

## RELATIONAL INCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

### *Inclusión relacional: desafíos y soluciones*

Alexander M. SIDORKIN

*California State University Sacramento. United States.*

*sidorkin@csus.edu*

*<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1083-8328>*

Date received: 06/10/2024

Date accepted: 07/12/2024

Online publication date: 02/06/2025

**How to cite this article / Cómo citar este artículo:** Sidorkin, A. M. (2025). Relational Inclusion: Challenges and Solutions [Inclusión relacional: desafíos y soluciones]. *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria*, 37(2), 125-144. <https://doi.org/10.14201/teri.32223>

#### ABSTRACT

While formal inclusion policies have successfully integrated diverse learners into mainstream classrooms, many students with special needs continue to experience social isolation despite their physical presence. This theoretical paper introduces and develops the concept of “relational inclusion” as a framework for moving beyond formal inclusion to address the quality and intentionality of peer interactions in educational settings. Drawing on relational pedagogy theory and empirical work on social inclusion, this paper argues that meaningful inclusion requires explicit attention to the relational dynamics of educational environments. The paper develops a conceptual framework comprising three key components: differentiated relationality, conscious relational design, and mediated relational development. These components interact within the dual axes of educational relations: well-being and growth. Through analysis of implementation challenges, including the tension between natural peer dynamics and organized interventions,

the complexity of relational competencies, and the often-unconscious nature of social skills, I propose practical strategies for fostering genuine relational inclusion. These strategies include making relational rules explicit, carefully considering the impact of activities on peer relations, and recognizing the unique nature of educational relationships. The paper concludes by outlining implications for teacher professional development, classroom practice, and educational policy, while identifying critical directions for future research. This work contributes to inclusion theory by providing a structured approach to understanding and addressing the social dimensions of inclusive education, moving beyond physical integration to foster meaningful connections among all students.

*Keywords:* relational inclusion; differentiated relationality; conscious relational design; meaningful interactions; social dynamics.

## RESUMEN

Mientras las políticas de inclusión formal han logrado integrar con éxito a diversos estudiantes en aulas regulares, muchos alumnos con necesidades especiales siguen experimentando aislamiento social a pesar de su presencia física. Este artículo teórico introduce y desarrolla el concepto de “inclusión relacional” como un marco para ir más allá de la inclusión formal, abordando la calidad e intencionalidad de las interacciones entre pares en entornos educativos. Basándose en la teoría de la pedagogía relacional y en investigaciones empíricas sobre inclusión social, el artículo sostiene que la inclusión significativa requiere una atención explícita a las dinámicas relacionales de los entornos educativos. El texto propone un marco conceptual compuesto por tres componentes clave: relacionalidad diferenciada, diseño relacional consciente y desarrollo relacional mediado. Estos componentes interactúan dentro de los dos ejes de las relaciones educativas: el bienestar y el crecimiento. A través del análisis de los desafíos de implementación, que incluyen la tensión entre las dinámicas naturales entre pares y las intervenciones organizadas, la complejidad de las competencias relacionales y la naturaleza a menudo inconsciente de las habilidades sociales, se proponen estrategias prácticas para fomentar una inclusión relacional genuina. Estas estrategias incluyen hacer explícitas las reglas relacionales, considerar cuidadosamente el impacto de las actividades en las relaciones entre pares y reconocer la naturaleza única de las relaciones educativas. El artículo concluye delineando las implicaciones para el desarrollo profesional docente, la práctica en el aula y las políticas educativas, además de identificar direcciones clave para futuras investigaciones. Este trabajo contribuye a la teoría de la inclusión proporcionando un enfoque estructurado para comprender y abordar las dimensiones sociales de la educación inclusiva, avanzando más allá de la integración física para fomentar conexiones significativas entre todos los estudiantes.

*Palabras clave:* inclusión relacional; relacionalidad diferenciada; diseño relacional consciente; interacciones significativas; dinámicas sociales.

## 1. WHY RELATIONAL INCLUSION?

Sarah, a third grader with autism spectrum disorder, sits at her desk in Ms. Johnson's mainstream classroom. Her presence here is the result of years of advocacy by her parents and progressive inclusion policies adopted by the school district. On paper, Sarah's inclusion is a success story.

Yet, as the class breaks into small groups for a science project, Sarah remains at her desk, seemingly forgotten. Her classmates form their groups quickly, their chatter filling the room with excitement. No one approaches Sarah or invites her to join. Ms. Johnson, noticing Sarah's isolation, gently encourages a group to include her. The children reluctantly make space, but their body language—turned away from Sarah, avoiding eye contact—speaks volumes.

During recess, the scene repeats itself. Sarah stands alone at the edge of the playground, watching her classmates play tag and gossip in small clusters. When she attempts to join a game, her awkward approach and difficulty understanding the unwritten rules of play lead to confusion and, ultimately, rejection. The other children are not intentionally cruel; they simply do not know how to interact with Sarah, and in the fast-paced world of playground politics, it is easier to exclude than to make the effort to include.

