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## Self, Solidarity, and Civility: Inclusive Practices for Children with Learning Disability in Mainstream Schools in Yaoundé 6

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the lived experiences of children with learning disability in mainstream schools in Yaoundé 6, focusing on how inclusive educational practices shape their sense of self, access to solidarity networks, and experiences of civility within mainstream classrooms. Drawing on recognition theory (Honneth, 1995) and a phenomenological approach to children with learning disability (social handicap), the study explores the tension between inclusive policy ideals and everyday realities. Through in-depth interviews the study reveals that self-construction is profoundly influenced by peer recognition, solidarity emerges through informal peer networks, and civility often functions as a conditional practice that includes or excludes. Findings suggest that inclusive practices must move beyond physical integration toward fostering authentic recognition and mutual solidarity.*

**Keywords:** *self, solidarity, civility, inclusive education, learning disability*

### 1. Introduction

The global movement toward inclusive education has reshaped educational landscapes across Africa, yet the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom practice remains substantial (UNESCO, 2020). In Cameroon, the 1998 Framework Law on Education Orientation affirmed the right of all children to education, yet children with learning disabilities and social handicaps continue to face barriers to meaningful participation (Ministère des Enseignements Secondaires, 2019). Children with learning disabilities refers to minors who have a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects specific academic skills- such as reading,

writing, spelling, mathematic and problem solving-despite having average intelligence.

In these children, the disability creates a significant and persistent gap between their potential (measured by IQ) and their actual academic performance. This is not due to poor teaching, lack of motivation or sensory problems (e.g vision or hearing). Early identification and tailored educational support (e.g. Individualized Education Programs) are critical for helping them succeed. For children with learning disability (social handicaps)—whose difficulties lie at the intersection of cognitive, behavioural, and

social domains—the mainstream classroom presents both opportunities and profound challenges.

Inclusive education has become a global policy priority, yet the psychological and relational dimensions of inclusion remain underexplored, particularly for learners with social handicaps. Social handicap refers to a condition in which cognitive, behavioural, or communicative impairments intersect with social stigmatization to produce exclusion (Tourette-Turgis, 2016). In Cameroon, despite policy commitments to inclusive schooling, mainstream classrooms often lack the structural and relational supports necessary for meaningful inclusion (Ndamba & Kamga, 2018).

The educational core argument of this study is that inclusion is not merely a matter of physical placement but requires the cultivation of three foundational elements: a positive self-concept among children with learning disability, authentic solidarity among peers, and a civility rooted in mutual recognition rather than mere tolerance. Without these, inclusive classrooms risk becoming sites of symbolic exclusion. How do mainstream learners with social handicaps in Yaoundé 6 construct their sense of self within inclusive classroom environments? In what ways do solidarity networks and practices of civility facilitate or hinder the integration children with learning disability?

Participants included 12 mainstream learners (7 male, 5 female) enrolled in two primary schools in Yaoundé 6, Cameroon. All participants had been identified by teachers and educational psychologists as presenting social handicaps, including mild intellectual disabilities (n=5), autism spectrum disorder (n=4), and severe behavioural difficulties (n=3). Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their enrollment in mainstream classrooms for at least one academic year. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews adapted for young participants drawing activities, and simplified questioning techniques. Each participant was interviewed twice over a four-week period, with sessions lasting 20–35 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English. Data analysis followed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) procedures, involving iterative reading, theme identification, and cross-case synthesis (Smith et al., 2009). Field observations in classrooms supplemented interview data.

Central to the inclusive education project are three foundational concepts: self, solidarity, and civility. The self refers to the learner’s identity, self-worth, and sense of belonging. Solidarity encompasses the mutual support networks among peers. Civility denotes the everyday practices of respect, politeness, and recognition that govern social interactions (Honneth, 1995; Misztal, 2001). These concepts are not merely abstract ideals but are enacted daily in classroom life, shaping whether inclusion is experienced as genuine belonging or subtle exclusion. Three dimensions manifest in inclusive classrooms in Yaoundé 6, focusing on the lived experiences of children with learning disability. By centering their voices, the study aims to contribute empirical insights to the field of inclusive education in the Cameroonian context and to inform pedagogical practices that foster authentic inclusion.

