

Creating Welcoming and Supportive Classroom Climates for Inclusive Education: Belonging, Psychological Safety, and Peer Support

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is not realized solely through curriculum adaptations or assessment reforms; it is deeply rooted in the quality of classroom climate experienced by learners and teachers. A welcoming and supportive classroom climate fosters belonging, psychological safety, mutual respect, and engagement among all learners, particularly those from marginalized or vulnerable groups. This chapter examines the foundations of inclusive classroom culture, strategies for reducing stigma and cultivating positive teacher attitudes, the role of peer support and collaborative learning structures, approaches to preventing bullying and ensuring psychological safety, and the importance of addressing teacher stress and well-being. Drawing upon research, policy frameworks such as NEP 2020, and inclusive pedagogy principles, the chapter provides practical and conceptual guidance for teacher education and school practice.

Keywords: *Creating Welcoming, Supportive Classroom, Inclusive Education, Psychological Safety, Peer Support*

1. Introduction: Why Classroom Climate Matters for Inclusion

Classroom climate refers to the overall quality of relationships, emotional tone, norms, and values that shape daily experiences of teaching and learning. In inclusive education, classroom climate is not a peripheral concern; it is central to whether learners feel safe, valued, and capable of participation (Fraser, 2012).

Research consistently shows that learners' academic engagement, social participation, and emotional well-being are strongly influenced by classroom climate (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). For learners with disabilities, first-generation learners, students from marginalized communities, and those experiencing trauma, an unsupportive classroom climate can become a powerful mechanism of exclusion, even when inclusive policies formally exist.

NEP 2020 emphasizes learner well-being, social-emotional learning, and joyful classrooms, recognizing that inclusive schooling requires attention to emotional and relational dimensions of education (Government of India, 2020).

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2. Foundations of an Inclusive Classroom Culture

2.1 Belonging, Respect, and Dignity

At the core of an inclusive classroom culture lies the principle of belonging, the feeling that one is accepted, respected, and valued as a full member of the learning community (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). Inclusive classrooms deliberately move away from deficit-based views of learners and instead recognize diversity as a resource for learning.

Key foundations include:

- Respect for learner diversity (ability, language, gender, culture)
- Clear norms of mutual respect
- Recognition of individual strengths and contributions

2.2 High Expectations for All Learners

Inclusive classroom climates balance care with high academic and social expectations. Lowering expectations in the name of inclusion often results in subtle exclusion and diminished opportunities (Florian, 2012). Teachers must communicate belief in every learner's capacity to grow, while providing appropriate supports.

3. Reducing Stigma and Promoting Positive Teacher Attitudes

3.1 Understanding Stigma in School Contexts

Stigma in classrooms often emerges through:

- Labeling practices
- Differential treatment
- Low expectations
- Public comparisons of performance

Learners with disabilities or learning difficulties are particularly vulnerable to stigmatization, which negatively affects self-esteem, participation, and academic outcomes (Goffman, 1963).

3.2 Teacher Attitudes as Determinants of Inclusion

Teacher beliefs and attitudes play a decisive role in shaping classroom climate. Research indicates that positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion are associated with greater learner participation and acceptance (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Teacher education must therefore:

- Challenge deficit-oriented thinking
- Promote reflective practice
- Encourage understanding of diversity through experiential learning

3.3 Language and Interaction Practices

Inclusive teachers use person-first, respectful language, avoid public shaming, and provide feedback that emphasizes effort and growth rather than comparison. Such interactional practices reduce stigma and foster psychological safety.

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4. Peer Support and Collaborative Learning Structures

4.1 Importance of Peer Relationships

Peers play a critical role in shaping learners' social experiences. Positive peer relationships enhance belonging, motivation, and learning, while peer rejection can severely undermine inclusion (Wentzel, 2017).

4.2 Cooperative and Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning structures, such as group work, peer tutoring, and cooperative tasks, are powerful tools for building inclusive classroom climates when designed intentionally.

Effective practices include:

- Heterogeneous grouping
- Clearly defined roles
- Shared responsibility for outcomes

Research shows that cooperative learning not only improves academic achievement but also reduces prejudice and enhances social acceptance (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

4.3 Peer Support for Learners with Additional Needs

Structured peer support systems, such as buddy systems, promote social inclusion for learners with disabilities without fostering dependency. When guided appropriately, peer support benefits both learners receiving and providing support.

5. Anti-Bullying and Psychological Safety

5.1 Bullying as a Barrier to Inclusion

Bullying, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyber forms, poses a serious threat to inclusive education. Learners with disabilities and those perceived as "different" are disproportionately targeted (UNESCO, 2017).

Bullying undermines:

- Psychological safety
- Academic engagement
- Mental health

5.2 Creating Psychologically Safe Classrooms

Psychological safety refers to an environment in which learners feel safe to express themselves, make mistakes, and seek help without fear of ridicule or punishment (Edmondson, 2018).

