



PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING: PARADOXES IN KOSOVO

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Abstract

Inclusive education is widely recognized as a key principle for promoting equal participation and well-being among children with disabilities; however, its implementation remains challenging, particularly in developing and transitional contexts. This study explores parental perspectives on school inclusion and the well-being of children with physical and sensory disabilities in Kosovo, using an ecological and bidirectional framework. A qualitative research design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 15 parents of children aged 8 to 15 attending mainstream schools, and data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that inclusion is experienced through interconnected tensions across structural, relational, and experiential dimensions, including gaps between policy and practice, tensions between care and reduced expectations in teacher practices, and contradictions between formal inclusion and experiences of difference in peer relationships. The study also identifies bidirectional dynamics, whereby children's well-being shapes their social interactions, while relational experiences simultaneously influence well-being, creating both positive and negative cycles. Overall, inclusion emerges as a dynamic and context-dependent process, highlighting the need to move beyond access-oriented approaches toward practices that support meaningful participation, relational belonging, and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Inclusive education, well-being, children with disabilities, parental perspectives, paradoxes.

INTRODUCTION

International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) highlight the importance of inclusive educational environments that promote equal opportunities, participation, and social belonging for children with disabilities. Within inclusive settings, schools play a critical role in supporting not only the academic development of children with disabilities but also their psychological and social well-being (Koster, 2010; Linder & Schwab, 2020). Research suggests that inclusive environments can enhance children's sense of belonging, social participation, and emotional development when appropriate support systems are in place.

Parents play a central role in understanding the educational experiences of children with disabilities. As primary caregivers and advocates, parents often have valuable insights into how schools support or hinder their children's inclusion. Their perspectives can provide important information about the effectiveness of inclusive practices, the level of support provided within schools, and the challenges children may encounter in educational settings (Shurr et al., 2023; Mantilla et al., 2022).

Despite the increasing emphasis on inclusive education internationally, only a small number of studies have explored parental perspectives on school inclusion in the context of Kosovo. Existing research has begun to examine the experiences and attitudes of parents of children with disabilities toward inclusive education, highlighting both the perceived benefits of inclusion and concerns regarding school support, resources, and teacher preparedness (Devolli & Zabeli, 2024; Kadriu &



Agani-Destani, 2026) Understanding parents' experiences can therefore contribute to identifying factors that support or hinder the well-being and inclusion of children with disabilities in schools. It is particularly important to examine these experiences from an ecological and bidirectional perspective. Therefore, this study aims to explore parental perspectives on school inclusion and the well-being of children with disabilities in Kosovo, through an ecological and bidirectional lens.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it advances understanding of inclusive education by conceptualizing it as a set of lived tensions and paradoxes rather than a linear or uniformly positive process. Second, by integrating ecological systems theory with a bidirectional and transactional perspective, the study highlights how children are not only shaped by their environments but also actively influence their relational contexts through their well-being and interactions. Third, by focusing on an under-researched context, the study provides context-sensitive insights that extend international debates on inclusion, particularly in systems where strong policy frameworks coexist with implementation challenges.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: An Ecological and Bidirectional Perspective

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which conceptualizes children's development and well-being as the result of dynamic interactions between the individual and multiple environmental systems, including family, school, and the broader social context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, children's experiences are shaped not by isolated factors, but by the interdependence of these systems and the quality of interactions within and across them. In the context of inclusive education, this implies that children's participation and well-being are influenced not only by classroom practices, but also by relationships between families, schools, and wider institutional structures (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

However, while ecological theory provides a strong framework for understanding contextual influences, it has often been applied in a predominantly descriptive manner in inclusive education research, with limited attention to the reciprocal processes through which children actively shape their environments. To address this limitation, the present study integrates a bidirectional and transactional perspective, drawing on Sameroff's model of development (Sameroff, 2009). This perspective emphasizes that children's well-being and school experiences are mutually constitutive: children's emotional states, behaviors, and competencies influence how they are perceived and treated by others, while relational and institutional contexts simultaneously shape their development. By combining ecological and transactional perspectives, this study moves beyond static conceptualizations of inclusion and instead frames it as a dynamic and relational process. In doing so, it addresses a key limitation in existing research, which has often overlooked the bidirectional nature of inclusion and well-being.

