.0% rated it low or very low. Exclusion was the weak point. Although 56.0% had never or rarely seen students excluded from classroom or group activities because of differences in ability, 22.0% had seen it sometimes and a further 22.0% often or always, so 44.0% had observed exclusion at least sometimes (n = 264; 95% CI [40.1, 48.0]). The dimension mean for peer climate was 3.68.

4.3 Perceived benefits of inclusive learning

Students were strongly positive about what inclusion does for them. In total, 33.0% strongly agreed and 36.0% agreed that studying with peers of different abilities improves mutual understanding and empathy (69.0%, 95% CI [65.2, 72.6]), and 32.0% and 37.0% respectively agreed that it improves social and communication skills (69.0%, 95% CI [65.2, 72.6]). In each case 15.0% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 16.0% were neutral. These were among the highest means of the 14 indicators (M = 3.82 and 3.81; d = 0.72 and 0.71), and the dimension mean was 3.81.

4.4 Psychosocial experience

Psychosocial experience was favourable for most students. Almost two-thirds felt comfortable or very comfortable in inclusive classrooms (65.0%), participated actively or very actively in class discussions and activities (65.0%) and felt confident or very confident in doing so (65.0%); 17.0%, 16.0% and 15.0%, respectively, gave unfavourable responses. Safety was rated safe or very safe by 67.0% (95% CI [63.1, 70.6]), but 15.0% felt unsafe or very unsafe from bullying, discrimination and unfair treatment and 18.0% felt only moderately safe. Isolation was the least favourable psychosocial indicator. Although 60.0% never or rarely felt isolated or left out, 20.0% did so sometimes and 20.0% often or always, so 40.0% (n = 240; 95% CI [36.2, 44.0]) experienced isolation at least occasionally (Figure 2). The dimension mean for psychosocial experience was 3.71.

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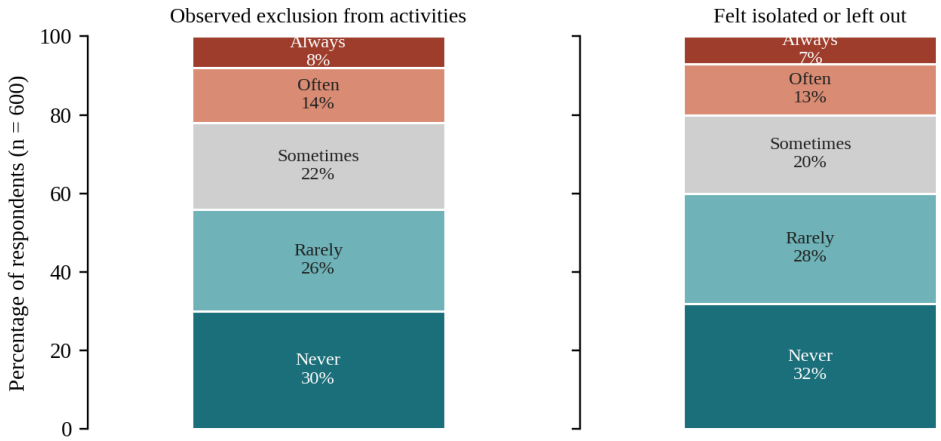


Figure 2. Frequency with which students observed exclusion from classroom or group activities (left) and felt isolated or left out (right) (N = 600). Percentages are rounded.

4.5 Dimensions compared: the belief–practice gap

Comparing the four dimensions revealed a consistent ordering. Perceived benefits had the highest mean (3.81), followed by psychosocial experience (3.71), peer climate (3.68) and peer contact (3.55). The difference between belief and practice was 17 percentage points when students' endorsement of empathy and social-skill benefits (69.0%) was set against the share reporting that students of different abilities always or often learn together (52.0%); the corresponding gaps were 13 points for group activities (56.0%) and 8 points for frequent daily or weekly interaction (61.0%). The confidence interval for endorsement of benefits ([65.2, 72.6]) did not overlap that for co-learning ([48.0, 56.0]), although these are within-sample descriptive comparisons rather than formal tests. At the same time, every indicator contained an unfavourable tail: across the 14 indicators 15.0% to 23.0% of students responded unfavourably and 16.0% to 22.0% chose the middle category. All means exceeded the midpoint (all $p < .001$), with effect sizes ranging from $d = 0.41$ to $d = 0.72$. When neutral and unfavourable responses are combined (and, for item 15, "don't know" responses are retained), the share of students who did not respond favourably ranged from 31.0% for empathy and social skills to 48.0% for learning together.

5. Discussion

This study set out to learn whether inclusive education after COVID-19 is experienced by students as more than co-presence. The answer is encouraging but incomplete. Most students report respect, acceptance, comfort, participation, confidence and safety, and they overwhelmingly believe that inclusive learning builds empathy and social skills. These findings are consistent with reviews reporting generally positive attitudes and empathy among classmates (Dell'Anna et al., 2019) and with evidence that inclusive schools can foster stronger peer bonds and less bullying than segregated settings (Bunch & Valeo, 2004).

