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Students' Voices on Inclusive Education in Urban Schools of Argentina

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores students' perspectives on inclusive education practices within urban Argentine secondary schools, addressing the critical gap in research that frequently excludes student voices from inclusive education discourse. Employing participatory research methodologies, the study engaged 127 students with and without disabilities across six secondary schools in Buenos Aires and Córdoba through focus groups, photovoice activities, and individual interviews. Students articulated nuanced understandings of inclusion extending beyond physical presence to encompass belonging, meaningful participation, peer relationships, and pedagogical responsiveness. Findings reveal that students value inclusive environments fostering mutual respect and friendship across differences, yet identify persistent barriers including inadequate teacher preparation, inflexible curriculum and assessment, attitudinal prejudices, and insufficient support services. Students with disabilities emphasized the psychological burden of constantly advocating for accommodations and navigating peers' curiosity or rejection. Neurotypical students expressed desires to support disabled peers but lacked knowledge about appropriate interactions and assistance.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a fundamental human rights imperative and educational reform priority worldwide, grounded in principles that all children

regardless of ability, background, or characteristics deserve equitable access to quality education within mainstream settings alongside their peers. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) established inclusive education as a legal obligation for signatory nations, requiring educational systems to ensure that persons with disabilities can access inclusive, quality education on an equal basis with others in the communities where they live. This rights-based framework represents a paradigm shift from previous segregation and integration models toward genuine inclusion where diversity is valued, educational systems adapt to accommodate all learners, and students with disabilities are full community members rather than visitors in mainstream settings requiring special dispensation.

Argentina ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008 and has since undertaken legislative and policy reforms promoting inclusive education, including the 2006 National Education Law establishing education as a universal right and the 2017 Federal Education Law amendments strengthening inclusive education commitments. Despite these progressive legal frameworks, implementation remains inconsistent and contested, with substantial variation across provinces and schools in inclusive practices, resource allocation, and philosophical commitment to inclusion. Cobeñas (2016) documented that while Buenos Aires and other urban centers have made significant strides toward inclusive education, many schools continue to resist enrolling students with disabilities, lack adequate support services, and maintain deficit perspectives viewing disability as individual pathology requiring remediation rather than environmental and systemic barriers requiring elimination. These implementation gaps reflect broader tensions between policy aspirations and institutional realities that characterize inclusive education globally.

Student voice in educational research and policy has gained recognition as essential for understanding educational experiences, identifying improvement priorities, and ensuring that reforms address actual needs rather than adult assumptions. Fielding (2004) argued that authentic student voice goes beyond token consultation to position students as knowledge creators and change agents whose perspectives fundamentally inform educational development. Cook-Sather (2006) emphasized that students possess unique insights into learning processes, classroom dynamics, and institutional practices that adults cannot access through observation alone, making their perspectives invaluable for educational improvement. In inclusive education contexts, student voice assumes particular significance as students with disabilities have historically been objectified as subjects of intervention rather than recognized as experts on their own experiences, while their neurotypical peers' perspectives on inclusion remain largely unexplored despite their crucial roles in creating inclusive or exclusive classroom cultures.

Research on students' perspectives on inclusive education, while growing, remains limited particularly in Latin American contexts. Existing literature, predominantly from North American and European settings, reveals that students

articulate sophisticated understandings of inclusion encompassing social acceptance, pedagogical differentiation, and institutional accessibility beyond adult-defined parameters. Messiou (2012) found that students identify subtle exclusionary practices including differential teacher expectations, peer marginalization, and curriculum irrelevance that formal inclusion indicators miss. Allan (1999) demonstrated that students with disabilities develop complex strategies for negotiating educational environments, managing stigma, and claiming space within mainstream settings, insights rarely captured in adult-centered research. However, these studies' cultural contexts differ substantially from Argentina's unique social, economic, and educational landscape, raising questions about transferability and highlighting needs for culturally-grounded research amplifying Argentine students' voices (Muhsyanur and Ramlee Bin Mustapha, 2023; Muhsyanur, 2024).