Parental Attitudes toward Inclusive Education

Parental attitudes toward inclusive education have been widely examined, with research generally reporting positive orientations toward the principles of inclusion (Hilbert, 2014). However, these findings should be interpreted with caution, as positive attitudes often coexist with significant concerns regarding implementation. Studies indicate that parental support is conditional and varies depending on the type and severity of disability (Kárpáti & Miklósi, 2026), with more favorable views toward the inclusion of children with physical or learning disabilities than those with behavioral or intellectual disabilities (Paseka & Schwab, 2020).

Moreover, parental attitudes appear to evolve in response to direct experiences with inclusive education systems. Exposure to inclusive settings can foster more positive perceptions over time; however, it may also reveal structural, organizational, and pedagogical limitations that challenge initial expectations (Mavropalias et al., 2019; Bahdanovich Hanssen & Erina, 2022; Shurr et al., 2021). These findings suggest that parental attitudes are not fixed, but are shaped by the quality,



consistency, and responsiveness of inclusive practices. Importantly, parental attitudes toward inclusion are also associated with children's social and emotional outcomes, highlighting their role in shaping children's quality of life within inclusive contexts (Santilli et al., 2022).

Taken together, the literature points to an underlying tension between ideological support for inclusion and concerns about its effectiveness in practice. However, much of the research continues to categorize parental attitudes as either positive or negative, thereby overlooking the ambivalence and complexity that characterize parents' lived experiences of inclusion.

Benefits and Barriers of Inclusive Education

A substantial body of research highlights the potential benefits of inclusive education for children with disabilities, particularly in relation to academic achievement, social participation, and emotional development (Bossaert et al., 2013; Hehir et al., 2016; Koster et al., 2010; Szumski et al., 2017). Inclusive settings provide opportunities for interaction with typically developing peers, which can support socialization, friendship formation, and social participation; however, the quality of these interactions remains highly dependent on contextual and relational factors (Carter et al., 2014; Koster et al., 2010).

At the same time, these benefits are not inherent outcomes of inclusion, but depend on the conditions under which inclusion is implemented. Research consistently identifies a range of structural and relational barriers that limit its effectiveness. One of the most frequently cited challenges relates to insufficient teacher preparation, with parents expressing concerns about teachers' ability to meet diverse learning needs (Hilbert, 2014; Paccaud et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2012). Structural constraints, including limited resources, large class sizes, and inadequate access to assistive technologies, further restrict the implementation of inclusive practices (Florian, 2014; Ainscow, 2020; Alzahrani, 2020).

However, these barriers are often treated in isolation within the literature, rather than as interconnected processes that shape the overall experience of inclusion. Relational challenges, such as bullying, social exclusion, and limited opportunities for meaningful peer interaction, are frequently reported but not always integrated into broader analyses of inclusion (Bossaert et al., 2013; Pijl et al., 2008). Communication gaps between families and schools further complicate these dynamics, as parents often report feeling insufficiently involved in decision-making processes (Paccaud et al., 2021). Structural constraints, including insufficient teacher preparation, policy inconsistencies, and broader systemic limitations, further reinforce these challenges (Jabri et al., 2025; Moriña, 2017).

This fragmented approach limits the ability to understand how structural and relational factors interact to influence children's well-being. A more integrated perspective is therefore needed to capture the complexity of inclusion as it is experienced in practice.