### 1.1. The Construction of Self in Inclusive Classrooms

#### Recognition and Self-Concept

The self is not a fixed entity but is dynamically constructed through social interactions and the recognition—or

misrecognition—of others (Honneth, 1995). For children with learning disability, the classroom serves as a critical site of self-formation. Analysis of participant interviews revealed that self-concept was closely tied to three factors: teacher feedback, peer treatment, and academic performance.

Participants who reported positive teacher recognition tended to express higher self-worth. F., a 9-year-old boy with mild intellectual disability, stated: “Madame says I am intelligent when I try. She claps for me. That makes me feel like I am someone.” Conversely, participants who experienced frequent correction or public reprimand articulated diminished self-perceptions. A., a 7-year-old girl with behavioural difficulties, noted: “The teacher always shouts at me. Maybe I am bad.”

Peer interactions also profoundly shaped self-concept. Learners who had at least one consistent peer friend described themselves in positive terms, while those isolated from peer networks expressed confusion about their social standing. Table 1 illustrates the relationship between recognition experiences and self-descriptors among participants.

Table 1: Self-Descriptors by Recognition Experience Among Participants (N=12)

Recognition Experience	Number of Participants	Common Self-Descriptors
Consistent positive teacher recognition	4	“smart,” “good,” “someone”
Inconsistent teacher recognition	5	“sometimes good,” “try but fail”
Frequent negative teacher feedback	3	“bad,” “trouble,” “not like others”
At least one consistent peer friend	7	“happy,” “has friend,” “normal”
No consistent peer friend	5	“alone,” “different,” “not chosen”

These findings align with the recognition-theoretical perspective that self-esteem is contingent upon experiencing oneself as valued by significant others (Honneth, 1995). In classrooms where recognition is conditional or withheld, children with learning disability internalize these judgments, compromising their self-formation.

#### Age-Related Patterns

Younger participants (ages 7–9) articulated self-concept primarily through emotional states and material markers of belonging (e.g., having a seat, being called by name). Older participants (ages 10–12) demonstrated more nuanced self-awareness, referencing social comparisons and teacher expectations. This developmental pattern suggests that early interventions to foster positive recognition may be particularly critical in the foundational years.

### 1.2. Solidarity Networks and Peer Support

#### Informal Solidarity Mechanisms

Solidarity—understood as mutual commitment and support among individuals—emerged in classrooms through both formal and informal mechanisms. Formal solidarity structures (e.g., teacher-assigned peer helpers) existed in two of the three schools studied,

yet participants consistently reported that informal peer networks provided the most meaningful support.

Informal solidarity took various forms: sharing snacks, protecting peers from teasing, explaining instructions quietly, and inviting participation in playground games. Figure 1 illustrates the types of solidarity acts observed and reported.

Figure 1: Types of Solidarity Acts among Peers (Observed and Reported)

- Sharing food/supplies: ██████████ (12 occurrences)
- Explaining instructions: ██████████ (10 occurrences)
- Defending against teasing: ██████████ (8 occurrences)
- Including in games: ██████████ (9 occurrences)
- Comforting when upset: ██████████ (6 occurrences)

Figure Description: A bar chart showing the frequency of reported solidarity acts

Participants valued solidarity acts highly. B., a 8-year-old girl with autism spectrum disorder, explained: “When others don’t want to play with me, Sarah calls me. She says ‘come, B., you can play.’ That makes me want to come to school.” Similarly, E., an 8-year-old boy with intellectual disability, noted: “My friend C. tells me the lesson when I don’t understand. The teacher talks too fast, but C. helps me.”

### Barriers to Solidarity

Despite these examples, participants also described barriers to solidarity. Stigma from peers, teacher indifference, and classroom competition emerged as significant obstacles. Participants reported being excluded from group work, avoided at lunch, or targeted for teasing. One participant, J., a 7-year-old boy with behavioral difficulties, stated: “The other children say I am crazy. They don’t sit near me. I eat alone.”