The Argentine educational context presents specific considerations shaping inclusive education experiences. Argentina's history of public education emphasizing universal access and social mobility creates cultural foundations supportive of inclusive principles, yet economic instability, provincial autonomy creating implementation variation, and persistent social hierarchies based on class and ethnicity complicate inclusion efforts. Duschatzky and Skliar (2001) analyzed how Argentine schools manage diversity, often through assimilationist approaches expecting students to adapt to institutional norms rather than institutions transforming to accommodate diversity, patterns potentially affecting inclusive education implementation. Additionally, Argentina's special education system historically developed parallel structures serving students with disabilities in segregated settings, creating institutional inertia and vested interests potentially resistant to inclusive education's disruptive implications for these established systems.

Disability in Argentine society carries complex cultural meanings influencing inclusive education experiences. Yarza de los Ríos and Rodríguez (2007) documented how Latin American disability discourse has historically pathologized disability through medical models emphasizing deficits and rehabilitation, perspectives that continue to influence educational practices despite rights-based policy frameworks. However, disability rights movements in Argentina have gained strength, advocating for social models recognizing disability as emerging from societal barriers rather than individual impairments, perspectives increasingly influential in policy though unevenly reflected in practice. Understanding how students navigate these competing frameworks—medical versus social models, charity versus rights approaches, segregation versus inclusion—requires attention to their lived experiences and meaning-making processes.

Adolescence as a developmental period adds particular dimensions to inclusive education experiences that research must acknowledge. Secondary school contexts differ substantially from primary settings in scale, subject specialization, peer culture intensity, and identity formation salience. Students in adolescence are negotiating complex social hierarchies, forming identities, and experiencing heightened

sensitivity to peer acceptance and rejection, dynamics profoundly affecting how they experience and contribute to inclusive or exclusive environments. Shevlin et al. (2013) found that adolescents with disabilities often experience intensified social exclusion compared to younger children as peer relationships become more selective and social expectations more complex, yet their perspectives on these experiences remain underrepresented in research. Similarly, neurotypical adolescents' attitudes toward disabled peers and inclusion evolve through this period in ways requiring investigation to support positive inclusive cultures.

The methodological imperative to engage students as active research participants rather than passive subjects demands approaches that honor young people's capacities, accommodate diverse communication needs, and create spaces where students feel safe expressing authentic perspectives including criticisms of their schools and teachers. Traditional research methods may inadequately capture students' experiences, particularly for those with intellectual disabilities, autism, or communication differences whose voices are most marginalized. Participatory and creative methodologies including photovoice, participatory mapping, and arts-based approaches have demonstrated effectiveness in amplifying diverse student voices, yet remain underutilized in Latin American educational research. Bergmark and Kostenius (2009) showed that such methods not only enhance data richness but empower students through research participation, developing critical consciousness and agency alongside generating knowledge, dual outcomes particularly valuable when researching marginalized populations.

METHOD

This qualitative study employed participatory research methodologies to explore students' perspectives on inclusive education in urban Argentine secondary schools. Following principles of participatory action research articulated by Reason and Bradbury (2012), the research positioned students as knowledge co-creators rather than mere data sources, involving them in research design, data collection, and interpretation processes. The study was conducted across six public secondary schools in Buenos Aires and Córdoba, Argentina's two largest urban centers, purposively selected to represent diverse socioeconomic contexts, student populations, and inclusive education implementation approaches. Participants included 127 students aged 13-18 years, comprising 51 students with officially recognized disabilities (including intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum conditions, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, and learning disabilities) and 76 neurotypical peers. Gender distribution was approximately balanced (48% female, 52% male), with deliberate recruitment of students from working-class and middle-class backgrounds reflecting the public school populations served. Bergmark and Kostenius' (2009) emphasis on creating research conditions that honor participants' dignity, agency, and knowledge guided recruitment and consent processes, with extensive time devoted to explaining research purposes in accessible formats and ensuring voluntary participation free from teacher or parental pressure.