Research Gap and Study Focus

While existing research provides valuable insights into parental attitudes, perceived benefits, and challenges of inclusive education, several important gaps remain. First, although some studies have examined parental perspectives on inclusive education in Kosovo (Devolli & Zabeli, 2024; Kadriu & Agani-Destani, 2026), research remains limited in scope, particularly in relation to how these perspectives are linked to the psychological well-being of children with disabilities. Second, much of the literature adopts a predominantly unidirectional perspective, focusing on how school environments influence children, while giving less attention to how children's well-being and relational experiences shape their engagement with school, in the lens of the bidirectional dynamics (Sameroff, 2009).

Furthermore, although prior studies identify both positive and negative aspects of inclusion, they rarely conceptualize these as interconnected or paradoxical processes (Bossaert et al., 2013). As a result, the tensions between inclusive ideals and lived experiences remain insufficiently theorized.



This limits the ability to fully understand inclusion as a dynamic and relational process shaped by ongoing interactions between individuals and their environments.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts an ecological and bidirectional framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 2009) to explore parental perspectives on school inclusion and children's well-being in Kosovo. By focusing on the interplay between structural, relational, and experiential factors, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of inclusion as a process characterized by tensions, contradictions, and reciprocal influences. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do parents perceive school inclusion and the well-being of children and adolescents with disabilities in Kosovo?

Sub-question 1: How do parents interpret the role of social relationships and their perceived reciprocal influence on children's well-being within inclusive school contexts?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine parental perspectives on school inclusion and the well-being of children and adolescents with disabilities in Kosovo. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of parents' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of inclusive education within real-life school contexts (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). This approach is particularly suited to capturing the complexity of inclusion as a relational and context-dependent process.

Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study were parents of children with physical and sensory disabilities (including visual impairments and blindness) who attend mainstream schools in Kosovo. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as this approach enables the recruitment of individuals with direct and relevant experience of inclusive education. The inclusion criteria required that participants be parents or primary caregivers of children aged between 8 and 15 years who were identified as having a physical or sensory disability and were enrolled in inclusive educational settings.

As presented in Table 1, the sample comprised 15 parents of children with disabilities enrolled in mainstream schools, including 8 mothers and 7 fathers, reflecting a relatively balanced representation of parental roles. The total number of 15 parents, was considered appropriate for qualitative research aiming to achieve depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Previous research suggests that data saturation in qualitative interviews can often be reached within relatively small samples, typically around 12 participants (Guest et al., 2006). In terms of the children's disability profiles, 6 participants were parents of children with visual disabilities, while 9 were parents of children with physical disabilities. The sample also included parents of 7 girls and 8 boys. This distribution allowed for the inclusion of diverse parental perspectives related to different types of sensory and physical impairments within inclusive educational settings. To protect participants' anonymity, detailed demographic information beyond parental role and type of disability was not reported.

Table 1. Demographics of the participants.

Code	Parental Role	Child's disability
P1	Mother	visual disability
P2	Mother	visual disability
P3	Father	visual disability

**Table 2 (Continued).** Demographics of the participants.

Code	Parental Role	Child's disability
P4	Father	visual disability
P5	Father	visual disability
P6	Father	visual disability
P7	Mother	visual disability
P8	Father	visual disability
P9	Mother	visual disability
P10	Mother	physical disability
P11	Mother	physical disability
P12	Father	physical disability
P13	Father	physical disability
P14	Mother	physical disability
P15	Father	physical disability