This scenario illustrates the heart of our discussion on relational inclusion. Sarah is physically present in an inclusive classroom, but she remains socially isolated. The gap between her physical presence and genuine social integration highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to inclusion—one that actively fosters meaningful relationships and ensures all students are truly part of the school community.

Having established the practical challenges faced by students like Sarah, let us now turn to examine how existing research has approached the social dimensions of inclusion.

### 1.1. *Previous research*

In special education, the social aspects of inclusion have long been recognized as crucial. Researchers have explored concepts such as social inclusion, belonging, and friendship in inclusive settings, acknowledging that physical integration alone is insufficient for true inclusion.

Julie Allan's work on social inclusion emphasizes that it extends beyond mere presence in mainstream classrooms. She argues for meaningful participation and acceptance, noting that achieving social inclusion requires not just policy changes, but shifts in attitudes and practices within schools (Allan, 2006).

The concept of belonging has been examined by Linda Graham and her colleagues. Their research suggests that belonging is influenced by various factors, including peer relationships, teacher attitudes, and school culture. They argue that

fostering a sense of belonging is essential for the success of inclusive education practices (Graham et al., 2016).

Erik Carter's research on friendship in inclusive settings reveals that while these environments provide opportunities for friendship formation, intentional support is often necessary. Carter emphasizes the importance of creating environments that promote social interaction and mutual understanding between students with and without disabilities (Carter, 2011).

While these concepts have advanced our understanding of the social dimensions of inclusion, there remains a need for a more pragmatic approach. The concept of "relational inclusion" aims to address this gap by focusing on the mechanisms of social inclusion. Rather than simply reiterating the importance of social inclusion as an aim, relational inclusion shifts the focus to how we can actively foster meaningful social connections in inclusive educational settings.

By relational inclusion, we seek to build upon existing research while providing an actionable framework for educators and policymakers. This approach acknowledges valuable insights from previous research while pushing the field towards more concrete strategies for achieving social inclusion in practice.

The challenge now is not to justify social inclusion as an aim—this is largely uncontroversial. The more pressing question is how to achieve it. Relational inclusion offers a path forward, focusing on the practical means of creating truly inclusive social environments in educational settings.

The concept of relational inclusion builds upon established ideas in special education by focusing on the quality and intentionality of peer and student-teacher interactions in inclusive educational settings. It can be understood as the deliberate fostering of meaningful, reciprocal, and educationally purposeful relationships between students with and without disabilities, and their teachers. This approach goes beyond physical integration and social acceptance, aiming to ensure productive, growth-minded participation in the social fabric of the educational community.

This concept aligns with recent work on the pedagogy of relations, which emphasizes the centrality of human relationships in educational processes. In discussing the importance of relationships in education, Sidorkin (2023) suggests that while well-being is crucial, it is not sufficient for true educational growth. A similar argument can be made for relational inclusion: while physical inclusion and general social acceptance are essential starting points, they do not guarantee the formation of meaningful peer relationships that are vital for the full participation and development of all students, including those with disabilities.

Relational inclusion emphasizes the active role of educators, peers, and the wider school community in creating conditions that not only allow but actively encourage the formation of genuine, educationally beneficial relationships. This involves more than simply providing opportunities for interaction; it requires deliberate strategies

to overcome barriers, foster understanding, and create shared experiences that can form the basis of lasting connections.

By focusing on relational inclusion, I aim to address often-overlooked aspects of social integration that can make the difference between a student being merely present in a classroom and being a fully engaged member of the school community. This approach recognizes that true inclusion is not just about where students learn, but about with whom they connect, share experiences, and develop as individuals. It also acknowledges the crucial role of teachers in facilitating and guiding these relationships towards educational purposes.

This conceptualization of relational inclusion invites us to consider how we can move beyond the goals of inclusion to the practical means of achieving meaningful social and educational connections in diverse classroom settings. To develop a comprehensive framework for this purpose, I first describe our methodological approach to synthesizing existing theories and evidence, before presenting the resulting conceptual framework for understanding and implementing relational inclusion in educational settings.

## **2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

This paper employs a theoretical synthesis methodology to develop the concept of relational inclusion and its accompanying framework. Our approach combines three complementary methods of theoretical inquiry: conceptual analysis, theory integration, and illustrative case development.

The conceptual analysis began with a systematic examination of three intersecting bodies of literature: inclusive education research, relational pedagogy theory, and social psychology of education. I focused particularly on works addressing the social dimensions of inclusion (e.g., Allan, 2006; Carter, 2011), foundational texts in relational pedagogy (e.g., Sidorkin, 2023), and empirical studies of peer relationships in educational settings (e.g., Graham et al., 2016). Sources were selected based on their theoretical significance, empirical support, and relevance to contemporary educational contexts.

Our theory integration process involved identifying key concepts and principles from these different theoretical traditions and synthesizing them into a coherent framework for understanding relational inclusion. This integration was guided by three criteria: theoretical coherence (how well different concepts fit together), practical applicability (potential for implementation in educational settings), and explanatory power (ability to address observed challenges in inclusive education).