Data collection occurred over eight months through multiple methods accommodating diverse communication preferences and generating rich, multidimensional data. Focus groups (n=24, 4-6 students each) created peer-supported environments where students collectively explored inclusion experiences, with some groups composed of students with similar disabilities sharing experiences, others mixing disabled and neurotypical students examining peer relationships and classroom dynamics, and some focusing on specific topics like assessment practices or teacher support. Individual semi-structured interviews (n=43) provided spaces for students uncomfortable with group discussion or wishing to share experiences privately, conducted in locations students selected to maximize comfort. Photovoice methodology, following Wang and Burris' (2012) framework, engaged 38 students in documenting their school experiences through photography and subsequent collective analysis, capturing visual data complementing verbal narratives.

Students photographed spaces, interactions, materials, and moments representing inclusion or exclusion, then participated in facilitated discussions interpreting images' meanings and implications. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim, with professional interpretation provided for students requiring sign language or augmentative communication support. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis approach, proceeding through familiarization, systematic coding, theme development, review, refinement, and reporting phases. Critically, a subset of students participated in member-checking sessions reviewing preliminary themes and interpretations, ensuring analyses reflected their intended meanings and incorporating their feedback into final interpretations. Ethical approval was obtained from institutional review boards, Argentine education authorities, and individual schools, with particular attention to ethical complexities of research involving minors and individuals with disabilities. Informed consent involved students, parents, and in some cases legal guardians, with assent processes ensuring students understood participation was voluntary and they could withdraw without consequences. Confidentiality protections included pseudonyms, de-identified quotations, and careful consideration of whether specific details might inadvertently identify participants in their school communities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Defining Inclusion: Beyond Physical Presence

Students articulated sophisticated conceptualizations of inclusion extending far beyond mere physical presence in mainstream classrooms to encompass belonging, meaningful participation, valued contribution, and authentic relationships. When asked to define inclusive education, students overwhelmingly rejected narrow definitions focused solely on students with disabilities being present in general education settings. Instead, they described inclusion as environments where

"everyone feels they belong," "differences are normal," "you can be yourself without fear," and "teachers teach in ways everyone can learn." One student with cerebral palsy explained, "Inclusion isn't just being in the same room. Anyone can put you in a room. Real inclusion is when people want you there, when you're part of everything, when what you think matters." These definitions emphasize inclusion's relational and affective dimensions, aligning with Ainscow and Miles' (2008) conceptualization of inclusion as fundamentally about presence, participation, and achievement rather than location alone.

Students distinguished between "true inclusion" and what several termed "fake inclusion" or "just sitting there inclusion," describing experiences where they were physically present but educationally and socially excluded. Students with disabilities recounted being placed in general education classrooms without appropriate supports, unable to access curriculum content, excluded from group activities, and ignored by teachers focusing on neurotypical students. One student with a learning disability described, "I sit in the back. The teacher talks fast, writes everything on the board, gives us worksheets. I understand nothing. My friends help me sometimes, but mostly I just sit. Is that inclusion? I'm there, but I'm not really there." Neurotypical students similarly recognized these shallow inclusion practices, with one noting, "We have kids with disabilities in our class, but they don't really participate. They have an aide who works with them separately. We're in the same room but it's like we're in different schools."

The social dimension of inclusion emerged as particularly salient for students, who emphasized that friendships, peer acceptance, and social belonging were as important as academic access. Students described inclusive schools as places where diverse students interact naturally, form genuine friendships across differences, and support one another without being asked. One neurotypical student reflected, "In my old school, kids with disabilities were separate. We didn't know them. Here, they're in our classes, we work together, we're friends. It's normal. That's inclusion—when it's just normal to be friends with everyone." Students with disabilities shared powerful narratives about the transformative impact of friendship and acceptance, with one student with autism explaining, "Having friends who accept me, who don't care that I'm different, who include me in things—that's what makes school worth coming to. Without friends, even if teachers are good and I'm learning, I feel alone and excluded."

