

Inclusive Curriculum Recontextualization: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis Of Teacher Agency For Social Inclusion

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Abstract—Although teachers' everyday curriculum decisions are central to addressing learner diversity and social inclusion in mainstream schools, evidence on how teacher agency operates through these decisions remains fragmented across educational settings and forms of marginalization. This qualitative meta-synthesis examined 28 empirical qualitative and mixed-methods studies with extractable qualitative evidence on teachers' curriculum-related practices for social inclusion in mainstream primary and secondary education. We analyzed the studies through within-study interpretation, cross-study comparison, thematic synthesis, and line-of-argument synthesis. We identified six recurring patterns of curriculum work and synthesized them into three higher-order orientations: access-oriented, recognition-oriented, and transformative inclusion. Across these orientations, we found that teachers exercised interpretive, adaptive, relational, and transformative forms of agency by modifying curriculum materials and assessment, reorganizing participation, drawing on students' identities, languages, cultures, and lived experiences, and challenging exclusionary curricular norms. We also found that institutional expectations, material resources, professional relationships, assessment regimes, and policy conditions enabled or constrained these practices. Drawing on these patterns, we conceptualize inclusive curriculum recontextualization as the situated process by which teachers reinterpret and rework the curriculum in ways that may broaden opportunities for access, recognition, participation, belonging, and justice. We argue that curriculum enactment is a central site where inclusion and exclusion are negotiated in everyday schooling.

Keywords—*inclusive education; teacher agency; curriculum enactment; social inclusion; qualitative meta-synthesis*

I. INTRODUCTION

Formal placement in a mainstream classroom does not guarantee social inclusion. Students may attend

the same schools and classes as their peers while remaining marginal to classroom participation, curriculum knowledge, peer relationships, or opportunities to learn. Current accounts of inclusive education therefore extend beyond physical access to questions of recognition, participation, belonging, and equitable engagement in classroom life [1], [2], [3]. These questions are especially significant for students whose schooling is shaped by disability, migration, multilingualism, race, gender, poverty, trauma, Indigenous knowledge, or other forms of marginalization [4], [5]. In this review, we use social inclusion as an overarching concept for the conditions that enable marginalized students to access learning, be recognized within curriculum and classroom life, participate meaningfully, and experience valued membership.

Curriculum is one of the places where these conditions are created and contested. Decisions about texts, examples, language, assessment, classroom tasks, and participation structures shape whose knowledge is visible, which forms of expression are legitimate, and who can engage meaningfully with learning. Exclusion can emerge when curriculum materials privilege dominant narratives, home languages are positioned as deficits, gendered assumptions remain unexamined, or disability is addressed mainly through remediation and individual accommodation [6], [7]. Conversely, curriculum can create wider opportunities for participation when teachers draw on students' cultural and linguistic resources, connect learning with lived experience, vary routes into common content, or rethink established ways of organizing assessment and classroom interaction [8], [9], [10]. This places curriculum at the center of social inclusion rather than treating inclusion as an additional intervention around the edges of classroom teaching.

Teachers play a central role because curriculum takes shape through interpretation and use. They make decisions about what to emphasize, how to represent subject matter, which materials to use, how tasks are organized, what counts as evidence of learning, and how students are positioned within classroom activity [11], [12], [13]. Teacher agency offers one way to understand this professional action.

Situated and ecological accounts describe agency as something teachers achieve through interaction with institutional, material, relational, and policy conditions [14], [15]. Curriculum recontextualization adds a related concern with how curriculum principles are interpreted and translated as they move into school and classroom practice [16]. Together, these perspectives help explain how teachers work on curriculum, but they leave a more specific question unresolved: how does this curriculum work become oriented toward social inclusion?

Research relevant to this question is spread across several bodies of scholarship. Reviews of inclusive education have concentrated heavily on disability and special educational needs, including teachers' beliefs, competence, collaboration, support needs, and inclusive strategies [17], [18], [19]. Other studies examine culturally responsive teaching, multilingual classrooms, migration and refugee education, gender-responsive practice, Indigenous knowledge, or social justice-oriented pedagogy, often within separate disciplinary and national literatures [8], [10], [20]. As a result, we know considerably more about inclusive practices within populations or traditions than about the curriculum work that cuts across these contexts. The field lacks a qualitative synthesis that shows what teachers reinterpret, adapt, negotiate, or challenge in the curriculum, how these practices differ in their inclusion purposes, and how contextual conditions shape what teachers can do.

We address this gap through a qualitative meta-synthesis of empirical studies that provide extractable qualitative evidence of teachers' curriculum-related practices for social inclusion in mainstream primary and secondary education. We bring together studies from different forms of marginalization to identify recurring patterns in teachers' curriculum work and to develop a higher-order interpretation of how teacher agency operates through curriculum enactment. We ask:

1. How do teachers exercise agency through curriculum enactment to support social inclusion across different educational and marginalization contexts?

2. What broader patterns of inclusive curriculum work emerge across these studies, and how are they shaped by the conditions in which teachers work?

II. METHOD

A. Research Design

We designed this review as a qualitative meta-synthesis to examine how teacher agency is expressed through curriculum-related practices for social inclusion across different educational and marginalization contexts. We included qualitative studies and mixed-methods studies when their qualitative findings could be clearly distinguished and extracted. We treated the findings of the primary studies as situated interpretations, preserving

contextual differences while examining recurring patterns across the evidence base. Our synthesis combined thematic synthesis [21] with line-of-argument interpretation [22]. The thematic stage allowed us to compare curriculum-related practices across studies and develop broader patterns, while the line-of-argument stage supported higher-order interpretation of how these patterns related to teacher agency and social inclusion. We reported the review process in accordance with PRISMA guidance [23].

