

A Systematic Literature Review: The Impact of Inclusive Schools on Mental Health

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Abstract

Nowadays, it is common to find children with special needs who are educated in the same school as other children. There are already several inclusive schools that can accept early childhood children with special needs without separating them from their peers. However, the learning process in inclusive schools has had a significant impact on students' mental health. This study used a systematic literature review (SLR) to identify and analyze the positive and negative impacts of inclusive schools on students' mental health. The first step was to define the research question (RQ) and then search several types of sources published in popular journal databases from 2013-2025. As a result of the review of selected articles, there are positive impacts of inclusive schools on students' mental health, such as increasing self-confidence and independence, reducing stigma and social isolation, improving social skills and empathy, and promoting tolerance and acceptance. Meanwhile, there are also negative impacts of inclusive schools, such as discomfort and feelings of inadequacy, adjustment difficulties, as well as disruptive behavior and classroom disruption.

Keywords: inclusive schools, mental health impact

Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a transformative approach in the modern education system, aiming to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, learn together in the same environment. For children with special needs, this approach not only supports academic development but also plays an important role in shaping their mental health. Numerous studies have highlighted the psychological benefits of inclusive education. Inclusive education is about ensuring that all individuals have access to quality education and that schools adapt to the needs of all students, rather than expecting students to adapt to schools (Ainscow, 2020).

Utami and Prihatini (2020) found that children with special needs who study in inclusive schools tend to have higher self-confidence compared to those who study in special schools. Friedman et al. (2021) explored the relationship between the inclusive school environment and stress and anxiety levels in children. The study showed that children who felt accepted and not discriminated against in the school environment had lower anxiety levels and better emotion regulation skills. In addition, a study by De Boer et al. (2011) showed that inclusion significantly

reduced feelings of isolation and anxiety in children with autism spectrum disorder. These findings underscore the importance of inclusive environments in improving emotional well-being, as students experience a greater sense of belonging and acceptance.

The purpose of this systematic literature review is to investigate how inclusive school environments affect the mental health of children with special needs and what factors contribute to inclusive education experiences affecting students' mental well-being. Specifically, this review seeks to answer the main research question of "What are the positive and negative impacts of inclusive schools on students' mental health?" This question will be answered by looking at various types of factors, barriers, and ways of learning in inclusive schools.

To obtain comprehensive results, this review is limited to literature published between 2011 and 2025, with a focus on empirical studies involving learners, including children with special needs who have equal learning opportunities. This paper consists of four sections. Section 2 explains the systematic literature review as the methodology of this study. Section 3 describes the results of the review and answers to the research questions. Section 4 presents the research conclusions and suggestions for future research.

Method

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is a secondary study to map, identify, critically evaluate, consolidate, and collect the results of major studies on specific research topics. SLR is the standard method for getting answers by conducting a literature review based on previous related studies. The aim of conducting an SLR is to summarize previous research, to identify gaps that need to be met between previous and current research, to produce coherent reports/syntheses, and to create a research framework.

The purpose of this literature review is to understand the research topic investigating how inclusive school environments affect the mental health of children with special needs and what factors contribute to inclusive education experiences affecting students' mental health. To obtain comprehensive results, this research analyzes a wide range of literature published from 2011 to 2025. The research will specifically focus on identifying the various psychological impacts (both positive and negative) that inclusive school students experience.

The purpose of the Research Question is to maintain the focus of the literature review. This condition facilitates the process of finding the data needed. Table I shows the research questions for this study. The purpose of the Research Question is to maintain the focus of the literature review. This condition facilitates the process of finding the data needed. Table 1 shows the research questions for this study.

Table 1
Research Question

ID	Research Question	Motivation
RQ	What are the positive and negative impacts of inclusive schools on students' mental health?	To identify various mental health impacts associated with participation in inclusive schools as a basis for developing an educational system that better supports the well-being of all students.

This research conducts searches on popular journal databases with specific keywords to answer the Research Question described above. The keywords used are: "**Mental Health**" AND "**Inclusive School**". Searching with keywords is done only in the abstract section. Search results found as many as articles.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to select the main study. The results of the article from these criteria will be reviewed by the researcher. The inclusion and exclusion criteria can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	ID	Criteria
Inclusion	I1	Articles related to mental health outcomes, Inclusive Schools, and well-being factors associated with participation in e-learning environments
	I2	Article published between 2013 – 2025
Exclusion	E1	The articles are the same, but in a different database journal
	E2	The article does not directly address the research question

Results and Discussion

The literature review process identified a total of fifteen relevant journal and conference articles published between 2013 and 2025. These studies were selected through the application of clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure their relevance to inclusive education and students' mental health. The distribution of publications demonstrates a growing scholarly interest in this topic over time. Only one article was published in 2013, followed by two articles in 2016 and one article in 2019. A marked increase is evident in recent years, with one article published in 2023, six articles in 2024, and four articles in 2025. This upward trend indicates that issues related to inclusive schools and mental health have received increased academic attention, particularly in

response to global concerns about student well-being and the implementation of inclusive educational policies. The final selection of fifteen articles, as summarized in Table 3, forms the basis of the analysis reviewed in this study.