To ground this theoretical work in practical reality, I developed illustrative cases based on composite experiences drawn from educational research and practice. The opening case of Sarah, for instance, synthesizes common experiences documented in

multiple studies of social inclusion in mainstream classrooms. Similarly, our analysis of Vivian Paley's work provides concrete examples of how theoretical principles can be applied in practice.

Throughout the development of this framework, an iterative process of theory building is employed, moving between abstract concepts and concrete examples to refine our understanding of relational inclusion. This approach allowed us to maintain theoretical rigor while ensuring practical relevance to educational settings.

### 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of relational inclusion builds upon and extends existing theories in inclusive education, social inclusion, and relational pedagogy. This framework proposes a shift from viewing inclusion primarily as a matter of physical placement or academic accommodation to understanding it as a complex relational phenomenon.

At the core of this framework is the recognition that meaningful inclusion is fundamentally about the quality and nature of relationships within educational settings. This perspective draws on my previous work on pedagogy of relation Sidorkin's (2023), which posits that educational processes are primarily relational in nature. I extend this idea to the realm of inclusive education, arguing that the success of inclusion efforts hinges on the relational dynamics between students with and without disabilities, as well as between students and educators.

The framework of relational inclusion comprises three key interrelated components:

*Differentiated Relationality:* This concept extends the idea of differentiated instruction to the relational sphere. It recognizes that students have diverse relational needs and capacities, much like they have diverse learning needs. Differentiated relationality involves tailoring relational interventions and supports meeting the unique social and emotional needs of each student.

*Conscious Relational Design:* This component involves bringing the often unconscious or implicit aspects of relational dynamics into conscious awareness and intentional design. It draws on psychoanalytic concepts (Freud, 1915/1963) and social psychology research on group dynamics (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) to make explicit the hidden relational curricula in educational settings.

*Mediated Relational Development:* This aspect of the framework emphasizes the role of carefully designed activities and environmental factors in shaping relational outcomes. It builds on Vygotskian ideas of mediated learning (Kozulin et al., 2003) but applies them specifically to the development of relational competencies.

These components interact within the dual axes of educational relations identified by Sidorkin (2023): well-being and growth. The framework posits that effective relational inclusion must balance these two dimensions, providing both

a sense of belonging and safety (well-being) and opportunities for challenge and development (growth).

Relational inclusion extends beyond the dyadic student-teacher relationship to encompass the entire relational ecology of the classroom and school. It recognizes the complex interplay between peer relations, teacher-student relations, and the broader school culture in shaping inclusive experiences.

This framework challenges the notion that peer relations should develop entirely naturally without adult intervention. Instead, it proposes that educators have a crucial role in consciously shaping the relational environment to promote inclusion. This approach aligns with recent critiques of the “naturalistic fallacy” in educational thinking (Biesta, 2015).

By focusing on relationships as the primary medium through which inclusion is achieved, this framework offers a new lens for understanding and addressing the challenges of inclusive education. It suggests that many of the difficulties faced in implementing inclusion may stem from insufficient attention to the relational dimension of educational experiences.

The relational inclusion framework generates several theoretical propositions:

1. The quality of peer and student-teacher relationships is a stronger predictor of inclusive outcomes than physical placement or academic accommodations alone.
2. Interventions aimed at enhancing relational competencies will lead to more successful inclusion than those focused solely on academic skills or physical accessibility.
3. Explicit attention to and design of relational dynamics in classrooms will result in more inclusive environments than approaches that leave peer relations to develop “naturally.”
4. The effectiveness of inclusive practices will vary based on how well they address both the well-being and growth dimensions of educational relations.
5. These propositions offer testable hypotheses for future research and provide guidance for developing practical interventions to promote inclusion.

The conceptual framework of relational inclusion offers a new paradigm for understanding and implementing inclusive education. By centering relationships and proposing mechanisms for consciously shaping relational dynamics, it provides a fresh approach to longstanding challenges in the field of inclusive education.

#### **4. CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING RELATIONAL INCLUSION**

Recognizing the importance of relational inclusion is a crucial first step, but it does not guarantee its successful implementation. While the goal is clear—to

foster meaningful, reciprocal relationships among all students, including those with disabilities, the path to achieving this goal is fraught with challenges. In Sarah's case, good intentions alone are insufficient. She, her teachers, and even her classmates may all desire inclusion in the abstract, but translating this desire into reality proves complex and elusive. The challenges in achieving relational inclusion are substantial and multifaceted, ranging from practical implementation difficulties to the intricacies of developing relational competencies in diverse student populations. Moreover, we must contend with potential resistance and skepticism from various stakeholders in the educational system. Understanding these challenges is essential if we are to develop effective strategies for fostering genuine relational inclusion in our schools.

Among the various challenges in implementing relational inclusion, perhaps the most fundamental is the tension between allowing peer relationships to develop naturally and providing structured support for inclusive interactions.

#### 4.1. *The Natural vs. Organized Peer Culture Dilemma*

A fundamental challenge in implementing relational inclusion stems from the complex nature of peer relationships and the tension between naturally evolving social dynamics and adult-organized interventions. Developmental psychology has long recognized the importance of peer culture as a self-organizing system, relatively independent from adult sanctions and interventions (e.g. Corsaro, 2009). This independence is often viewed as a crucial developmental benchmark, signaling children's growing social competence and autonomy.