However, students also acknowledged complexity and contradiction in their inclusion experiences and perspectives. Some students expressed ambivalence about full inclusion, describing situations where they appreciated having separate spaces or specialized support rather than being in general education settings full-time. One student with an intellectual disability noted, "Sometimes I like being in the resource room. It's quieter, the teacher goes slower, I understand better. In regular class, everything is so fast, so much noise, so confusing." These nuanced perspectives challenge binary inclusion versus segregation frameworks, suggesting students desire flexibility and choice in how support is provided rather than ideological

commitments to particular placement models. Several students emphasized that inclusion should mean having options and support tailored to individual needs rather than one-size-fits-all approaches, whether fully inclusive or fully separate.

Barriers to Inclusion: Systemic and Interpersonal

Table 1. Primary Barriers to Inclusive Education Identified by Students

Barrier Category	Students Identifying (n=127)	Percentage	Illustrative Student Quotes
Teacher Lack of Knowledge/Skills	98	77%	"Teachers don't know how to teach us"; "They try but don't understand disabilities"
Inaccessible Curriculum/Materials	84	66%	"Everything is too hard, too fast"; "Books don't have pictures or simple words"
Rigid Assessment Practices	79	62%	"Tests are the same for everyone"; "I need more time but can't get it"
Negative Peer Attitudes	71	56%	"Some kids are mean, make fun"; "People stare and whisper"
Insufficient Support Services	68	54%	"Not enough aides to help everyone"; "Therapists come rarely"
Physical Accessibility Issues	52	41%	"Stairs everywhere, no ramps"; "Can't reach things, spaces too small"
Inadequate Resources/Funding	47	37%	"No special materials"; "Teachers pay for things themselves"

Note: Students could identify multiple barriers. Percentages indicate proportion of total participants mentioning each barrier category.

Teacher preparation and pedagogical capacity emerged as the most frequently cited barrier to effective inclusion, with students across disability categories and schools identifying teacher knowledge gaps as fundamentally limiting inclusive practices. Students described teachers who lacked understanding of specific disabilities, employed inflexible one-size-fits-all instructional approaches, and appeared uncomfortable or overwhelmed by classroom diversity. One student with

ADHD explained, "My teacher is nice, but she doesn't understand ADHD. She gets frustrated when I move around or lose focus. She thinks I'm not trying, but I am trying. I need to move to think. She doesn't know that." These accounts align with research by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) documenting that teacher attitudes and pedagogical competencies represent crucial determinants of inclusive education success, often more influential than resource availability or policy mandates.

Students with disabilities described the exhausting labor of constantly educating teachers about their needs, requesting accommodations, and advocating for appropriate support, responsibilities they felt should not fall on students. One student with a visual impairment recounted, "Every year, new teachers, same conversations. I explain I can't see the board, need materials in large print, need extra time for assignments. Some teachers are good, others forget or don't bother. I'm tired of explaining. Why don't they learn about this before we arrive?" This testimony reveals the psychological and social costs of inadequate teacher preparation, placing burdens on students that undermine the very inclusion schools claim to provide. Neurotypical students also noticed and were affected by teacher inadequacies, with several expressing discomfort watching teachers struggle or treat disabled peers unfairly, creating classroom tensions affecting all students.

Curriculum and assessment inflexibility represented another major barrier, with students describing content, pacing, and evaluation approaches that failed to accommodate diverse learning needs. Students identified textbooks written at reading levels inaccessible to many, instruction proceeding too rapidly for processing differences, and assessment formats advantaging particular skills while disadvantaging others. One student with dyslexia lamented, "Everything is about reading fast and writing long answers. I understand the content, but writing is so hard for me. My grades don't show what I know, they show that I have dyslexia. That's not fair." These experiences exemplify what Tomlinson (2014) described as curricular barriers where inflexible educational structures create disability by failing to accommodate natural human diversity, highlighting that inclusion requires not merely placing diverse students in existing structures but transforming structures themselves.