Participants were recruited through organizations supporting children with disabilities in Kosovo. Participation was voluntary, and parents were informed about the purpose of the study prior to providing informed consent. All data were treated confidentially, and participants' anonymity was ensured.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with parents. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow participants to share their experiences and perspectives in depth while also enabling the researcher to guide the discussion around key topics related to school inclusion and children's well-being. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to explore participants' individual experiences. The guide included open-ended questions and prompts aligned with the study's research questions. The interview questions focused on parents' perceptions of their children's experiences in school, the level of support provided by teachers and schools, the challenges encountered in inclusive educational settings, and the perceived impact of school inclusion on their children's well-being. All interviews were conducted individually and lasted approximately 45 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Ethical considerations were carefully followed, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and the protection of participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), following an inductive–deductive approach. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, systematic coding, and the development and refinement of themes. The software ATLAS.ti was used to facilitate data management, coding, and the organization of emerging themes. Particular attention was given to identifying patterns, contrasts, and tensions within parents' accounts, enabling the exploration of both shared experiences and divergent perspectives. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of inclusion as a complex and context-dependent process. The analysis was further guided by an ecological and bidirectional perspective, supporting the interpretation of themes in relation to interactions between children, families, and school environments, as well as the reciprocal influences between children's well-being and their educational experiences.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants, including the Declaration of Helsinki. In the context of the authors' institutions,



formal ethical approval is not required for interview-based research of this nature. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were removed from the data, and codes (P1 to P15) were used in reporting the findings to protect participants' identities. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed in line with qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through in-depth engagement with participants and the use of verbatim quotes to support interpretations. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear and systematic coding process using ATLAS.ti, allowing for transparency in data analysis. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in the data and minimizing researcher bias through iterative reflection during the analytical process. Finally, transferability was supported by providing detailed contextual descriptions of participants and settings, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, resulting in the identification of key codes, which were organized into categories and overarching themes, presented in Table 2. The analysis revealed a set of interconnected themes reflecting key tensions and paradoxes within inclusive education, particularly between policy and practice, support and limitation, and inclusion and participation. In addition, the findings highlight the bidirectional dynamics between children's well-being and their social relationships within school contexts.

Table 3. Codes, categories, and themes.

Codes	Categories	Themes
Legal framework vs. weak implementation	Policy–practice gap	School Inclusion: Ideals vs. Realities
Limited teacher capacity for IEPs; lack of resources; insufficient assistants; inaccessible infrastructure	Structural and capacity constraints	School Inclusion: Ideals vs. Realities
Presence without active participation	Limited functional inclusion	School Inclusion: Ideals vs. Realities
Feeling different; limited opportunities; need for equal treatment	Awareness of difference and need for inclusion	Psychological & Social Well-being
Emotional strain; tension; discomfort	Emotional distress	Psychological & Social Well-being
Concerns about independence; unclear future	Future uncertainty	Psychological & Social Well-being
Self-doubt; risk of inferiority; need for self-worth	Self-perception and self-value	Psychological & Social Well-being
Lack of resources; large class sizes; lack of assistants	Structural constraints in teaching	Teacher Practices
Caring but underprepared teachers; over-support; reduced expectations	Tension between care and limited expectations	Teacher Practices
Peer support; social learning; teacher-mediated interactions	Supportive peer interactions	Peer Relationships
Limited interaction outside school; dependency on parents	Restricted social participation	Peer Relationships

**Table 4 (Continued).** Codes, categories, and themes.

Codes	Categories	Themes
Bullying; peer rejection; negative peer experiences	Peer exclusion and victimization	Peer Relationships
Influence of parental attitudes; stigma	Social attitudes and stigma	Peer Relationships
Self-confidence shaping relationships; improvement influencing teacher response	Well-being influencing relationships	Bidirectional Dynamics
Bullying leading to withdrawal	Negative relational cycles	Bidirectional Dynamics
Positive relationships enhancing well-being; inclusion experiences	Positive relational cycles	Bidirectional Dynamics

Table 2 summarizes the key codes, categories, and themes deriving from the analysis, organized into five main areas. The process of categorizing codes into broader categories and themes resulted in the identification of five main themes: School Inclusion: Ideals vs. Realities, Psychological and Social Well-being, Teacher Practices, Peer Relationships, and Bidirectional Dynamics. The following sections present each theme in detail, illustrating how these tensions and paradoxes are reflected in parents' accounts and how inclusion and well-being are shaped through dynamic interactions between children, families, and school environments