However, this perspective presents a significant dilemma for educators and policymakers seeking to foster relational inclusion. On one hand, there is a strong argument for allowing peer relationships to develop naturally, without excessive adult interference. This approach respects children's autonomy and allows for the development of authentic social skills. On the other hand, as we have seen in Sarah's case, unguided peer interactions can often lead to exclusion and isolation of students with disabilities or those who struggle with social skills. Paradoxically, peer socialization includes enforcement of norms, which is an exclusionary pressure to force others to comply with group norms.

The question arises: To what extent should adults intervene in peer relationships to promote inclusion? Is it possible to facilitate meaningful connections without undermining the natural development of peer culture? These questions become even more complex when one considers that what is often labeled as "complex" or "self-organized" in peer relationships might simply reflect our lack of understanding about how to effectively influence these dynamics.

Furthermore, the implementation of relational inclusion strategies is complicated by the diverse needs and abilities present in inclusive classrooms. A one-size-fits-all approach is clearly inadequate, yet developing individualized strategies for



fostering relationships among diverse learners demands significant time, resources, and expertise that many educators feel ill-equipped to provide.

The challenge, then, is to find a balance between respecting the natural evolution of peer relationships and providing the necessary scaffolding to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, have the opportunity to form meaningful connections. This balance must be struck while navigating the constraints of the educational system, including time pressures, competing academic priorities, and limited resources.

While the dilemma of natural versus organized peer culture presents one set of challenges, equally complex is the development of the relational competencies necessary for meaningful inclusion.

#### 4.2. *Complexity of Relational Competencies*

The challenge of fostering relational inclusion is further complicated by the intricate nature of relational competencies themselves. These skills, which include empathy, communication, social problem-solving, and perspective-taking, are not innate for many children, particularly those with developmental disabilities or neurodivergent conditions.

Consider Jason, the protagonist in Vivian Paley's "*The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*" (1990). Jason, a five-year-old with autism spectrum disorder, struggles to engage with his classmates during playtime. While other children immerse themselves in imaginative play, creating elaborate scenarios and fluidly switching roles, Jason remains fixated on his toy helicopter. He circles the periphery of the playgroup, making engine noises and reciting facts about different helicopter models. When a well-meaning classmate invites him to join their game as a rescue pilot, Jason becomes visibly distressed, unable to deviate from his established play pattern or integrate his interests with those of his peers.

This vignette illustrates the complexity of relational competencies. For Jason, the seemingly simple act of joining peer play involves a myriad of challenging skills: reading social cues, understanding unspoken rules of play, flexibly adapting to others' ideas, and managing the anxiety of novel social situations. These challenges are not unique to children with diagnosed conditions; many students struggle with various aspects of social interaction to some degree.

Moreover, relational competencies are not developed in isolation. They require repeated practice in diverse social contexts, feedback from peers and adults, and the ability to reflect on and learn from social experiences. In an inclusive classroom, the range of relational skills can vary dramatically, creating a complex social ecosystem that educators must navigate.

The task of developing these competencies is further complicated by the bidirectional nature of social relationships. It is not enough to focus solely on the child with social difficulties; their peers must also develop the skills to interact effectively

with diverse classmates. This involves fostering empathy, patience, and the ability to adapt communication styles—skills that even many adults find challenging.

Educators face the daunting task of simultaneously supporting the development of these complex relational competencies in all their students while also creating an environment that accommodates and values diverse social styles. This requires a deep understanding of social development, the ability to model and teach subtle social skills, and the flexibility to adapt strategies for a wide range of learners.

In the context of relational inclusion, the complexity of these competencies underscores the need for comprehensive, long-term approaches that go beyond simple social skills training. It calls for a reimagining of the classroom as a laboratory for social learning, where diverse relational styles are not just accommodated, but celebrated as opportunities for growth and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, as Ljungblad and Aspelin (2020) point out, relational competencies in teachers are largely intuitive and operate below the level of conscious awareness. One can reasonably assume this is true for children as well. This insight has significant implications for how one approaches the development of these skills. Direct instruction in social skills, while sometimes helpful, is often insufficient to address the complex, context-dependent nature of relational competencies.

Instead, let me consider more indirect, context-based interventions. These might include strategies to enhance overall well-being, promote self-tuning, and develop emotional regulation skills. Such approaches recognize that relational competencies are deeply intertwined with emotional states and overall mental health. By creating environments that support emotional well-being and self-regulation, one may indirectly foster the development of more effective relational skills.

This perspective shifts our focus from teaching specific social skills to cultivating environments and experiences that naturally promote the development of relational competencies. It requires educators to pay close attention to the social-emotional climate of the classroom and to consider how various activities and interactions might indirectly support the growth of these crucial skills.