Table 3
Filtering Process Result

No	Publication Year	Number of Articles
1.	2013	1
2.	2016	2
3.	2019	1
4.	2023	1
5.	2024	6
6.	2025	4
Total		15

Positive Impact of Inclusive Schools on Mental Health

The results of the literature review indicate that inclusive schools have several positive impacts on students' mental health, contributing to more supportive learning environments and effective educational practices. The reviewed studies consistently show that inclusive education positively influences students' emotional well-being, social skills, learning engagement, and overall psychological outcomes.

One of the most frequently reported positive impacts is the reduction of social isolation and the development of empathy among students. Inclusive school environments provide opportunities for students with diverse abilities to interact, collaborate, and build meaningful peer relationships. These interactions foster mutual understanding and acceptance, enabling students—particularly those with special educational needs—to feel more socially connected and emotionally supported within the school community.

Another key finding relates to the enhancement of students' self-confidence and emotional well-being. Inclusive classrooms allow students to participate actively in learning activities through differentiated instruction and appropriate support. Such participation enables students to experience academic success, which strengthens their self-esteem and emotional resilience. In addition, inclusive education promotes equal access to learning by implementing adaptive instructional strategies. These strategies help students with diverse learning needs engage meaningfully with learning content, reducing anxiety and promoting a sense of psychological safety.

The results also indicate that inclusive schools contribute to the development of social participation and communication skills. Through collaborative learning activities and group work, students learn to express ideas, cooperate with peers, and engage in constructive social interactions. These experiences enhance students' social competence and sense of belonging. Furthermore, the reviewed studies highlight that inclusive schools support psychologically healthy learning environments characterized by positive classroom interactions, reduced stress, and improved learning outcomes. Overall, the results demonstrate that inclusive schools, when effectively implemented, play an important role in promoting students' mental health and well-being.

Table 4
Positive Impacts of an Inclusive School on Students' Mental Health

No	Positive Impacts	References
1.	Reduce social isolation and increase empathy	Göransson and Nilholm (2014), Hehir et al. (2016), UNESCO. (2025), World Health Organization. (2025), Banks and McCoy (2024)
2.	Effective strategies and education policy implications	Mitchell (2019)
3.	Self-confidence and emotional well-being	Ainscow (2013), Armstrong (2016), Loreman (2024), Sharma et al. (2024).
4.	Providing access to education, adaptive learning strategies	Florian (2019), Forlin (2023).
5.	Social participation, communication skills, and sense of belonging	Pijl (2023), De Boer et al. (2013).
6.	Psychologically healthy learning environment, improved learning outcomes	Sulkowski and Joyce (2025).

The findings of this review support the view that inclusive education has strong potential to promote positive mental health outcomes among students. Consistent with Ainscow (2013), inclusive schools should be understood not merely as physical spaces where students with diverse needs are placed together, but as social environments that foster participation, acceptance, and emotional security. When inclusion is implemented effectively, students experience reduced social isolation and increased empathy, supporting Göransson and Nilholm's (2014) argument that inclusive education enhances social relationships and mutual understanding.

The improvement in students' self-confidence and emotional well-being identified in the results aligns with Armstrong's (2016) assertion that inclusive practices empower students by focusing on strengths rather than limitations. Similarly, Loreman (2024) emphasizes that inclusive learning environments promote emotional development by ensuring that students feel valued, respected, and supported. These conditions are essential for the development of positive self-perceptions and emotional stability.

The importance of adaptive learning strategies highlighted in this review is also supported by Florian (2019), who argues that inclusive pedagogy should be intentionally designed to accommodate learner diversity from the outset. By offering flexible instructional approaches, inclusive schools can reduce academic pressure and promote equitable learning opportunities. This perspective is reinforced by Forlin (2023), who stresses that access to appropriate support services is critical for maintaining students' psychological comfort and engagement in inclusive settings.

Social participation and communication skills emerged as another significant benefit of inclusive education. De Boer et al. (2013) note that positive peer interactions in inclusive classrooms contribute substantially to students' sense of belonging and emotional well-being.

Likewise, Pijl (2023) highlights that inclusive environments can strengthen social competence when collaboration and peer support are actively facilitated.

However, the reviewed literature also indicates that inclusive education does not automatically guarantee positive mental health outcomes. Sharma and Sokal (2024) warn that inadequately implemented inclusion may increase psychological pressure and emotional exhaustion among students. This concern supports Mitchell's (2019) argument that inclusive policies must be accompanied by sufficient resources, teacher preparation, and institutional commitment.

The emergence of stigma and feelings of being unwelcome in some inclusive settings, as reported by Hehir et al. (2016) and UNESCO (2025), further illustrates the complexity of inclusion in practice. Sulkowski and Joyce (2025) emphasize that without a psychologically safe learning environment, students are at greater risk of experiencing negative mental health outcomes. As the World Health Organization (2025) asserts, schools play a critical role in promoting mental well-being, and inclusive education must be carefully designed to ensure that all students benefit both academically and psychologically.