These findings underscore that solidarity does not emerge automatically in inclusive classrooms. Rather, it requires intentional cultivation through pedagogical strategies that value cooperation over competition and foster a classroom culture of mutual support.

### 1.3. Civility as Inclusion and Exclusion

#### Conditional Civility

Civility—the everyday practices of respect, politeness, and consideration—operated as a double-edged sword in participants’ experiences. When civility was extended consistently, it created conditions for belonging. However, participants frequently described civility as conditional, granted only when they conformed to behavioral norms they struggled to meet.

Teachers’ civility practices varied significantly. Some teachers consistently addressed all learners with respect, using names and positive reinforcement. Others reserved civility for high-achieving or well-behaved learners. K., a 9-year-old boy with mild intellectual disability, observed: “The teacher says ‘please’ to the good students. To me, she just points. I know I am not good enough for ‘please.’”

Table 2: presents teachers’ civility practices as perceived by participants.

Teacher Behaviour	Frequency	Number of Participants Reporting
Uses learner’s name consistently	Often	4
Uses learner’s name sometimes	Sometimes	5
Rarely or never uses learner’s name	Rarely/never	3
Speaks politely (e.g., “please,” “thank you”)	Often	3
Speaks politely sometimes	Sometimes	6
Speaks politely rarely or never	Rarely/never	3
Offers encouragement	Often	4
Offers encouragement sometimes	Sometimes	5
Offers encouragement rarely or never	Rarely/never	3

Table 2: Perceived Teacher Civility Practices Toward Participants (N=12)

#### Peer Civility and Micro-Exclusions

Peer civility—greetings, polite requests, respectful responses—similarly followed patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Participants who were perceived as “different” or “difficult” often experienced incivility disguised as humor. M., a 7-year-old girl with behavioural challenges, recounted: “They pretend to be nice, then laugh. They say ‘hello, M.,’ then whisper. I know they are making fun.”

These micro-exclusions accumulate over time, eroding learners’ sense of belonging and reinforcing their marginalized status within the classroom. As one participant stated poignantly: “They are polite to me when the teacher is watching. When the teacher is not watching, I am nothing.”

### 1.4. Toward Authentic Inclusive Practices

#### Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study suggest that inclusive practices in Yaoundé 6 must move beyond physical integration to address the relational dimensions of inclusion. Three pedagogical implications emerge:

First, teacher training must include explicit attention to recognition practices. Teachers need support in recognizing their own biases and developing strategies for affirming all learners consistently, regardless of behavioural challenges or academic performance.