B. Search Strategy and Study Selection

We searched Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC for studies published between 1 January 2010 and 3 June 2026, supplemented by manual searching. The search combined terms related to teachers and teacher agency, curriculum enactment and adaptation, social inclusion and equity, and qualitative research, with syntax adapted to each database. The searches yielded 8,485 records: Scopus ($n = 8,205$), ERIC ($n = 52$), and Web of Science ($n = 228$). After 131 duplicates were removed, 8,354 records remained. During preliminary relevance screening, 8,090 records were excluded when the title and, where available, abstract clearly indicated an ineligible publication type, an educational level outside the review scope, or insufficient alignment with the review focus on teachers' curriculum-related work for social inclusion. Records whose relevance could not be determined confidently at this stage were retained for detailed title-and-abstract screening, leaving 264 records for assessment. During the final eligibility check, we retained studies only when their findings provided sufficiently detailed qualitative evidence of teachers' curriculum-related decision-making or enacted or reported classroom practice. Twenty-eight studies met the final inclusion criteria. The complete selection process is presented in Figure 1.

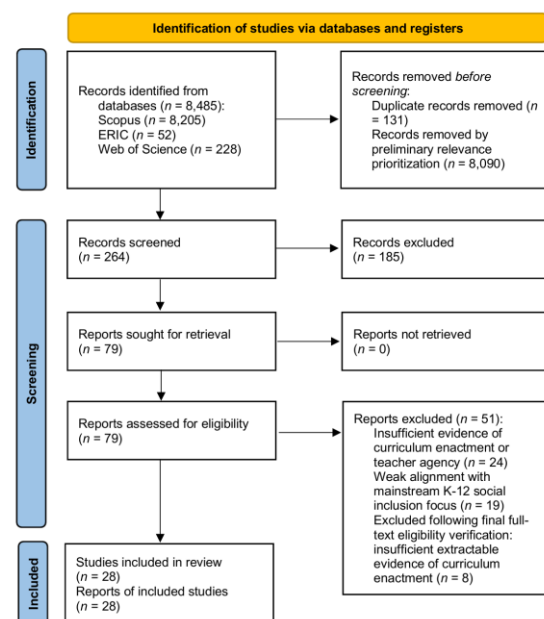


Fig. 1. Flow diagram of the identification and screening process

C. Eligibility Criteria

We included peer-reviewed empirical studies that provided extractable qualitative evidence of in-service teachers' curriculum-related practices for social inclusion in mainstream primary and secondary education. Eligible studies used qualitative designs or mixed-methods designs in which the qualitative component could be clearly identified and analyzed separately. We included studies addressing disability, migration, multilingualism, cultural or racial marginalization, gender, Indigenous knowledge, trauma, and related equity concerns when they reported sufficiently detailed evidence of how teachers interpreted, adapted, mediated, negotiated, or otherwise enacted curriculum in response to these concerns. We excluded studies confined to preschool or kindergarten-only settings outside mainstream primary schooling, higher education, special schools, or other non-mainstream settings. We also excluded studies focused solely on pre-service teachers, professional development, attitudes or beliefs without evidence of curriculum-related classroom practice, as well as purely quantitative and non-empirical publications. To be retained, a study had to provide sufficiently detailed qualitative evidence of teachers' curriculum-related decision-making or enacted or reported classroom practices relevant to social inclusion.

D. Quality Appraisal

We appraised the methodological quality of the included studies using the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research [24]. For mixed-methods studies, we assessed only the qualitative component that contributed evidence to the synthesis. The checklist examines methodological coherence, data collection and analysis, researcher positioning and reflexivity, representation of participants' voices, ethical conduct, and the relationship between the data, interpretation, and conclusions. We recorded each criterion as Yes, No, or Unclear. We did not convert these judgments into numerical quality scores or exclude studies solely based on appraisal results. Instead, we used the appraisal to inform the strength of our interpretations and treated findings from studies with greater methodological or reporting limitations more cautiously. Study-level appraisal results are provided in Supplementary Table 1.

E. Analysis and Synthesis

We extracted information on study context, participants, inclusion focus, data sources, curriculum-related practices, and the conditions that enabled or constrained teachers' actions. During analysis, we distinguished among participant accounts or observed practices, the interpretations offered by the primary study authors, and our own cross-study interpretations. This distinction helped us avoid treating teachers' reported intentions, observed classroom practices, and student experiences as equivalent forms of evidence.

We first analyzed each study individually and coded findings related to curriculum interpretation, adaptation, materials, assessment, participation, representation, classroom relationships, and structural constraints. We then compared codes across studies to identify recurring patterns, contextual differences, and divergent findings. Through iterative comparison, we grouped related codes into six themes representing recurring forms of inclusive curriculum work. We subsequently examined the broader purposes toward which these practices were directed and developed three higher-order orientations: access-oriented, recognition-oriented, and transformative inclusion. In parallel, we interpreted how teachers acted through the curriculum and identified four forms of agency: interpretive, adaptive, relational, and transformative.

Finally, we used line-of-argument synthesis to examine how these themes, orientations, and forms of agency related across different contexts. From this higher-order interpretation, we developed inclusive curriculum recontextualization as an analytical construct describing how teachers reinterpret and rework curriculum for social inclusion within institutional, material, relational, and policy conditions. A study-level evidence map linking the included studies to the themes, orientations, forms of agency, contexts, and evidence types is provided in Supplementary Table 2.

III. RESULTS

The 28 included studies represented diverse national, educational, and marginalization contexts, including disability, migration and refugee education, multilingualism, racial and cultural marginalization, gender and sexual diversity, Indigenous knowledge, trauma, and related equity concerns. Despite this variation, the synthesis identified recurring ways in which teachers worked with curriculum to address inclusion. Six interrelated themes were developed: reframing the curriculum as a space of recognition; adapting curriculum to enable access and participation; positioning students' lived experiences as curricular resources; building belonging through relational and dialogic agency; resisting exclusionary and normative curriculum structures; and exercising agency within structural constraints. Across these themes, teachers' curriculum work differed in both its form and its inclusion-related direction. The themes therefore provide the empirical basis for the higher-order synthesis presented later in this section, which brings together three orientations of inclusive curriculum enactment and four forms of teacher agency.