The challenges of implementing relational inclusion are multifaceted and complex. From the tension between natural peer dynamics and organized interventions, to the intricacies of developing relational competencies in diverse learners, to the often-intuitive nature of these skills, educators face significant hurdles in fostering truly inclusive social environments. These challenges underscore the need for a more comprehensive, nuanced approach to inclusion that goes beyond physical integration and surface-level social acceptance. As I seek solutions to these challenges, I turn to the pedagogy of relation for insights and strategies. This framework, with its focus on the centrality of relationships in education, offers promising avenues for addressing the complexities of relational inclusion and moving towards more effective, holistic approaches to inclusive education.

## 5. RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY: A FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

The challenges inherent in implementing relational inclusion call for a robust theoretical framework that can guide practical interventions. The pedagogy of relation, with its emphasis on the fundamental role of relationships in educational processes, offers valuable insights that may help address these challenges. By shifting our focus from individual skills or isolated interventions to the broader relational context of education, this approach provides a fresh perspective on fostering inclusive environments. Let us consider how key concepts from relational pedagogy theory might be applied to the specific challenges of relational inclusion. While this theory was not originally developed with special education in mind, its principles may prove particularly relevant in addressing the complex social dynamics of inclusive classrooms. By examining three key aspects of relational pedagogy—making relational rules explicit, understanding the impact of activities on peer relations, and recognizing the unique nature of educational relations—we can begin to construct a more comprehensive approach to relational inclusion. To address these challenges, I propose three key strategies derived from relational pedagogy. The first involves bringing implicit social rules into explicit awareness

### 5.1. *Making Relational Rules Explicit*

Vivian Paley's groundbreaking experiment, detailed in her book *"You Cannot Say You Cannot Play"* (Paley, 1992) offers a compelling example of making relational rules explicit. In her kindergarten classroom, Paley introduced a simple yet powerful rule: no child could be excluded from play. This rule, initially met with resistance and skepticism from both children and adults, gradually transformed the social dynamics of the classroom.

Paley's approach involved not just stating the rule, but extensively discussing it with the children, exploring its implications, and working through the challenges of implementation. She engaged the children in conversations about fairness, inclusion, and the feelings associated with being left out. Through storytelling and role-playing, Paley helped the children develop empathy and understanding for their peers who were often excluded.

The success of Paley's experiment lies in its move to bring relational dynamics from the subconscious to the conscious mind. By making the unspoken rules of social interaction explicit, she raised relational awareness among her students. This approach aligns with established practices in counseling and therapy, where bringing unconscious patterns into conscious awareness is a key step in fostering change (Beck, 2011).

Group therapy and the study of group dynamics also offer valuable insights into this process. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) emphasize the importance of examining

and understanding group processes as they unfold. Similarly, in educational settings, making relational rules explicit allows students to reflect on and actively shape their social interactions.

The power of Paley's approach lies not just in talking about relationships, but in making them actionable through the adoption of explicit rules. In inclusive settings, these rules should recognize neurodiversity as a legitimate aspect of inclusion. Rather than framing rules negatively (e.g., "no ableism"), they can be stated positively to promote active inclusion. Examples might include:

- "You cannot say you cannot play"
- "Everyone gets a chance to contribute"
- "We help each other understand and participate"

In high school settings, these rules might evolve to reflect more complex social dynamics:

- "Everyone deserves to be heard"
- "We value diverse perspectives and experiences"
- "Support is always available—just ask"

By making these relational rules explicit and actionable, educators can create a framework for fostering genuine inclusion that goes beyond physical presence to meaningful social participation. Beyond making relational rules explicit, a second crucial strategy involves understanding and intentionally designing activities that foster inclusive peer relationships.

## 5.2. *The Impact of Activities on Peer Relations*

Another key postulate of the Pedagogy of Relation is that activities mediate relationships. As Sidorkin (2023) argues, human relations can be broadly categorized into two types: immediate and mediated. Immediate relations are those based on direct personal attraction or affinity, while mediated relations are formed through shared activities or interests. In educational settings, most relationships begin as mediated, with students and teachers coming together around learning activities.

The choice of activities in a classroom can significantly influence the formation and quality of peer relationships. Activities that foster collaboration, mutual support, and diverse contributions tend to enhance positive peer relations. Conversely, activities that are overly competitive or that highlight individual differences in ability can potentially damage relationships, especially in inclusive classrooms where students have a wide range of capabilities.

In the context of relational inclusion, this understanding becomes particularly crucial. The selection of classroom activities should be done with careful consideration of how they might impact the social dynamics among students with diverse abilities. Activities that inherently disadvantage or exclude certain students can reinforce social hierarchies and hinder the development of inclusive peer relationships. For instance, traditional competitive sports or academic contests might inadvertently showcase the limitations of some students with disabilities, potentially leading to social isolation or lowered self-esteem.

Instead, educators should prioritize activities that allow for multiple forms of participation and success. Collaborative projects, group problem-solving tasks, or creative endeavors that value diverse inputs can provide opportunities for all students to contribute meaningfully. Such activities can help highlight the unique strengths of each student, fostering mutual respect and understanding among peers.