Peer attitudes and social dynamics presented complex barriers encompassing overt bullying, subtle marginalization, and awkward uncertainty about appropriate interactions. Students with disabilities shared painful experiences of mockery, exclusion from social groups, and being treated as inferior or pitiable rather than as equals. Simultaneously, neurotypical students described wanting to be supportive but feeling uncertain about how to interact with disabled peers, fearing they might say or do something offensive. One neurotypical student reflected, "I want to be friends with María [student with Down syndrome], but I don't know how to talk to her. I don't want to treat her like a baby, but I also don't know if she understands things the same way. So sometimes I just don't talk to her, even though I want to. I think that hurts her feelings and that makes me feel bad." This testimony reveals how lack of education about disability and interaction across differences creates

barriers even among well-intentioned students, suggesting that promoting inclusion requires explicit social skills instruction and structured opportunities for meaningful cross-difference relationships.

Students as Agents of Inclusion

Contrary to deficit narratives positioning students with disabilities as passive recipients of inclusive services or neurotypical students as merely accepting their presence, participants demonstrated remarkable agency in creating inclusive cultures, advocating for needed changes, and supporting one another. Students described taking initiative to educate peers about disabilities, challenge discriminatory treatment, adapt activities to be more inclusive, and advocate with teachers and administrators for systemic improvements. One student with autism recounted establishing a student disability awareness club that organized presentations, facilitated discussions, and created peer mentoring programs, initiatives she began after recognizing that formal school efforts were inadequate. Another student who uses a wheelchair described successfully advocating for accessible bathroom renovations by organizing a petition, presenting to the school board, and mobilizing community support, demonstrating sophisticated understanding of advocacy processes and persistence in pursuing structural changes.

Peer support emerged as a crucial inclusion mechanism, with students developing informal and formal systems for assisting one another academically and socially. Neurotypical students described sharing notes with peers with visual impairments, explaining concepts to classmates with intellectual disabilities, and defending disabled peers against bullying. Students with disabilities similarly supported neurotypical peers, challenging one-directional help narratives and demonstrating that support is reciprocal rather than hierarchical. One student with a physical disability explained, "People think I only receive help, but I help too. I'm good at math, so I tutor my friends. I listen when they have problems. Help goes both ways. That's what friends do." These reciprocal support patterns align with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist principles recognizing all learners as possessing strengths and needs, with peer collaboration benefiting all participants through scaffolding and perspective-sharing.

However, student agency also revealed problematic patterns where inclusion's heavy lifting fell disproportionately on students rather than institutional systems. Students described self-advocating because official support was inadequate, organizing peer support because teachers failed to facilitate collaboration, and educating others about disability because schools provided no systematic awareness programming. While students' resilience and initiative merit celebration, their necessity also signals institutional failures. Slee (2011) warned against celebrating individual resilience stories while ignoring systemic inadequacies that make such resilience necessary, cautioning that heroic narratives can obscure institutional accountability. Several students expressed frustration that inclusion seemed to

depend on their constant effort rather than systematic supports, with one noting, "I shouldn't have to fight for basic things. It's exhausting. Why can't the school just do what it's supposed to do without me having to beg?"

Students also identified limitations to their agency, describing situations where despite their advocacy, meaningful change proved impossible due to resource constraints, administrative resistance, or structural barriers beyond school-level control. One student described months of advocating for curriculum modifications only to be told that standardized assessments required uniform instruction, illustrating how system-level policies can override local inclusive efforts. Another recounted proposing accessibility improvements her school deemed too expensive, highlighting material constraints limiting even well-intentioned inclusion. These experiences reveal that while student voice and agency are valuable, genuine inclusion requires adult and institutional responsiveness, resources, and systemic change that students alone cannot produce, no matter how articulate or persistent their advocacy.

Visions for More Inclusive Futures

When asked to envision ideal inclusive schools, students articulated sophisticated recommendations addressing pedagogical, social, structural, and cultural dimensions. Their suggestions consistently emphasized holistic transformation rather than superficial accommodations, with students recognizing that genuine inclusion requires coordinated changes across multiple domains. Students prioritized teacher education as foundational, advocating for pre-service and in-service professional development ensuring all teachers understand diverse disabilities, possess differentiated instruction skills, and develop inclusive attitudes. One student stated, "Teachers should learn about disabilities in university, not just special education teachers but all teachers. And they should keep learning, not just once but always, because every student is different." This recommendation aligns with research by Florian (2012) emphasizing that inclusive education requires reconceptualizing teacher preparation to view teaching diverse learners as core professional competency rather than specialized skill.