A. Reframing the Curriculum as a Space of Recognition

Across the studies, recognition was evident in teachers' decisions about whose identities, histories, languages, bodies, and knowledge were made visible and legitimate within the curriculum. In literacy and literature classrooms, teachers selected, supplemented, or reworked texts to address disability,

race, migration, and other forms of marginalization. Critical discussion and counter-curricular reading were also used to connect canonical or children's literature with students' social realities and to question dominant representations [25], [26], [27], [28], [29]. These practices differed in scope. Some broadened representation within an otherwise established curriculum, whereas others questioned the assumptions that determined which experiences and perspectives counted as legitimate curriculum knowledge.

Recognition-oriented curriculum work also appeared outside literacy. Teachers incorporated students' cultural and community knowledge into instruction, introduced Indigenous knowledge and local artifacts, and reconsidered gendered or heteronormative assumptions in science and physical education [30], [31], [32], [33]. Across these contexts, recognition involved more than adding diverse examples. It concerned the boundaries of legitimate subject knowledge and the extent to which marginalized identities and knowledge could be included in what students were expected to learn. The studies therefore revealed a continuum from increased curricular visibility to more substantive questioning of established knowledge hierarchies.

B. Adapting Curriculum to Enable Access and Participation

A second recurring pattern concerned teachers' efforts to reduce barriers to participation by modifying curriculum content, tasks, materials, assessment, and classroom organization. In studies involving disability and special educational needs, teachers altered learning objectives, differentiated tasks, adjusted assessment expectations, changed grouping arrangements, and adapted equipment or instructional materials [34], [35], [36], [37]. In materially constrained settings, these adaptations frequently depended on locally available resources, including tactile materials, large-print or Braille resources, and changes to seating and classroom organization [38].

Comparable mediation occurred in multilingual and refugee education. Teachers omitted, extended, replaced, or re-sequenced prescribed activities and used linguistic scaffolding, translation tools, bilingual resources, multimodal supports, and peer assistance to make curriculum content more accessible [39], [40], [41]. The extent of adaptation nevertheless varied considerably. Some practices enabled students to participate within largely unchanged curricular arrangements, while others involved more substantial redesign of learning tasks, assessment, or participation structures. Access-oriented curriculum work could therefore remove immediate barriers without necessarily altering the assumptions on which the wider curriculum was organized.

C. Positioning Students' Lived Experiences as Curricular Resources

Across several studies, teachers moved beyond adapting curriculum for students and instead drew on students' lived experiences as resources for curriculum development. Migration histories, linguistic repertoires, family and community knowledge, racialized and gendered experiences, and civic concerns became part of classroom content and interaction. In immigrant, refugee, and multilingual settings, teachers used translanguaging, family knowledge, transnational experiences, and civic issues to connect formal learning with students' social worlds [42], [43].

This pattern also appeared in culturally responsive teaching, critical literacy, social-emotional learning, and physical education. Teachers incorporated students' cultural capital, community concerns, experiences of exclusion, and perspectives on participation into decisions about what would be taught and how learning would be organized [27], [31], [44], [45]. The strongest examples went beyond using lived experience to illustrate predetermined content. Students' experiences influenced what counted as relevant curriculum knowledge and, in some cases, provided starting points for co-constructing learning activities. Across the studies, this shift repositioned students from recipients of an adapted curriculum to contributors to its enactment.

D. Building Belonging through Relational and Dialogic Agency

Inclusive curriculum work also depended on how teachers organized relationships and participation around learning. Across studies, dialogue, peer interaction, family engagement, student voice, mentoring, and collaborative activity were used to create opportunities for students to participate as recognized members of classroom communities. In multilingual and bilingual settings, curriculum enactment was shaped by relationships among teachers, students, families, linguistic resources, and wider institutional arrangements [46], [47].

In disability, refugee, and physical education contexts, teachers reorganized participation through peer support, grouping, modeling, mentoring, positive reinforcement, and opportunities for student voice [36], [40], [45], [48], [49]. These practices suggest that belonging was related not only to interpersonal care but also to curricular decisions about who could contribute, how participation was structured, and whose perspectives influenced classroom activity. Evidence for belonging was stronger in studies that incorporated student accounts or sustained observation; in teacher-report studies, claims were more appropriately interpreted as teachers' intended or perceived contributions to inclusion.

E. Resisting Exclusionary and Normative Curriculum Structures

A smaller but analytically important group of studies documented teachers questioning or negotiating curriculum norms associated with racism, ableism, monolingualism, heteronormativity, coloniality,

assimilation, and canonical knowledge. In literacy classrooms, teachers used alternative texts, critical discussion, and counter-curricula to address whiteness, racism, migration, and the exclusion of marginalized perspectives [27], [28], [29]. In politically restrictive settings, resistance could also take strategic forms as teachers attempted to preserve inclusive curriculum aims while navigating censorship or anti-DEI pressures [42].

Similar patterns appeared in gender-inclusive science, Indigenous knowledge, disability inclusion, and social-emotional learning. Teachers challenged binary assumptions, colonial knowledge hierarchies, restrictive curriculum expectations, and individualized accounts of social problems [32], [33], [44], [50]. Resistance was not always overt. It could involve selecting alternative examples, modifying prescribed materials, legitimizing students' languages, or creating spaces for perspectives that were marginal within the formal curriculum. The studies therefore showed transformative agency as ranging from explicit challenges to curriculum norms to more cautious forms of negotiation within restrictive contexts.