Theme 1: Parental Understandings of School Inclusion: Ideals and Realities

Parents revealed a clear distinction between the principles of inclusive education and their practical implementation within school settings, highlighting a central tension between policy and practice. While participants demonstrated awareness of their children's rights and acknowledged that legal framework supporting inclusion is well in place, they consistently emphasized gaps in how these policies are implemented in everyday school contexts. Seven out of fifteen parents noted that, although inclusive education is well established in legislation, its implementation remains limited. As one parent stated, *"According to the laws, each child should be treated equally. Laws are very well placed in our country, but they lack implementation."* This reflects a broader structural paradox in which strong policy commitments coexist with weak institutional execution. Four out of fifteen parents raised concerns related to the competences of teachers to support their children's rights, particularly by implemented individualized education plans (IEPs). One parent explained, *"I know that my child is supposed to be educated with an individual education plan, but I am not sure whether the teacher has the necessary competences to do so."* This highlights uncertainty regarding the preparedness of school staff and reflects a tension between formal educational provisions and the practical capacity to deliver them.

In addition, material and infrastructural barriers were frequently reported. The lack of adapted learning materials, such as enlarged texts, Braille literature, and limited physical accessibility within school buildings were identified as significant obstacles. For example, one parent stated, *"There are no enlarged writing materials,"* while another noted, *"For my child it is difficult to get to the second floor of the school building. There are no elevators."* Such barriers not only limit access but also shape children's opportunities for meaningful participation within the classroom.

Nine out of fifteen parents also emphasized the insufficiency of support services, particularly the lack of trained assistants and specialized staff. Although some training initiatives for teachers were acknowledged, they were perceived as insufficient. As one parent reflected, *"I know that teachers have often undergone trainings, but I don't think they were sufficient. Simply, more specialized assistants should be in place."* These limitations were perceived as having a direct impact on children's well-being and level of participation. Parents frequently described a situation in which children are physically present in the classroom but not meaningfully engaged in the learning process, reflecting a paradox of inclusion as presence without participation. As one parent explained, *"This affects very badly the well-being of my child. He cannot be fully integrated in the education process."*



He is more only in class, but not very actively involved.” This illustrates how inclusion in form does not necessarily translate into inclusion in experience.

From an ecological perspective, these challenges reflect interactions across multiple levels, including school resources, teacher capacities, and institutional support structures, all of which shape children’s educational experiences. At the same time, parents report that children’s limited participation and engagement may further influence their emotional well-being and motivation, pointing to the bidirectional relationship between school experiences and well-being.

Finally, some parents expressed ambivalence regarding the most appropriate educational setting for their children. While specialized resource centers were perceived as potentially offering better support, parents also emphasized the importance of maintaining proximity to family and community. One parent shared, *“Sometimes I think it would be better if my child were educated in the Resource Centre for Blind and Visually Impaired in Peja, but I don’t want him far from the family.”* This reflects a further tension between access to specialized services and the value of social inclusion within mainstream and family environments.

Overall, parents’ perspectives reveal a complex and layered reality in which inclusive education is supported in principle but constrained in practice, shaped by structural limitations, relational dynamics, and systemic inconsistencies across educational contexts.

Theme 2: Psychological and Social Well-being of Children

Findings suggest that children’s psychological and social well-being is strongly shaped by their awareness of difference and by how others respond to them in everyday social contexts. Eight out of fifteen parents explained that their children are conscious of not being the same as their peers, and that this awareness influences how they perceive themselves and their place within social environments. As one parent noted, *“My child understands that he is not the same as other children. He feels himself hindered from many opportunities.”* This reflects how perceived difference may be accompanied by a sense of restriction and exclusion. This points to a key tension between children’s formal inclusion in school settings and their lived experiences of limitation and difference.

At the same time, parents emphasized that their children do not seek exceptional treatment, but rather to be accepted and treated equally. One parent explained, *“He does not like to be treated exceptionally, nor better or worse than the others. I see that he suffers the part when others tend to treat him differently.”* This highlights a tension between support and equality, where efforts to provide additional attention or assistance may inadvertently reinforce feelings of difference and exclusion.