Teachers foster psychological safety by:

- Establishing clear anti-bullying norms
- Responding consistently to harmful behavior
- Encouraging respectful dialogue
- Modeling empathy and fairness

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5.3 Whole-School Approaches

Anti-bullying efforts are most effective when embedded within whole-school policies that involve teachers, students, parents, and administrators. NEP 2020's emphasis on student well-being supports such systemic approaches.

6. Teacher Stress Prevention and Well-Being

6.1 Teacher Stress in Inclusive Classrooms

While inclusive education offers moral and pedagogical benefits, it can also increase teacher workload and emotional demands if adequate support is lacking. High levels of stress and burnout negatively affect classroom climate and teacher-student relationships (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

6.2 Supporting Teacher Well-Being

Preventing teacher stress is essential for sustaining inclusive classroom climates. Strategies include:

- Professional development in inclusive practices
- Collaborative planning and peer support
- Reasonable workload expectations
- Access to counselling and mentoring

6.3 Emotional Competence and Self-Care

Teachers' social-emotional competence significantly influences classroom climate. Teachers who practice self-care, emotional regulation, and reflective practice are better equipped to create supportive and responsive learning environments.

7. Implications for Teacher Education

Teacher education programmes must explicitly prepare teachers to:

- Build inclusive classroom cultures
- Address stigma and bias
- Facilitate collaborative learning
- Respond to bullying and emotional distress
- Manage stress and maintain professional well-being

Embedding these competencies into pre-service and in-service training aligns with NEP 2020's vision of holistic teacher development.

8. Challenges in Creating Supportive Classroom Climates

Despite policy support, teachers face challenges such as:

- Large class sizes
- Limited resources
- Rigid curricular pressures
- Inadequate institutional support

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Addressing these challenges requires systemic commitment, not merely individual teacher effort.

9. Conclusion

Creating welcoming and supportive classroom climates is foundational to inclusive education. Such climates are built through respectful relationships, positive teacher attitudes, collaborative peer structures, psychological safety, and attention to teacher well-being. Inclusive classroom climates transform schools from sites of sorting and exclusion into communities of belonging and growth. For inclusive education to move beyond policy rhetoric, classroom climate must be recognized as a central pedagogical and ethical priority.

Case Studies: Creating Welcoming and Supportive Classroom Climates in Indian Schools

Case Study 1: Building a Sense of Belonging in a CBSE Inclusive Primary Classroom

Context

A CBSE-affiliated private school in North India with a diverse student population introduced inclusive classroom climate practices in **Class III**, including learners with ADHD, speech difficulties, and first-generation learners.

Classroom Climate Strategy

The class teacher implemented:

- Daily **morning circle time** for emotional check-ins
- Classroom rules co-created with students
- Celebration of multiple forms of achievement (effort, kindness, creativity)

Impact on Learners

- Improved participation of shy and neurodivergent learners
- Reduction in classroom disruptions
- Stronger peer relationships and empathy

Policy Alignment

- **NEP 2020:** Emphasis on joyful, stress-free learning
- **NCF 2023:** Focus on belonging and learner well-being

Case Study 2: Reducing Stigma through Teacher Attitude Change (State Board - Upper Primary)

Context

A government upper primary school in a rural district faced issues of labeling and stigma toward learners with learning difficulties in **Class VII**.

Intervention

After in-service training on inclusive pedagogy, teachers:

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- Stopped public comparison of marks
- Used strength-based feedback
- Avoided labeling language (e.g., “weak student”)

Classroom Climate Outcomes

- Improved self-esteem among previously marginalized learners
- Increased classroom participation
- Enhanced teacher-student trust

Policy Alignment

- **NEP 2020:** Teacher sensitization and equity
- **NCF 2023:** Respect for learner diversity

Case Study 3: Peer Support and Buddy System in a CBSE Secondary Classroom

Context

In a CBSE **Class VIII** classroom including a learner with hearing impairment and another with mild intellectual disability, teachers introduced a structured **peer buddy system**.

Inclusive Practice

- Rotational peer buddies for academic and social support
- Clear guidance to prevent over-dependence
- Emphasis on mutual learning rather than “helping”

Outcomes

- Increased social integration of learners with disabilities
- Improved peer empathy and collaboration
- Enhanced classroom cohesion

Policy Alignment

- **NCF 2023:** Collaborative learning
- **NEP 2020:** Social-emotional learning

Case Study 4: Addressing Bullying and Ensuring Psychological Safety (State Board - Secondary Level)

Context

A state board secondary school reported incidents of verbal bullying against a student from a marginalized community in **Class IX**.

School-Level Response

- Immediate teacher intervention and restorative dialogue
- Class discussions on respect and diversity
- Establishment of anonymous reporting mechanisms

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Impact on Classroom Climate

- Significant reduction in bullying incidents
- Improved psychological safety
- Increased student willingness to seek help

Policy Alignment

- **NEP 2020:** Safe and supportive school environments
- **NCF 2023:** Emotional safety and dignity

Case Study 5: Teacher Stress Prevention and Collaborative Support (CBSE Primary Section)

Context

Primary teachers in a CBSE school reported stress due to managing inclusive classrooms with large class sizes.