F. Exercising Agency within Structural Constraints

Structural constraints were not confined to a particular form of inclusion but cut across the other five themes. Teachers' curriculum decisions were shaped by curriculum prescription, examination and accountability pressures, class size, available resources, professional learning, institutional expectations, language policy, and wider sociopolitical conditions. Studies of disability inclusion, for example, showed that opportunities to adapt curriculum were constrained by standardization, limited resources, role ambiguity, and insufficient professional support [35], [37], [38]. Similar tensions appeared in linguistically diverse classrooms, where prescribed schemes, language ideologies, and inconsistent policy support limited teachers' capacity to mediate curriculum [39], [41].

Refugee, trauma-related, and multilingual studies further demonstrated that teachers worked within combinations of linguistic barriers, trauma, uncertain educational trajectories, restricted resources, and uneven institutional support [40], [43], [51], [52]. These conditions did not simply determine whether agency was present or absent. They shaped what forms of action were possible and how far teachers could depart from established curriculum arrangements. Some teachers substantially reworked content or participation structures, whereas others relied on pragmatic adjustments that enabled access without changing the broader system.

G. Higher-order Synthesis

The six themes captured recurring patterns in what teachers did with curriculum, but cross-theme comparison revealed two further dimensions. First, the curriculum work differed in its inclusion-related

direction. Second, it differed in the form of professional action through which teachers undertook that work. We therefore distinguished three overlapping orientations of inclusive curriculum enactment: access-oriented, recognition-oriented, and transformative inclusion, and four forms of agency: interpretive, adaptive, relational, and transformative.

1) *Orientations of inclusive curriculum enactment:* Access-oriented inclusion centered on reducing barriers that prevented students from engaging with existing curriculum and classroom learning. Teachers modified tasks, materials, language demands, assessment, equipment, grouping, and scaffolding to widen opportunities for participation. This orientation was especially prominent in studies of disability, special educational needs, multilingualism, refugee education, and trauma. Its defining feature was that access was widened while the broader organization of curriculum often remained relatively stable.

Recognition-oriented inclusion concerned whose identities, languages, histories, cultures, experiences, and knowledge were visible and valued within the curriculum. It was particularly evident in studies of literature, culturally responsive pedagogy, migration, race, gender, and Indigenous knowledge. Recognition-oriented practices therefore extended inclusion beyond access by addressing questions of representation and epistemic legitimacy.

Transformative inclusion was evident when curriculum work questioned or reconfigured the norms and knowledge hierarchies that contributed to exclusion. This orientation appeared most clearly in counter-curricular literacy practices, decolonial pedagogy, gender-inclusive science, activist physical education, and critical transnational curriculum work. It involved asking not only how marginalized students could participate in the curriculum but also whether the assumptions organizing curriculum content, knowledge, and participation should themselves be changed.

These orientations were not sequential stages or a hierarchy of increasingly desirable practice. Access-oriented adaptations could be necessary and consequential in contexts where students faced immediate barriers to learning. The distinction instead captures differences in what curriculum work was intended to change: students' access to existing arrangements, the recognition afforded within those arrangements, or the arrangements themselves.

2) *Forms of teacher agency:* A second dimension concerned how teachers acted through curriculum. Interpretive agency involved making sense of curriculum in relation to students' identities, experiences, languages, histories, and social positions. Adaptive agency involved changing content, tasks, materials, assessment, language demands, or participation structures in response to barriers to learning. Relational agency involved organizing curriculum through dialogue, student voice, peer

relationships, family and community knowledge, and other social resources. Transformative agency involved questioning, negotiating, or resisting curriculum norms associated with ableism, monolingualism, racism, heteronormativity, coloniality, and other forms of exclusion.

The forms of agency did not map directly onto the three orientations. The same practice could involve several forms of agency or contribute to more than one inclusion orientation. For example, adapting a task could primarily widen access, but an adaptation that incorporated students' linguistic or cultural knowledge could simultaneously contribute to recognition. Likewise, transformative agency and transformative inclusion were related but analytically different: the former describes how teachers acted, whereas the latter describes the direction of the curriculum change. Across all four forms, agency remained mediated by institutional, material, relational, policy, and sociopolitical conditions. For this reason, exercising agency within structural constraints functions in the synthesis as a cross-cutting contextual theme rather than as a fifth form of agency.

3) *Inclusive curriculum recontextualization: The line-of-argument synthesis brought these dimensions together in the concept of inclusive curriculum recontextualization.* We use the term to describe the situated curriculum work through which teachers interpret, adapt, relationally organize, negotiate, and sometimes challenge curriculum in response to questions of access, recognition, participation, belonging, and justice.

The concept connects three analytical questions emerging from the synthesis: what curriculum work recurred across the studies, how teachers exercised agency through that work, and toward what forms of inclusion the work was directed. The six themes address the first question, the four forms of agency address the second, and the three orientations address the third. All three operated within conditions that enabled, constrained, or redirected teachers' actions.

Viewed in this way, the studies showed considerable variation in the scope of curriculum change. At one end were compensatory adaptations that enabled students to participate more effectively within existing curricular arrangements. At the other were practices that challenged established representations, participation norms, or knowledge hierarchies. Inclusive curriculum recontextualization captures this variation without treating teacher agency and curriculum recontextualization as synonymous. Instead, it identifies curriculum as the site through which teacher agency becomes consequential for social inclusion.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results position curriculum enactment as a consequential site of social inclusion in mainstream schooling. Inclusive education scholarship has long

emphasized access, participation, support, and the conditions that enable teachers to respond to learner diversity [17], [19]. Our synthesis adds a more explicitly curricular perspective. Inclusion was shaped through decisions about what knowledge became available to students, how curriculum content was represented, which linguistic and cultural resources were legitimized, and how participation and assessment were organized. This helps explain why physical placement or access to a common curriculum does not, by itself, ensure meaningful participation or recognition [9], [53], [54].