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The most important pattern is the gap between belief and practice. Students rated the benefits of inclusion more highly than the amount of contact they experienced. Contact theory implies that benefits depend on structured, cooperative and institutionally supported interaction rather than proximity alone (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Only about half of students reported frequent co-learning and just over half frequent group activities, and 8.0% did not know whether co-learning occurred at all, which suggests that in some settings inclusion is not visible to students. Caballero's (2024) finding that mainstream students want more shared activity than their schools provide points in the same direction. A plausible reading is that goodwill exists but opportunity structures lag behind it, and the pandemic's disruption of shared activity may have deepened the lag, although the present design cannot test this.

A second pattern is the persistent unfavourable minority. Between 15.0% and 23.0% of students gave unfavourable responses to every indicator, 40.0% had at least occasionally felt isolated, 44.0% had at least sometimes seen exclusion, and 15.0% felt unsafe. These proportions are large enough to matter in any classroom of 40. Because half of the sample are students with disabilities, the pooled data cannot show who experienced these difficulties. Existing studies suggest that marginalisation, social isolation and barriers to participation are especially salient for students with disabilities (Akramy, 2025; Dell'Anna et al., 2022; Sedláčková et al., 2025), and the pandemic affected mainstream as well as specialised classrooms (Kauffman et al., 2022). The data are therefore consistent with the argument that inclusion has to support the well-being of all students, not only those with identified needs, but separate analysis by group is required to show where the risk is concentrated.

A third consideration is the substantial middle. Between 16.0% and 22.0% of students chose the neutral category on each indicator, and 8.0% did not know whether co-learning occurred. Neutral responses are ambiguous: they may reflect genuine ambivalence, limited exposure to peers of different abilities, or reluctance to evaluate classmates. Taken together with the unfavourable tail, they show that a clear majority, but far from all students, have a secure and positive experience of inclusion. The undecided middle may be the group most responsive to improved practice, since a student who has not yet formed a view of inclusion is likely to be influenced by the quality of the contact that the school provides. This reading is conjectural and could be tested by examining which students occupy the neutral category.

The high endorsement of inclusion's benefits is nevertheless a resource. Students who already believe that inclusive learning builds empathy are likely to respond to structured opportunities for cooperation. Intervention research points to peer-mediated strategies, structured social-skills programmes and group-inclusion approaches grounded in positive psychology as ways of increasing meaningful participation (Aisy & Aprilia, 2025; Reijnders et al., 2023; Tsafrir & Bocoș, 2023). Class-environment research also suggests that teacher–student and student–student relationships shape attitudes towards inclusion (Xu et al., 2022), which underlines the role of teachers in organising contact.

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The study also contributes to a literature in which teachers' perspectives have been studied more extensively than students' (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). By surveying mainstream students and students with disabilities with a single instrument at the secondary and senior secondary stage, it provides a set of student-voice benchmarks against which the effect of later interventions can be judged. Its limitation is that these benchmarks describe the whole sample, and the next analytic step is to compare the two groups directly.

6. Implications for Practice

Four implications follow. First, schools should make cooperative contact routine by using mixed-ability group tasks with shared goals, peer mentoring, projects, clubs and sports in which every student has a defined role, rather than relying on informal mixing. Second, schools should make inclusion visible and understood, with awareness activities that explain the purpose of inclusion and challenge stereotypes, so that fewer students are unsure whether it is happening. Third, schools should treat exclusion, isolation and insecurity as measurable outcomes by running short, anonymous student surveys each term, reporting results by student group and following up on classes in which unfavourable responses are concentrated. Fourth, schools should provide counselling and peer-support channels that are accessible to students with disabilities and that are available to all students affected by isolation after the pandemic.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings should be read in light of several limitations. The analysis pools mainstream students and students with disabilities, so differences between them, which are central to the question of inclusion, remain to be analysed. The sample was purposive and the design cross-sectional, so the results describe the surveyed students and do not support causal claims about the effect of COVID-19. Each indicator was measured with a single self-report item, which limits reliability and invites social desirability bias, and ordinal responses were treated as interval scores. Observed exclusion refers to what students saw rather than what they experienced. Disability type was not recorded. Future research should analyse peer experience separately by student group and disability type, combine surveys with sociometric and observational measures, include qualitative accounts, and follow cohorts over time to see whether contact and belonging recover.

8. Conclusion

After COVID-19, students in inclusive classrooms are, on the whole, comfortable, accepted and safe, and they believe in the value of learning together. Yet their reported contact with peers of different abilities is lower than their endorsement of inclusion, and between one in six and one in four report unfavourable experiences on every indicator studied. Closing the gap between belief and practice, and attending to the minority who feel excluded, isolated or unsafe, is the next task for inclusive schools.

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