Moreover, the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be applied not just to academic instruction, but to the design of social activities as well. By creating flexible activities that can be engaged with in multiple ways, educators can ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate fully and build positive relationships with their peers. This might involve offering choices in how students can contribute to a group project or designing games that rely on a variety of skills rather than a single ability.

By thoughtfully selecting and designing activities that promote collaboration, value diversity, and allow for multiple paths to success, educators can create a classroom environment that naturally fosters positive peer relations and supports relational inclusion. This approach recognizes that the path to meaningful social inclusion is often through shared experiences and mutual engagement in purposeful activities.

The third key element of our framework addresses the distinctive characteristics of relationships in educational settings, which differ fundamentally from purely social relationships.

### *5.3. The Unique Nature of Educational Relations*

Educational relations, as described in the Pedagogy of Relation, possess a unique duality that sets them apart from other types of human relationships. This duality is characterized by two interconnected axes: well-being and growth (Sidorkin, 2023). The well-being axis encompasses feelings of safety, acceptance, and belonging, while the growth axis involves challenge, learning, and development.

Unlike purely social relationships, educational relations must maintain a delicate balance between these two axes. On one hand, students need to feel secure and valued within the educational environment. This sense of well-being forms the foundation upon which learning can occur. On the other hand, education inherently involves pushing boundaries, confronting challenges, and experiencing the sometimes-uncomfortable process of growth.

The tension between these two aspects is what gives educational relations their distinct character. A good teacher, for instance, must create a supportive environment while simultaneously challenging students to extend beyond their comfort zones. This balance is crucial for fostering genuine learning and development.

In inclusive classrooms, there is a heightened risk of overemphasizing the well-being axis at the expense of growth. While it is undoubtedly important to ensure that all students, particularly those with special needs, feel safe and accepted, there is a danger in allowing this focus to overshadow the equally important aspect of growth and challenge.

The temptation to prioritize comfort and belonging can inadvertently transform the classroom into something more akin to a social club than an educational environment. While well-being is crucial, it should not come at the cost of educational progress. Education, by its very nature, involves expectation and opportunity for growth.

It is important to note that growth in an inclusive setting does not necessarily mean uniform progress towards standardized outcomes. Rather, it implies a broader understanding of development that acknowledges diverse paths and paces of learning. Growth might manifest differently for different students, but the principle remains: education should challenge all students to move beyond their current capabilities, whatever those may be.

Maintaining this growth dimension in inclusive classrooms requires thoughtful consideration. It involves setting individualized, achievable challenges that push each student to develop, while still maintaining an environment of acceptance and support. This might mean adapting tasks, providing varied forms of scaffolding, or redefining what constitutes 'growth' for different learners.

In essence, while inclusive education rightly emphasizes acceptance and belonging, it must not lose sight of its fundamental purpose: to facilitate learning and development for all students. The unique duality of educational relations—the balance between well-being and growth—remains crucial, even as we adapt our understanding of what growth looks like in diverse educational settings. Having established these theoretical foundations and practical strategies, I now turn to their concrete implications for educational practice and policy.

## **6. IMPLICATIONS FOR FOSTERING RELATIONAL INCLUSION**

The relational turn in inclusive education represents a significant shift in our approach to creating truly inclusive learning environments. This shift moves us away from a primary focus on differentiated instruction to an emphasis on differentiated relationality. While differentiated instruction has been valuable in addressing diverse learning needs, it often falls short in addressing the social and relational aspects of inclusion. By turning our attention to relationships, we open up new avenues for fostering genuine inclusion.

The justification for this relational turn lies in the recognition that meaningful inclusion extends far beyond physical presence or even academic participation. It encompasses the quality of social interactions, the sense of belonging, and the mutual understanding among diverse learners. As we have seen in the challenges outlined earlier, many students with disabilities or neurodivergent conditions struggle not with the academic content itself, but with the social aspects of the learning environment. By focusing on relations, one can address a critical aspect of inclusion that has often been overlooked or underemphasized.

Central to this relational approach is the notion of “making the unconscious conscious” as applied to relations. This concept, borrowed from psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1915/1963), takes on new significance in the context of relational inclusion. The often-unexamined patterns of interaction, biases, and social norms that shape classroom dynamics need to be brought to the surface. However, this raises an important question: Why do relational competencies tend to stay unconscious?

There are two potential explanations for this phenomenon, and it is likely that both play a role. First, from an evolutionary perspective, keeping relational processes largely unconscious may be an adaptation that frees up cognitive resources for other tasks. Social interactions are complex and multifaceted; if one had to consciously process every aspect of every interaction, one might be overwhelmed and unable to function effectively in social settings. This explanation aligns with dual-process theories of cognition (Evans, 2008), which posits that much of our cognitive processing occurs automatically and unconsciously.

The second explanation involves cultural suppression—a kind of taboo on making relations explicit. This idea is supported by sociological research on the “hidden curriculum” in schools (Jackson, 1968). The hidden curriculum refers to the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn in school. Many of these hidden lessons pertain to social norms and relational dynamics. By keeping these lessons implicit, society maintains certain power structures and social hierarchies. This cultural suppression may serve to perpetuate existing social orders, including those that marginalize certain groups.