The synthesis also strengthens the ecological interpretation of teacher agency. Situated accounts conceptualize agency as professional action achieved through engagement with relational, institutional, material, and policy conditions rather than as a stable individual attribute [14], [15]. The studies reviewed here show how these conditions become consequential through curriculum enactment. Curriculum prescription, assessment regimes, class size, professional knowledge, material resources, school leadership, language policy, and sociopolitical pressures shaped what teachers could modify, represent, assess, or challenge [35], [37], [39], [41]. This extends ecological accounts by locating agency within specific curricular decisions and showing that contextual conditions influence both teachers' scope for action and the parts of curriculum that are open to reinterpretation.

The three orientations identified in the synthesis add a further analytical distinction. Access-oriented, recognition-oriented, and transformative inclusion describe different directions in which curriculum work may operate. This matters because practices commonly grouped under inclusive teaching can address different forms of exclusion. Differentiating a task, modifying assessment, or providing linguistic scaffolding may reduce immediate barriers while leaving the wider curriculum largely intact [34], [35], [40]. Other practices broaden the range of identities, languages, histories, or experiences represented, while some question the norms and knowledge hierarchies that reproduce exclusion [27], [32], [33]. These orientations are not developmental stages or a hierarchy. Access-oriented adaptation may be essential where students face immediate linguistic, material, sensory, or assessment barriers [36], [38], [48], whereas recognition-oriented work brings into view those knowledge and experiences that are treated as legitimate curriculum resources. This latter concern is consistent with research on culturally responsive and multilingual teaching that emphasizes students' linguistic, cultural, community, and experiential resources [8].

The distinction between the orientations and the forms of agency is equally important. The forms describe how teachers act, whereas the orientations describe the inclusion-related direction of that action. The two therefore cannot be inferred from one another. An adaptive act may widen access, contribute to

recognition, or do both; relational agency may support participation without substantially altering curriculum content; and transformative agency may challenge established norms while remaining constrained in its effects. This distinction also counters any assumption that teacher agency is inherently inclusive or progressive. Several studies contained qualifying evidence in which teacher decisions reproduced gendered assumptions, deficit perspectives, monolingual expectations, limited differentiation, or established curriculum hierarchies despite inclusive intentions [30], [37], [48]. Agency creates possibilities for curriculum change, but the direction and consequences of that action remain empirical questions.

The relational dimension of agency further complicates individualized accounts of inclusive practice. Curriculum enactment was shaped through interactions among teachers, students, families, peers, colleagues, community knowledge, and institutional arrangements. Student voice, peer support, family knowledge, dialogue, and multilingual resources became part of the conditions through which curriculum could be interpreted and reorganized [45], [46], [47], [49]. This locates inclusion within relationships that mediate access to curriculum knowledge and participation in classroom activity. It also suggests that responsibility for inclusive enactment cannot rest primarily with individual teachers, since the scope and sustainability of their actions depend on wider organizational conditions.

This point is especially relevant to the relationship between inclusive education policy and classroom practice. Rights-based commitments may remain aspirational when teachers are expected to translate them into practice without sufficient curricular flexibility, resources, professional learning, or institutional support [53], [55]. Restrictive assessment systems, rigid curriculum expectations, large class sizes, material shortages, inconsistent language policies, and limited organizational support repeatedly narrowed the possibilities for inclusion-oriented curriculum work [35], [39], [51], [52]. Under such conditions, teachers often relied on pragmatic adaptations that improved immediate access while leaving broader arrangements unchanged. The policy–practice gap can therefore be understood in part as a curriculum enactment problem: broad commitments to inclusion must be translated into practical decisions about content, assessment, language, materials, and participation structures.

These findings also have implications for teacher education and professional learning. Research has documented teachers' need for knowledge, confidence, resources, collaboration, and institutional support in implementing inclusive education [17], [18]. Our synthesis suggests that these needs should also be approached as questions of curriculum judgment. Teachers need opportunities to identify exclusionary assumptions embedded in curriculum content and assessment, evaluate whose knowledge and experiences are represented, draw on students'

linguistic and cultural resources, and consider how classroom organization enables or restricts participation. Such work requires supportive organizational conditions, including collaborative planning, appropriate resources, flexibility in curriculum and assessment, and leadership that supports professional judgment.

The broader conceptual contribution of the synthesis lies in inclusive curriculum recontextualization. Existing curriculum scholarship describes teachers as active interpreters and mediators who translate, adapt, and reshape curriculum in relation to local conditions [11], [12], [13], while curriculum recontextualization draws attention to how curriculum is transformed as it moves across policy, institutional, and classroom contexts [16]. Inclusive curriculum recontextualization brings an explicit inclusion-related dimension to these processes. It captures how teachers' interpretation and reworking of curriculum may alter access to learning, the legitimacy of identities and knowledge, opportunities for participation and belonging, and the assumptions through which exclusion is maintained. The concept does not substitute for curriculum enactment, inclusive pedagogy, or teacher agency. Its analytical value lies in connecting what is reworked in curriculum, how teachers exercise agency through that work, the inclusion-related direction of their actions, and the contextual conditions that shape what becomes possible.

V. CONCLUSION

This qualitative meta-synthesis examined how teacher agency is exercised through curriculum enactment for social inclusion across diverse contexts in mainstream primary and secondary education. The synthesis shows that inclusive curriculum work extends beyond providing access to existing learning opportunities. Teachers also make decisions about whose knowledge and experiences are recognized, how participation is organized, and whether exclusionary curriculum assumptions are maintained or challenged.