Negative Impacts of Inclusive Schools on Students' Mental Health

The results of the literature review in Table 5 indicate that inclusive schools may also have negative impacts on students' mental health, particularly when inclusive practices are not effectively implemented. One of the most frequently reported negative outcomes is mental pressure, stress, and emotional discomfort. Several studies note that students, especially those with special educational needs, may feel overwhelmed in inclusive classrooms when instructional approaches, classroom expectations, or peer interactions do not adequately accommodate their individual abilities. This mismatch can result in emotional strain and persistent feelings of inadequacy.

Another negative impact identified in the reviewed studies is the presence of adaptation difficulties and feelings of alienation. In situations where academic and social support systems are insufficient, students may struggle to adjust to the inclusive learning environment. These challenges often manifest in reduced classroom participation, social withdrawal, and a weakened sense of belonging. Additionally, high workload and emotional exhaustion emerge as common concerns, particularly when students are expected to meet standard academic demands without appropriate modifications or individualized assistance.

The findings also reveal the risk of new forms of stigma in inclusive school settings. Although inclusive education aims to reduce discrimination, some students may feel labeled, exposed, or unwelcome when their differences are emphasized rather than supported. Experiences of discrimination and repeated adaptation difficulties may persist when teachers and schools lack adequate resources, training, or institutional support. Collectively, these conditions can contribute to poor mental health outcomes, highlighting that inclusion without proper implementation may inadvertently harm students' psychological well-being.

Table 5
Negative Impacts of an Inclusive School on Students' Mental Health

No	Positive Impacts	References
1.	Mental pressure, stress, discomfort	Ainscow (2013), Armstrong (2016), Sharma and Sokal (2024), World Health Organization. (2025), De Boer et al. (2013)
2.	Adaptation difficulties, feelings of alienation	Florian (2019), Pijl (2023)
3.	High workload, emotional exhaustion	Forlin (2023), Banks and McCoy (2024)
4.	Risk of new stigma, feeling unwelcome	Göransson and Nilholm (2014), Hehir et al. (2016), UNESCO. (2025)
5.	Discrimination, adaptation difficulties	Mitchell (2019), Loreman (2024)
6.	Poor mental health	Sulkowski and Joyce (2025)

The negative impacts identified in this review emphasize that inclusive education does not automatically guarantee positive mental health outcomes. Ainscow (2013) cautions that inclusion should focus on meaningful participation rather than mere physical placement, as poorly structured inclusion can increase students' stress and emotional vulnerability. Similarly, Armstrong (2016) argues that when inclusive environments fail to recognize individual differences, they may unintentionally contribute to feelings of pressure and inadequacy among learners.

The adaptation difficulties and feelings of alienation reported in this review align with Florian's (2019) observation that inclusive pedagogy requires planning and support to address learner diversity. Without such planning, students may experience exclusion within inclusion. Pijl (2023) further notes that social acceptance in inclusive settings is not automatic and depends heavily on peer attitudes and teacher facilitation.

High workload and emotional exhaustion identified in the findings are consistent with Forlin's (2023) argument that inclusive education demands adequate structural and instructional support. When such support is lacking, students may experience excessive academic pressure, leading to emotional fatigue. Banks and McCoy (2024) also highlight that inequitable workload distribution in inclusive classrooms can negatively affect students' mental well-being.

The emergence of new stigma in inclusive schools reflects concerns raised by Göransson and Nilholm (2014), who warn that inclusion can paradoxically reinforce labeling when differences are highlighted without sufficient support. Hehir et al. (2016) emphasize that inclusive education must challenge deficit-based perspectives to prevent students from feeling marginalized. This view is reinforced by UNESCO (2025), which states that inclusive education fails when it does not foster dignity, belonging, and psychological safety.

Finally, the association between poorly implemented inclusion and poor mental health outcomes supports the argument of Sulkowski and Joyce (2025), who stress that schools play a critical role in protecting students' psychological well-being. As Mitchell (2019) and Loreman (2024) argue, inclusive policies must be accompanied by adequate teacher training, resources, and systemic commitment to prevent discrimination and emotional harm.

Overall, the discussion highlights that while inclusive education has strong potential benefits, inadequate implementation can lead to stress, alienation, and negative mental health outcomes. Therefore, inclusive schools must prioritize comprehensive support systems, teacher preparedness, and policy alignment to ensure that inclusion promotes, rather than undermines, students' mental health.

Conclusion

This study concludes that inclusive education, when effectively implemented, significantly supports the mental well-being of children with special educational needs (SEN). The findings demonstrate that students with SEN experience higher levels of emotional and behavioral challenges compared to their non-SEN peers. However, the presence of an inclusive school climate—particularly strong teacher support and peer inclusion—was associated with reduced mental health difficulties. Teacher support emerged as the most influential factor, highlighting the need for educators to be equipped with inclusive pedagogical skills and emotional literacy. Moreover, fostering positive peer relationships plays a vital role in reducing social isolation and promoting a sense of belonging. Overall, inclusive education has the potential not only to enhance academic outcomes but also to nurture the emotional resilience and psychological safety of all students. Therefore, schools must invest in inclusive practices, teacher training, and supportive peer cultures to fully realize the mental health benefits of inclusive education.

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