The interplay between these evolutionary and cultural factors creates a complex landscape for relational inclusion. It underscores the need for more theoretical work in this area, particularly in understanding how we can effectively bring relational dynamics into conscious awareness in educational settings.

When it comes to peer relational exclusion, scholars have a general understanding of the cultural mechanisms at play. Social psychologists have long recognized that exclusion often serves to establish and enforce social norms within peer groups (Killen, Rutland, & Jampol, 2008). However, what remains less clear is how specific characteristics become part of the norm while others do not. For instance, we all have seen shifts in the acceptance of diverse sexual orientations among younger generations (Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2016), and there has been a general trend



towards greater acceptance of physical disabilities (Scior, 2011). Yet, acceptance of neurodivergence seems to lag behind (Bottema-Beutel, Park, & Kim, 2018). Understanding these differential rates of acceptance is crucial for developing effective strategies for relational inclusion.

Finally, let us address the role of teachers in shaping peer relations. Vivian Paley's work, exemplified by her "You cannot say you cannot play" rule, demonstrates the potential power of direct teacher intervention in peer relations. This approach challenges the notion that peer relations should be entirely autonomous and free from adult influence. The idea of peer autonomy, while well-intentioned, may be based on a misunderstanding of the nature of autonomy and an overvaluation of "natural" social phenomena.

The anthropological tendency to glorify "natural" social orders (Shweder, 1991) has perhaps led us to be overly hesitant about intervening in peer dynamics. However, in the context of inclusive education, we must recognize that intervention may be necessary to create truly inclusive social environments. Teachers have not only the right but the responsibility to set expectations for peer relations, to model inclusive behaviors, and to actively shape the relational climate of their classrooms.

This is not to suggest that teachers should micromanage every aspect of peer interaction. Rather, it is about establishing a framework of expectations and values that promote inclusion. By doing so, teachers can help create a classroom culture where diversity is valued, where empathy is practiced, and where exclusionary behaviors are challenged.

The relational turn in inclusive education offers a promising path forward. By focusing on the quality of relationships, making implicit relational dynamics explicit, and empowering teachers to actively shape peer relations, educators can move closer to achieving true inclusion. This approach requires us to grapple with complex questions about the nature of social interaction, the roots of exclusion, and the role of education in shaping social norms. As we continue to explore these questions, we open up new possibilities for creating educational environments where all students can thrive, not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well.

The implementation of relational inclusion has significant practical implications for educators, school administrators, and policymakers. First, professional development programs for teachers should be redesigned to emphasize the development of relational competencies. This could include training in recognizing and addressing unconscious biases, facilitating inclusive group dynamics, and employing differentiated relationality strategies. For example, workshops could focus on teaching educators how to conduct inclusive circle times or how to mediate peer conflicts in ways that promote understanding of diverse needs and abilities.

Second, classroom activities should be reimaged to prioritize inclusive interactions. This might involve replacing traditional competitive activities with collaborative projects that value diverse contributions. For instance, a science fair could be



restructured as a collaborative exhibition where students with different strengths work together to create comprehensive displays. Additionally, schools could implement “buddy systems” or peer mentoring programs that are carefully designed to foster meaningful connections between students with and without disabilities.

At the policy level, school districts should consider developing inclusion metrics that go beyond academic achievement and physical integration to measure the quality of peer relationships and social engagement. This could involve regular social network analyses to identify isolated students, or the use of climate surveys that specifically address relational aspects of inclusion. Furthermore, funding allocations should reflect the importance of relational inclusion, with resources dedicated to smaller class sizes, additional support staff, and programs that facilitate inclusive social interactions.

Lastly, parent and community engagement strategies should be developed to extend relational inclusion beyond the school walls. This could include education programs for parents on supporting inclusive friendships, community events that showcase the diverse abilities of all students, and partnerships with local organizations to create inclusive extracurricular opportunities.

By implementing these practical strategies, schools can move closer to realizing the full potential of relational inclusion, creating environments where all students feel genuinely connected and valued.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored the concept of relational inclusion, applying the principles of relational pedagogy to the field of inclusive education. The paper began by highlighting the gap between physical inclusion and genuine social integration, illustrating the need for a more comprehensive approach to inclusion that focuses on the quality of peer interactions and relationships.

The paper examined the challenges inherent in implementing relational inclusion, including the tension between natural peer dynamics and organized interventions, the complexity of developing relational competencies, and the often-unconscious nature of these skills. By drawing on the framework of relational pedagogy, I proposed strategies to address these challenges, such as making relational rules explicit, considering the impact of activities on peer relations, and recognizing the unique dual nature of educational relations.

The exploration of these concepts demonstrates that applying the tenets of relational pedagogy to inclusion can be a productive approach. It offers new perspectives on long-standing challenges and provides a framework for developing more effective inclusive practices. The emphasis on relationships as central to the educational process aligns well with the goals of inclusive education and offers promising avenues for fostering genuine social integration.

However, it is important to emphasize that this paper represents just the beginning of what must be a much larger conversation and body of work. Translating the concept of relational inclusion into widespread practice will require significant further research, theoretical development, and practical experimentation.