The study contributes to this literature by conceptualizing inclusive curriculum recontextualization as the situated process through which teachers interpret, adapt, relationally organize, negotiate, and sometimes challenge curriculum in relation to access, recognition, participation, belonging, and justice. The three orientations of inclusion and four forms of agency identified in the synthesis provide complementary ways of examining both the direction and the mode of teachers' curriculum work. Importantly, this work remains shaped by institutional, material, relational, policy, and sociopolitical conditions; inclusive curriculum enactment cannot therefore be understood solely as a matter of individual teacher commitment or competence.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the review's scope. The synthesis was limited to English-language studies identified through selected

databases and to evidence reported in the included studies, which varied in methodological quality and in the extent to which student perspectives or observed classroom practices were available. Future research should examine inclusive curriculum recontextualization across specific subjects, learner groups, and policy contexts, with greater use of student perspectives, longitudinal designs, and classroom-based evidence.

NOTES

An earlier version of this study was presented as an abstract at DITEC26: Digital Transformation in Education and Social Inclusion, held on 1 July 2026 in İzmir, Türkiye.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This study synthesized data from previously published studies and did not involve recruiting human participants or collecting primary data. Therefore, institutional ethics approval was not required.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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SUPPLEMENTARY TABLE 1. JBI CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF INCLUDED STUDIES

Appraisal framework. JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research (10 items). Y = Yes; N = No; U = Unclear. The “Yes count” is a descriptive reporting aid only and is not a validated JBI score. All 28 studies received an overall appraisal of “Include”; appraisal was used to characterize methodological robustness and inform interpretation.

No.	Study	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Yes Count	Overall
1	Barr and Mavropoulou [34]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	8	Include
2	Bialka and Mancini [25]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y	7	Include
3	Bradfield and Exley [26]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y	7	Include
4	Clark et al. [30]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	8	Include
5	Coyle et al. [46]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	8	Include
6	D'Angelo and Singal [48]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	9	Include
7	Damianidou [50]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	9	Include
8	Davis and Subramaniam [31]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	8	Include
9	Dyches [27]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	9	Include
10	Giri [51]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	9	Include
11	Hedman and Magnusson [47]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y	7	Include
12	Hizli-Alkan et al. [39]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	10	Include
13	Kelly [28]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	9	Include
14	Kim [42]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	9	Include
15	Letzel-Alt and Pozas [40]	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	8	Include
16	Li and Qin [43]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	9	Include
17	Liu and Yang [35]	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y	6	Include
18	McGovern et al. [44]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y	7	Include
19	Miles et al. [38]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	8	Include
20	Overton et al. [36]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y	7	Include
21	Philpot and Ovens [49]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	10	Include
22	Quist et al. [32]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y	7	Include
23	Rende Mendoza and Johnson [33]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	9	Include
24	Rusdiansyah et al. [41]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	8	Include
25	Silva et al. [45]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	U	Y	U	Y	7	Include
26	Strogilos et al. [37]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	10	Include
27	Tambyah and Sempowicz [52]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	8	Include
28	Vlach [29]	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	9	Include

Interpretive note. Most non-Yes judgments concerned reporting of researcher positionality (Q6), researcher influence/reflexivity (Q7), or explicit ethics approval/consent (Q9). “Unclear” for Q9 denotes insufficient reporting or verification, not evidence of unethical conduct.

JBI item key

Q1 Congruity between philosophical/theoretical positioning and research methodology.	Q6 Researcher located culturally or theoretically.
Q2 Congruity between research methodology and the research question/objectives.	Q7 Researcher influence on research (and vice versa) addressed.
Q3 Congruity between research methodology and data collection.	Q8 Participants/voices adequately represented.
Q4 Congruity between research methodology and the representation/analysis of data.	Q9 Ethical conduct/appropriate ethical approval reported.
Q5 Congruity between research methodology and the interpretation of results.	Q10 Conclusions flow from data analysis/interpretation.

Judgment rule: Yes = explicitly supported; No = criterion not addressed in the report; Unclear = available reporting did not permit a confident judgment. No study was excluded solely on the basis of the JBI appraisal. Source: JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research [24].

SUPPLEMENTARY TABLE 2. EVIDENCE MAP LINKING INCLUDED STUDIES TO THE THEMATIC AND HIGHER-ORDER SYNTHESIS

Theme codes: T1 = Reframing the Curriculum as a Space of Recognition; T2 = Adapting Curriculum to Enable Access and Participation; T3 = Positioning Students' Lived Experiences as Curricular Resources; T4 = Building Belonging Through Relational and Dialogic Agency; T5 = Resisting Exclusionary and Normative Curriculum Structures; T6 = Exercising Agency Within Structural Constraints. Orientation codes: A = Access-oriented inclusion; R = Recognition-oriented inclusion; Tr = Transformative inclusion. Agency forms: Interpretive, Adaptive, Relational, and Transformative.

Note. Themes, orientations, and forms of agency are analytically distinct but overlapping. Themes capture recurring forms of curriculum work; orientations indicate the inclusion purposes toward which that work was directed; agency forms indicate how teachers acted through curriculum work. Assignments are non-exclusive and represent the present meta-synthesis, not the categories used by the primary study authors. Where evidence was based primarily on teacher self-report, claims about belonging or social inclusion are treated as reported, intended, or perceived contributions.