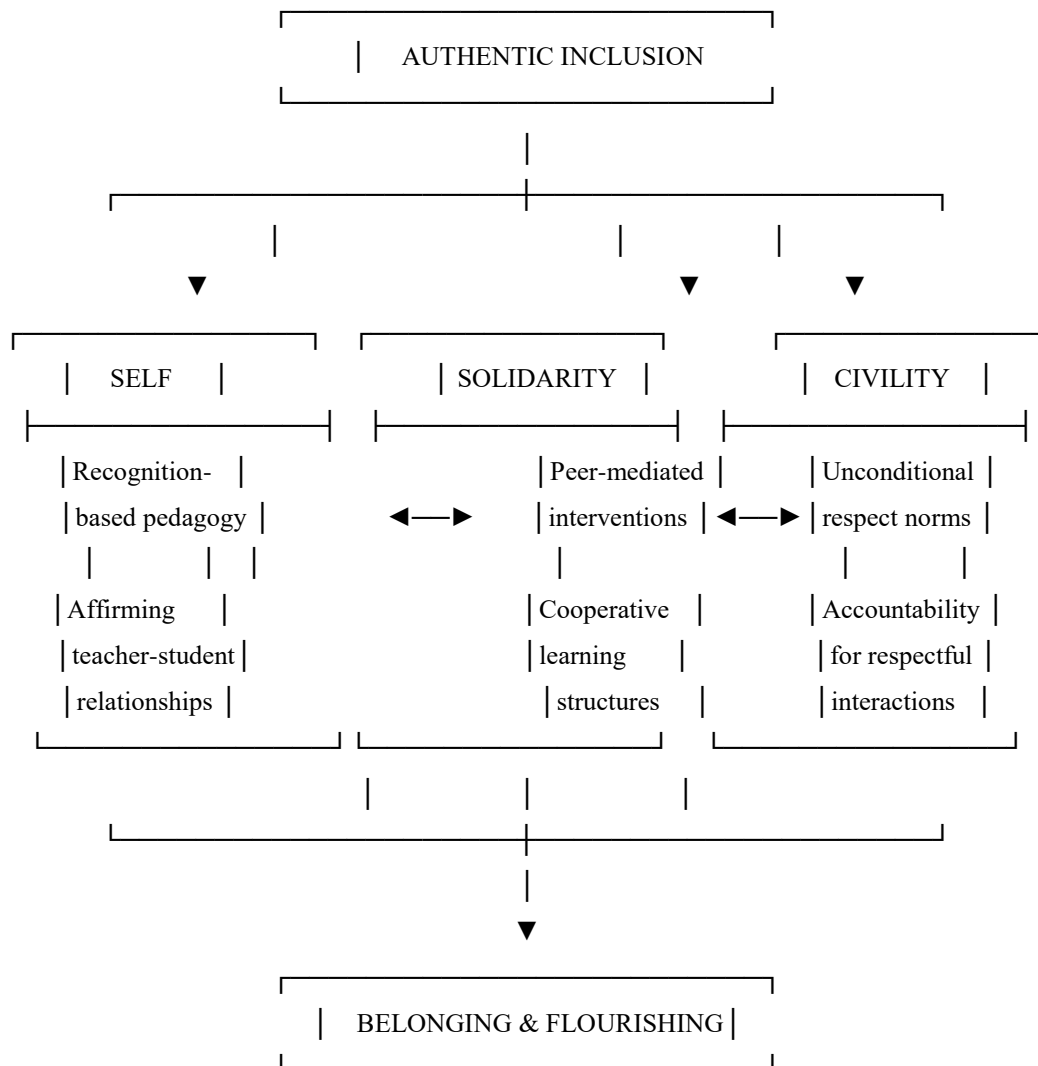
Second, classrooms should cultivate intentional solidarity structures. Peer-mediated interventions, cooperative learning, and classroom meetings can create opportunities for authentic peer support rather than leaving solidarity to chance.

Third, civility must be framed as unconditional. Creating classroom norms of respect that apply to all learners—and holding

all learners accountable to these norms—can counter the conditional civility that marginalizes children with learning

disability.

**Figure 2: A Framework for Authentic Inclusion**



**Figure 2: Framework for Authentic Inclusion: Self, Solidarity, Civility**

Figure Description: A circular diagram with three interconnected components

### 1.5. Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single urban context. Future research should examine inclusive practices across diverse Cameroonian settings (rural, semi-urban) and include the perspectives of teachers, parents, and peers. Longitudinal designs could illuminate how self-concept, solidarity, and civility evolve over time. Additionally, intervention studies testing recognition-based pedagogies would contribute valuable evidence for policy and practice.

### Conclusion

This study shows children with learning disability in Yaoundé 6 experience self-construction, solidarity networks, and civility within inclusive classrooms. Findings reveal that inclusion is not guaranteed by physical placement alone. Rather, authentic inclusion depends on the quality of recognition learners receive, the presence of meaningful peer solidarity, and the unconditional extension of civility. When these elements are present, children

with learning disability experience belonging and develop positive self-concepts. When absent, inclusive classrooms risk perpetuating the very exclusion they aim to overcome. For educators and policymakers, these findings underscore the importance of attending to the relational foundations of inclusion. Teacher training, classroom practices, and school culture must intentionally foster recognition, solidarity, and unconditional civility. Only then can inclusive education fulfill its promise of belonging for all learners.

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