While this framework provides a foundation for implementing relational inclusion, several important questions remain to be explored through future research.

### 7.1. *Future Research Directions*

To advance the field of relational inclusion, I propose several key areas for future research:

1. *Longitudinal Studies*: Long-term studies are needed to track the impact of relational inclusion strategies on students' social integration, academic performance, and overall well-being over time.
2. *Measurement Tools*: Researchers should develop and validate instruments to measure the quality of relational inclusion in educational settings. These tools should capture both the well-being and growth dimensions of educational relations.
3. *Intervention Studies*: Experimental research is needed to test the effectiveness of specific relational inclusion interventions, comparing them with traditional inclusion approaches.
4. *Cross-Cultural Research*: Studies exploring how relational inclusion manifests in different cultural contexts could provide valuable insights into its universality and cultural specificity.
5. *Teacher Education*: Research on how to effectively incorporate relational inclusion principles into teacher preparation programs is crucial for widespread implementation.
6. *Technology and Relational Inclusion*: As digital learning environments become more prevalent, studies on how to foster relational inclusion in online and hybrid educational settings are necessary.
7. *Neurodiversity and Relational Inclusion*: More research is needed on how to tailor relational inclusion strategies for students with diverse neurodevelopmental conditions.
8. *Policy Analysis*: Studies examining the impact of different educational policies on relational inclusion could inform future policymaking.

These research directions will help to deepen our understanding of relational inclusion, provide evidence for its effectiveness, and guide its practical implementation in diverse educational contexts.

As we move forward, let us keep in mind that the goal of relational inclusion is not just to improve educational outcomes, but to create school communities where every student feels genuinely connected, valued, and empowered to grow. By centering relationships in our approach to inclusion, we open up new possibilities for creating educational experiences that are not just academically enriching, but socially and emotionally fulfilling for all students.

The path to realizing relational inclusion will require collaborative efforts from researchers, educators, policymakers, and students themselves. It will involve challenging long-held assumptions about peer relations, rethinking the role of teachers in shaping social dynamics, and reimagining what truly inclusive educational environments look like. Through continued research, dialogue, and practical application, we can work towards a future where relational inclusion becomes the norm in our educational systems, benefiting all learners.

## REFERENCES

- Allan, J. (2006). The repetition of exclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 10(2-3), 121-133.
- Beck, J. S. (2011). *Cognitive behavior therapy: Basics and beyond*. Guilford Press.
- Biesta, G. (2015). On the two cultures of educational research, and how we might move ahead: Reconsidering the ontology, axiology and praxeology of education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 14(1), 11-22.
- Bottema-Beutel, K., Park, H., & Kim, S. Y. (2018). Commentary on social skills training curricula for individuals with ASD: Social interaction, authenticity, and stigma. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(7), 2350-2354.
- Carter, E. W. (2011). Supporting peer relationships. In M. E. Snell & F. Brown (Eds.), *Instruction of students with severe disabilities* (7th ed., pp. 431-460). Pearson.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2009). Peer culture. In J. Qvortrup, W. A. Corsaro, & M. S. Honig (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of childhood studies* (pp. 301-315). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Evans, J. S. B. (2008). Dual-processing accounts of reasoning, judgment, and social cognition. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 59, 255-278.
- Freud, S. (1915/1963). The unconscious. In *General psychological theory: Papers on meta-psychology*. Collier Books.
- Graham, L. J., Van Bergen, P., & Sweller, N. (2016). Caught between a rock and a hard place: disruptive boys' views on mainstream and special schools in New South Wales, Australia. *Critical Studies in Education*, 57(1), 35-54.
- Jackson, P. W. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Killen, M., Rutland, A., & Jampol, N. S. (2008). Social exclusion in childhood and adolescence. In K. H. Rubin, W. M. Bukowski, & B. Laursen (Eds.), *Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups* (pp. 249-266). The Guilford Press.
- Kozulin, A., Gindis, B., Ageyev, V. S., & Miller, S. M. (Eds.) (2003). *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context*. Cambridge University Press.

- Ljungblad, A. L., & Aspelin, J. (2020). Relational competence in teacher education: Teachers' relational experiences and professionalism. *Frontiers in Education*, 5, 76.
- Paley, V. G. (1990). *The boy who would be a helicopter*. Harvard University Press.
- Paley, V. G. (1992). *You cannot say you cannot play*. Harvard University Press.
- Scior, K. (2011). Public awareness, attitudes and beliefs regarding intellectual disability: A systematic review. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 32(6), 2164-2182.
- Shweder, R. A. (1991). *Thinking through cultures: Expeditions in cultural psychology*. Harvard University Press.
- Sidorkin, A. M. (2023). *Pedagogy of Relation: Education After Reform*. Routledge.
- Twenge, J. M., Sherman, R. A., & Wells, B. E. (2016). Changes in American adults' reported same-sex sexual experiences and attitudes, 1973–2014. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(7), 1713-1730.
- Yalom, I. D., & Leszcz, M. (2005). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy*. Basic Books.