Study	Context / educational setting	Inclusion focus	Data / evidence base	Themes	Orientations	Agency form(s)	Key supporting and qualifying evidence
Barr and Mavropoulou [34]	Australia; mainstream secondary mathematics; students with mild intellectual disability	Disability inclusion; mathematics access; student voice	Teacher and student semi-structured interviews; classroom observations; learning support plans	T2, T4, T6	A	Adaptive, Relational	Accommodations and scaffolding widened participation; student accounts identified barriers and preferred adjustments. Time demands constrained adaptation.
Bialka and Mancini [25]	United States; mainstream middle-school Language Arts	Disability representation and disability-related curriculum	Teacher interviews; teacher-selected curricular artifacts; student focus group	T1, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Transformative	Selection and use of disability-related texts made disability visible as a curricular and social issue and could challenge ableist assumptions. Evidence combined teacher decision-making with artifacts and limited student-perspective evidence.
Bradfield and Exley [26]	Australia; primary English/literature across metropolitan, suburban, remote, government and non-government contexts	Representation, diversity and culturally relevant text selection	Semi-structured interviews with nine primary teachers	T1	R	Interpretive	Teachers selected or excluded literature in relation to curriculum aims, students' lives, cultural backgrounds and ethical concerns. Evidence is primarily teacher-reported; claims concern professional judgment. Curriculum decisions shaped which movement experiences were treated as legitimate for girls and boys. The study also provides disconfirming evidence: safety assumptions and gendered activity choices sometimes reproduced gendered patterns.
Clark et al. [30]	Australia; senior secondary Physical Education in three schools	Gender equity; embodied learning; movement-based curriculum enactment	Curriculum/course documents, unit and lesson materials, assessment-related documents; semi-structured teacher interviews	T1, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Transformative	Teachers designed multilingual learning environments; student focus groups directly supported claims about language, identity, participation, and belonging.
Coyle et al. [46]	England; linguistically and culturally diverse secondary school; EAL-CLIL/bilingual learning	Linguistic and cultural inclusion; learner-centered curriculum design; belonging	Longitudinal qualitative case study; 16 student focus groups (53 students); teacher and senior-leader semi-structured interviews	T1, T4	A, R	Interpretive, Adaptive, Relational	Observed adaptations included individualized support, adapted materials, peer pairing, and reinforcement; limited resources, unclear roles, and deficit assumptions constrained inclusion.
D'Angelo and Singal [48]	Dominican Republic; two mainstream public primary schools	Disability / diverse learning needs; inclusive participation; overage learners	Ethnographic school/classroom observations and qualitative interviews	T2, T4, T6	A	Interpretive, Adaptive, Relational	Teachers described interpreting, negotiating and at times resisting curriculum requirements that restricted inclusion. Because evidence is interview-based, claims refer to reported practices and professional positioning.
Damianidou [50]	Cyprus; mainstream secondary education	Disability inclusion / exclusion; curriculum restriction; teacher change agency	Semi-structured interviews with 21 teachers; grounded-theory analysis	T5, T6	Tr	Interpretive, Transformative	Classroom observations support claims about enactment, while claims about students embracing diversity were largely framed by teachers' perceptions.
Davis and Subramaniam [31]	United States; urban Title I elementary school serving minoritized students	Culturally responsive pedagogy; diversity; cultural capital; social justice	Participant interview transcripts; focus group transcripts; classroom observations/observation field notes	T1, T3	R	Interpretive, Adaptive, Relational	Canonical literature was reworked through culturally responsive and counter-curricular practices that connected texts to racialized and social experiences. Observed
Dyches [27]	United States; urban secondary British literature classroom	Race, marginalization, culturally responsive counter-curriculum and social justice	Ethnographic case study with sustained classroom observation, interviews and curricular/teaching artifacts	T1, T3, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Relational, Transformative	

Giri [51]	Nepal; three mainstream schools (two urban, one rural)	Disability participation; teacher agency; resource constraints	Qualitative interviews with eight mainstream-school teachers	T2, T6	A	Adaptive, Relational	practice supports claims of curricular transformation. Teachers reported creating resources, adapting instruction and using assistive/Braille-related supports to widen participation. Resource shortages, limited training and persistent deficit views constrained agency. Evidence is teacher-reported.
Hedman and Magnusson [47]	Sweden; linguistically diverse primary-school settings; mother-tongue teaching	Multilingual inclusion; relational agency; linguistic repertoires	Ethnographic fieldwork; teacher interviews; fieldnotes/observational evidence from everyday practice	T3, T4	A, R	Interpretive, Adaptive, Relational	Teachers adapted practice to students' multilingual repertoires and worked relationally across students, languages, and institutional arrangements. The evidence supports enacted relational and linguistic mediation. Teachers omitted, extended, replaced or revised prescribed materials and used linguistic/multimodal scaffolding. Observations directly documented mediation, while curriculum schemes, institutional culture and multilingual resources conditioned what was possible.
Hizli-Alkan et al. [39]	England; language-diverse mathematics classrooms across two schools (primary and lower-secondary years)	Linguistic equity; curriculum mediation; mathematics participation	Four teacher interviews; ten classroom observations (approximately 15 hours)	T2, T6	A, R	Interpretive, Adaptive	Critical literacy connected canonical texts to race, whiteness, and oppression; sustained observations and student data documented both enactment and student experience. Teachers centered transnational and multilingual knowledge and adapted materials amid restrictive educational pressures; student outcomes were less directly evidenced. Teachers reported differentiated assignments, translation tools, bilingual supports, peer tutoring and mentoring. Language barriers, trauma, grading practices, and uncertainty about students' educational trajectories constrained inclusion. Belonging claims are teacher-reported. Teachers connected instruction to students' languages, transnational experiences, families, and civic realities and advocated against subtractive schooling; evidence was mainly teacher- and document-based.
Kelly [28]	United States; urban high-school English	Race, oppression, social justice and critical literacy	Yearlong classroom observations; teacher and student interviews; student writing; curriculum materials	T1, T3, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Relational, Transformative	Teachers adapted curriculum objectives, content, instruction, and assessment. Extensive observations documented enactment, while centralized curriculum, accountability demands, and large classes constrained adaptation. Teachers reworked an established SEL curriculum beyond individual self-regulation to address social identity, community issues, and
Kim [42]	United States; public high school in a predominantly White, politically conservative Midwestern community	Refugee-background students; critical transnational curriculum; multilingualism; civic agency; censorship	Yearlong qualitative case study; teacher interviews; informal school/classroom observations; fieldnotes; documents and artifacts	T3, T5, T6	R, Tr	Interpretive, Relational, Transformative	
Letzel-Alt and Pozas [40]	Germany; mainstream schools serving Ukrainian refugee students	Refugee inclusion; differentiated instruction; academic and social participation	Qualitative interviews with eight teachers	T2, T4, T6	A	Adaptive, Relational	
Li and Qin [43]	United States; two urban-school qualitative cases; three teachers supporting immigrant/refugee students	Linguistic responsiveness; translanguaging; advocacy; critical/transnational pedagogy	Teacher interviews; documents in the second case; case-based accounts of instructional and advocacy practices	T3, T6	A, R, Tr	Interpretive, Adaptive, Relational, Transformative	
Liu and Yang [35]	China; mainstream primary schools; general-education teachers and students with disabilities	Access to the general curriculum; disability inclusion; curriculum adaptation	Interviews with 22 general-education teachers; 91 lesson observations; educational/curriculum materials	T2, T6	A	Interpretive, Adaptive	
McGovern et al. [44]	United States; mainstream middle-school social-emotional learning	Social justice/equity; social identities; community issues; civic engagement	Teacher interviews; student interviews; classroom observations	T3, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Relational, Transformative	