Supportive Measures

- Weekly peer-sharing meetings
- Collaborative lesson planning
- Reduced non-teaching workload

Impact

- Improved teacher morale
- Better classroom climate
- More consistent inclusive practices

Policy Alignment

- **NEP 2020:** Teacher well-being and professional support
- **NCF 2023:** Teacher autonomy and collaboration

Cross-Case Insights

Classroom Climate Dimension	Evidence from Case Studies
Belonging and inclusion	Circle time and peer support increased participation
Reduction of stigma	Positive teacher attitudes transformed learner engagement
Psychological safety	Anti-bullying interventions reduced fear
Peer collaboration	Buddy systems strengthened social cohesion
Teacher well-being	Reduced stress improved classroom climate

Implications for Teacher Education and School Leadership

These Indian case studies demonstrate that:

- Inclusive classroom climates are **achievable within CBSE and State Board systems**
- Teacher attitudes and daily practices matter more than resources alone
- Whole-school support strengthens classroom-level inclusion

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Teacher education programmes should integrate these case studies into **micro-teaching, practicum reflection, and assessment tasks** to prepare future teachers for inclusive classroom realities.

Policy Mapping: Creating Welcoming and Supportive Classroom Climates

(Alignment with NEP 2020 and NCF 2023)

1. Alignment with National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

NEP 2020 foregrounds learner well-being, social-emotional learning, equity, and teacher well-being as essential foundations of quality education. The present chapter operationalizes these policy directions at the classroom level.

Table 1: Chapter-NEP 2020 Explicit Mapping

Chapter Focus Area	Relevant NEP 2020 Provisions	Nature of Alignment
Inclusive classroom culture and belonging	Para 4.1, 4.4	NEP emphasizes schools as spaces of inclusion, respect, and joyful learning. The chapter elaborates classroom norms, relationships, and practices that foster belonging for all learners.
Reducing stigma and discriminatory practices	Para 6.8, 6.9	NEP mandates elimination of discrimination against learners from marginalized groups. The chapter addresses stigma, labeling, and teacher language as barriers to inclusion.
Positive teacher attitudes towards diversity	Para 5.15, 5.16	NEP highlights teacher sensitization and professional development for inclusive education. The chapter identifies teacher attitudes as central determinants of classroom climate.
Social-emotional learning (SEL)	Para 4.4, 4.24	NEP calls for holistic development beyond academics. The chapter integrates SEL through empathy, peer relations, and psychological safety.
Peer collaboration and cooperative learning	Para 4.6, 4.23	NEP promotes collaborative and experiential learning. The chapter presents peer support and cooperative structures as tools for inclusion.
Anti-bullying and child safety	Para 4.8, 6.14	NEP stresses safe, secure, and supportive learning environments. The chapter directly addresses bullying prevention and psychological safety.
Teacher well-being and stress management	Para 5.1, 5.15	NEP recognizes teacher well-being as essential for quality education. The chapter links teacher stress prevention with positive classroom climates.

NEP 2020 Interpretation: This chapter translates NEP 2020’s broad vision of joyful, inclusive, and safe schooling into **concrete classroom practices**, ensuring that inclusion is experienced daily by learners.

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2. Alignment with National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023

NCF 2023 provides pedagogical clarity for implementing NEP 2020, positioning classroom climate as central to learning, assessment, and learner well-being.

Table 2: Chapter-NCF 2023 Explicit Mapping

Chapter Theme	NCF 2023 Core Principles	Operationalization in the Chapter
Welcoming classroom environments	Learner-centered and inclusive pedagogy	The chapter outlines strategies for creating emotionally supportive and respectful classroom spaces.
Psychological safety	Safe environments for exploration and error	The chapter emphasizes classrooms where learners can ask questions, make mistakes, and express identities without fear.
Learner agency and voice	Active participation of learners	Circle time, peer dialogue, and shared norms promote learner voice, as emphasized in NCF 2023.
Collaborative learning	Learning as a social process	Peer support, cooperative learning, and buddy systems reflect NCF's emphasis on social learning.
Respect for diversity	Recognition of individual and cultural diversity	The chapter addresses linguistic, socio-cultural, and ability-based diversity in classroom interactions.
Teacher autonomy and professionalism	Reflective teacher practice	Teachers are positioned as reflective professionals shaping classroom climate contextually.
Well-being of learners and teachers	Holistic development	The chapter integrates emotional well-being of both learners and teachers as a core curricular concern.

NCF 2023 Interpretation: The chapter strengthens NCF 2023 implementation by linking classroom climate directly to pedagogy, inclusion, and learner well-being, not treating it as an add-on.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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