Students envisioned curriculum and assessment reforms allowing multiple pathways to demonstrate learning, valuing diverse strengths, and accommodating different processing speeds and modalities. They advocated for universal design for learning principles making materials accessible to all students from the outset rather than retrofitting accommodations. One student explained, "Instead of giving me special worksheets that look different and everyone knows are special, why not make all worksheets work for everyone? Use simple language, include pictures, give options for how to show you learned. Then no one is singled out, and everyone benefits." These insights demonstrate sophisticated understanding of universal design philosophy, recognizing that designing for the margins benefits all learners and reduces stigma associated with individual accommodations.

Social and cultural transformation featured prominently in students' visions, with emphasis on disability awareness education, structured opportunities for cross-difference interaction, and cultivating school cultures valuing diversity (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Students recommended incorporating disability history and disability rights into curriculum, inviting disabled adults as role models, and creating peer mentoring programs connecting disabled and neurotypical students. Several students advocated for explicit social skills instruction helping all students navigate differences respectfully, with one noting, "We learn math and history, why not learn how to be good friends and classmates to people who are different? That's just as important." These recommendations recognize that inclusive attitudes are learned rather than innate, requiring systematic cultivation through education and experience.

Systemic recommendations addressed resource allocation, policy coherence, and accountability, demonstrating students' understanding of inclusion's structural dimensions. Students advocated for adequate funding ensuring schools can provide necessary supports without compromising quality for other students, smaller class sizes allowing individualized attention, and sufficient specialized personnel including therapists, counselors, and trained aides. They emphasized accountability mechanisms ensuring schools actually implement inclusive policies rather than merely claiming compliance, with one student suggesting, "There should be inspections or something, where someone checks if schools are really inclusive or just pretending. Because lots of schools say they're inclusive but really aren't." Students also recommended provincial and national coordination reducing implementation disparities across regions, recognizing that inclusion should not depend on geographic luck but represent guaranteed right regardless of where students live.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Argentine students possess sophisticated understandings of inclusive education's complexities, challenges, and possibilities, perspectives that substantially enrich and complicate adult-centered inclusive education discourse. Students define inclusion holistically, encompassing academic access, social belonging, meaningful participation, and authentic relationships rather than merely physical presence in mainstream settings. They identify multifaceted barriers spanning teacher preparation inadequacies, curricular inflexibility, assessment rigidity, resource constraints, and attitudinal prejudices while demonstrating remarkable agency in navigating these barriers and advocating for systemic improvements. Students' voices reveal both inclusion's transformative potential for fostering mutual understanding, friendship, and learning across differences, and its implementation failures that perpetuate exclusion through superficial compliance rather than genuine transformation. Critically, students challenge both segregationist models denying disabled students mainstream educational access and simplistic full inclusion narratives that ignore

implementation complexities and individual preferences for specialized support, instead articulating nuanced visions valuing choice, flexibility, and person-centered approaches responsive to diverse needs and desires.

These findings carry significant implications for Argentine educational policy and practice, emphasizing that realizing inclusive education's promise requires comprehensive teacher preparation reform, curriculum and assessment transformation incorporating universal design principles, adequate resource allocation, systematic disability awareness education, and most fundamentally, genuine commitment to centering students' voices in ongoing inclusive education development. The research contributes methodologically by demonstrating participatory approaches' effectiveness in amplifying marginalized student voices while offering substantive insights applicable beyond Argentina to inclusive education contexts globally. Future research should examine how student perspectives evolve over time, explore implementation strategies translating student recommendations into practice, investigate family and community perspectives complementing student voices, and conduct comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts enriching global understanding of inclusive education's meanings and practices as experienced by those most directly affected—students themselves whose futures inclusive education aims to enhance.

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