								civic participation. Student interviews and observations strengthen evidence for relational and curricular change. Teachers used locally available and tactile materials, seating changes, and large-print or Braille-related supports. Severe material constraints limited adaptation; contrasts with less-experienced teachers provided qualifying evidence. Teachers used adapted equipment, modeling, grouping, explicit instruction, environmental accommodations, and relational knowledge to enable participation. Field observations provide direct evidence of enacted adaptations.
Miles et al. [38]	Tanzania; 15 rural, urban and coastal mainstream primary schools across four districts	Disability equality; inclusive pedagogy under material scarcity	Video-recorded lesson observations; in-depth interviews with experienced teachers	T2, T6	A	Interpretive, Adaptive, Relational		Student voice, democratic participation, and cultural knowledge shaped participation; multiple data sources documented context-sensitive curriculum change. Storytelling, peer collaboration, and local artifacts broadened legitimate classroom knowledge; outcome claims remained limited to the qualitative case evidence.
Overton et al. [36]	Australia; mainstream junior-primary Physical Education	Disability inclusion; meaningful participation; safe learning environments	Semi-structured teacher interviews; field observations	T2, T4	A	Adaptive, Relational		Teachers created or adapted science materials to make gender diversity visible and challenge binary/heteronormative assumptions. Evidence documents curriculum work, but classroom effects are not based on direct student outcome observation. Teachers mediated multilingual policy in classroom practice; limited training, materials, and policy consistency constrained implementation.
Philpot and Ovens [49]	Aotearoa New Zealand; nine secondary-school Health and Physical Education teachers	Social justice; inclusion; student voice; culturally responsive HPE	Observations; post-observation interviews; teaching artifacts; practitioner focus groups	T3, T4, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Relational, Transformative		Students' experiences of exclusion, gendered participation, and violence informed curriculum co-construction; student voice and sustained classroom data supported relational and transformative interpretations. Teachers used instructional and curricular modifications to support access; differentiation remained uneven under standardized curriculum, examination, class-size, and resource constraints. Teachers reported selecting resources, adjusting curriculum/assessment and developing individual goals for trauma-affected students. Agency depended on knowledge of students, trauma pedagogy and school support. Enactment evidence was predominantly self-
Quist et al. [32]	Ghana; marginalized early-grade classrooms; ten early-grade facilitators	Indigenous knowledge; culturally responsive/decolonial scaffolding; epistemic justice	Qualitative case study of ten early-grade facilitators	T1, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Transformative		
Rende Mendoza and Johnson [33]	United States; grade 6–12 science educators	Gender/sexual diversity; LGBTQ+/trans inclusion; gender-inclusive science curriculum	In-depth teacher interviews; instructional materials; reflective teaching statements	T1, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Transformative		
Rusdiansyah et al. [41]	Rural Indonesia; mainstream primary education; multilingual education policy implementation	Linguistic/cultural inclusion; multilingual policy-to-practice translation	Interviews with 10 primary teachers, 5 headteachers and 1 policymaker; classroom observations; document analysis	T2, T6	A, R	Interpretive, Adaptive		
Silva et al. [45]	Brazil; 4th-grade primary Physical Education; 20 students	Social justice; gendered exclusion; violence; activist and co-constructed curriculum	Participatory action research across 70 lessons; fieldnotes; student-work sessions; artifacts; student focus group; debriefing recordings	T3, T4, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Relational, Transformative		
Strogilos et al. [37]	Singapore; mainstream primary classrooms; students with special educational needs	Differentiated instruction; curriculum modification; disability/SEN access	Teacher/support-staff interviews; classroom observations; lesson plans; focus groups	T2, T6	A	Interpretive, Adaptive		
Tambyah and Sempowicz [52]	Australia (Queensland); three primary and secondary schools; 55 teachers in the overall multimethod study	Complex trauma; inclusive curriculum and assessment; teacher agency	Follow-up qualitative teacher interviews within an exploratory multimethod study	T2, T6	A	Interpretive, Adaptive, Relational		

Vlach [29]	United States; elementary literacy/read-aloud classrooms	Immigration, censorship, critical pedagogy and social justice	Yearlong multi-case study; 53 read-aloud observations; classroom artifacts; teacher interviews	T1, T5	R, Tr	Interpretive, Relational, Transformative	reported. Text selection and read-aloud discussion humanized immigrant/refugee experiences and interrupted dominant narratives; sustained observations documented practice, while censorship constrained enactment.
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