Nine out of fifteen parents expressed uncertainty and concern about their children’s future, particularly in relation to independence and the role of education in preparing them for adult life. One parent stated, *“Her future is very unclear. I am not sure whether the education she is receiving enables her to be independent in the future.”* These reflections indicate that psychological well-being is not only shaped by present experiences, but also by expectations and anxieties related to future inclusion, autonomy, and life opportunities. This reflects a tension between educational participation in the present and uncertainty about meaningful inclusion in the future.

Another important dimension emerging from parents’ narratives relates to children’s self-perception and sense of self-worth. One parent shared, *“I know that she perceives herself as different from others. I just hope that she doesn’t perceive herself as less than others.”* Similarly, another parent emphasized the need for stronger self-value, stating, *“She needs to value herself more.”* These reflections suggest a tension between awareness of difference and the development of a positive self-concept, highlighting the risk that children may internalize negative perceptions of their differences.

From an ecological perspective, these experiences are shaped through interactions across multiple contexts, including family, school, and peer environments. At the same time, parents’ accounts



indicate that children's emotional states and self-perceptions may influence how they engage in social relationships, pointing to a bidirectional relationship between well-being and social participation. Taken together, these findings reveal a broader tension between children's desire for equal inclusion and their ongoing experiences of difference, which may affect both their emotional well-being and sense of self.

Theme 3: Teacher Practices and Support

Parents' accounts revealed a complex and, at times, contradictory picture of teacher practices, characterized by a central tension between care and constraint. While teachers were generally perceived as caring, attentive, and well-intentioned, parents also highlighted structural limitations and practices that may unintentionally restrict children's participation and development.

A recurring concern reported by nine out of fifteen parents, related to the lack of resources and institutional support available to teachers. Parents noted that teachers often work in challenging conditions, including large class sizes and insufficient access to assistive technology. As one parent explained, *"The teacher often complains about not having all the needed resources and assistive technology in the classroom."* Similarly, the absence of teaching assistants was highlighted as a significant barrier: *"The teacher would need an assistant. The number of children in the class is very high, and of course, they cannot fully dedicate time to my child."* These constraints reflect a structural tension between inclusive expectations and limited institutional capacity, which restricts teachers' ability to provide individualized support.

Despite these challenges, parents consistently described teachers as caring and supportive. One parent noted, *"The teacher is very careful; she might not have all the needed skills to support my child, but she is caring."* This reflects a positive perception of teachers' attitudes, even in the absence of sufficient training or resources. At the same time, it highlights a tension between positive intentions and limited professional preparedness, suggesting that care alone may not be sufficient to ensure effective inclusion.

However, parents also identified practices that may inadvertently limit children's development. Five parents reported that their children were often excluded from academic expectations, such as homework. As one parent reported, *"There are cases when other children have homework, but my son does not. He says that the teacher has decided not to give him homework."* While such decisions may be intended to reduce pressure, they may also communicate lower expectations and limit opportunities for learning and skill development. This reflects a paradox of support, where actions intended to help may simultaneously constrain children's academic growth and participation.

In addition, some parents described instances of over-support or excessive caution, where teachers provided more assistance than necessary. As one parent reflected, *"I noticed that the teacher tends to be very careful, sometimes even providing more help than needed. I would like my daughter to be a little challenged so she can develop."* These accounts point to a tension between protection and autonomy, where efforts to support children may reduce opportunities for independence, challenge, and competence development.

From an ecological perspective, these practices are shaped by interactions between teacher capacities, classroom conditions, and institutional support structures. At the same time, parents' accounts suggest that teacher expectations and practices may influence children's engagement, motivation, and self-confidence, pointing to a bidirectional relationship between teaching practices and children's well-being.

Overall, parents' perspectives highlight a relational and structural tension in teacher practices, where care and support coexist with constraints that may unintentionally reinforce dependency or limit participation. Taken together, these findings reveal that teacher support may simultaneously enable and constrain inclusion, underscoring the need for a balanced approach that combines emotional support with appropriate expectations and opportunities for active engagement.



Theme 4: Peer Relationships and Social Integration

Parent highlighted the central role of peer relationships in shaping children's experiences of inclusion and well-being. Peers were often described as an important source of support, learning, and social development within the school environment. Several parents emphasized that interaction with classmates provides valuable opportunities for socialization and learning. As one parent noted, *"For my child, his peers are very important. Socialization is very important. He has the chance to learn from other students."* In many cases, peers were actively involved in supporting children with disabilities in everyday tasks, sometimes encouraged by teachers. One parent explained, *"The teacher often engages other children in the classroom to support my child."* While such practices were generally perceived as beneficial, some parents expressed uncertainty about how these interactions are experienced by peers, pointing to a tension between structured support and authentic peer relationships.

Despite these positive experiences, parents also described limitations in social integration, particularly beyond the school setting. Opportunities for interaction outside school were often restricted due to practical and contextual barriers. As one parent explained, *"My child is limited in participating in activities outside school with peers, because that would implicate my presence as well, and that is not suitable."* This suggests a tension between inclusion within formal school environments and exclusion in informal social contexts, where participation remains constrained.

In addition, four parents reported experiences of peer rejection and bullying, particularly during initial stages of inclusion. One parent shared, *"There have been cases when my daughter felt bullied from her classmates. I think that happened more in the beginning."* These experiences highlight the challenges children with disabilities may face in establishing positive peer relationships, especially in the absence of adequate awareness and support. They also reflect a tension between the goal of social inclusion and the persistence of exclusionary peer dynamics.

Parents further pointed to the influence of the broader social environment, including the attitudes of other parents. Negative perceptions and resistance from some parents were perceived as contributing to exclusionary dynamics among children. As one participant noted, *"Sometimes parents also tend to be a bad influence, because they do not like the idea that their child is in the same class as a child with disabilities."* This reflects how societal attitudes extend beyond the school context and shape peer interactions, highlighting the ecological nature of inclusion processes.

From a bidirectional perspective, these findings suggest that children's social experiences may influence their emotional well-being and willingness to engage with peers, while at the same time their confidence and social skills may shape the quality of their relationships. This points to a reciprocal relationship between peer interactions and well-being, where positive and negative experiences can reinforce each other over time.

Theme 5: Bidirectional Dynamics Between Relationships and Well-being

Parents' narratives highlight a clear bidirectional relationship between children's psychological well-being and the quality of their social relationships. On one hand, children's emotional state and sense of competence appear to influence how they engage with peers and teachers. On the other hand, the nature and quality of these relationships further shape their well-being, illustrating a dynamic and reciprocal process. Seven parents emphasized that children's internal sense of competence and self-confidence plays a key role in their ability to build and maintain positive relationships. As one parent explained, *"My child needs to work more, feel more competent and happy with himself in order to perform well in school and have peers and teachers who value him and want to stay close to him."* This suggests that when children feel capable and satisfied with themselves, they are more likely to engage positively in social and academic contexts, which in turn strengthens their relationships.

At the same time, negative social experiences were found to have a direct impact on children's emotional well-being and their willingness to engage with others. One parent shared, *"My child has*



experienced times when he was bullied, and now he is not that much interested to spend time with his friends, so he does not initiate contacts with his peers.” This illustrates how adverse experiences such as bullying can lead to withdrawal and reduced social interaction, creating a negative relational cycle in which diminished well-being further limits opportunities to form supportive relationships.

Parents also observed that improvements in children’s functioning and behavior can positively influence how they are perceived and treated by others, particularly teachers. As one parent noted, *“I notice that as much as he has improved over time, the teacher was more happy to work with him and have him in the class.”* This indicates that children’s development and progress may elicit more positive responses from teachers, reinforcing supportive interactions and contributing to a more inclusive classroom environment.

Conversely, positive relational experiences were described as enhancing children’s emotional well-being and active participation in social life. One parent recounted, *“One day my daughter was feeling grateful that her friend invited her to her birthday. She felt happy and asked whether she could buy her a present that her friend likes. She was happy, relaxed and doing her part in that relationship.”* This example demonstrates how feeling accepted and included by peers can foster positive emotions, a sense of belonging, and reciprocal engagement in relationships, contributing to a positive relational cycle.

In addition, the findings highlight the bidirectional dynamics between children’s well-being and their social relationships. Table 3 presents an overview of these key tensions and their implications for children’s well-being.

Table 5. Types of tensions in school inclusion and their implications for the well-being of children with disabilities.

Type of Tension	Dimension	Description from Parents’ Perspectives	Implications for Children’s Well-being
Structural tensions	Policy–practice and resource gaps	Inclusive education is supported in policy but inconsistently implemented, with limited resources, training, and support services.	Formal inclusion without adequate support may reduce engagement, participation, and emotional security.
Relational tensions	Care vs expectations (teacher practices)	Teachers are caring but may lower expectations, over-support, or exempt children from tasks.	May limit autonomy, competence development, and self-confidence.
	Support vs exclusion (peer and teacher relations)	Children experience both support and exclusion, including structured peer support, bullying, and social distancing.	Inconsistent relational experiences may affect belonging and emotional stability.
Experiential tensions	Inclusion vs feeling different	Children are physically included but remain aware of their difference and limited opportunities.	May weaken sense of belonging and increase feelings of isolation.
	Equality vs differentiated treatment	Children seek equal treatment, yet support practices may reinforce difference.	May contribute to discomfort and negative self-perception.
Bidirectional dynamics	Well-being ↔ relationships	Children’s confidence influences relationships, while relationships shape well-being, creating positive or negative cycles.	Can reinforce either engagement and belonging or withdrawal and reduced participation.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that children’s well-being and their relationships are dynamically interconnected through reinforcing cycles. This reflects a tension between positive and negative relational trajectories, where supportive interactions can enhance well-being and inclusion, while adverse experiences may lead to withdrawal and reduced participation. From an ecological perspective, these dynamics are shaped through interactions across multiple contexts, including peer relationships, teacher practices, and family support systems.



DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, and RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to explore parental perspectives on inclusive education and the well-being of children with physical and sensory disabilities in Kosovo, through a bidirectional and ecological lens. The findings provide a clear response to these questions. First, in relation to Research Question 1, parents perceive inclusion not as a consistently supportive process, but as a complex and often contradictory experience shaped by gaps between policy and practice, structural limitations, and diverse relational dynamics. These conditions influence children's psychological and social well-being, which is experienced as both supported and constrained within inclusive settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Second, in relation to Sub-question 1, parents interpret social relationships as central to children's well-being, highlighting that interactions with peers and teachers play a key role in shaping emotional experiences, participation, and sense of belonging. Importantly, these relationships are understood as bidirectional, with children's well-being influencing their social engagement, while relational experiences simultaneously reinforce or undermine well-being (Sameroff, 2009).

A first key insight relates to the paradox of inclusion; whereby inclusive education is strongly supported at the policy level but inconsistently implemented in practice (UNISECO, 2020). Parents demonstrated awareness of legal frameworks that promote equal access and participation, aligning with international standards such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). However, these formal commitments often fail to translate into meaningful inclusion within everyday school experiences. This reflects broader systemic challenges, where structural limitations, such as insufficient resources, lack of trained staff, and limited institutional support, constrain the realization of inclusive principles (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). From an ecological perspective, this gap can be understood as a misalignment between macro-level policies and micro-level practices (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As a result, children may be physically present in inclusive settings while remaining only partially engaged, reinforcing the distinction between access and meaningful participation.

A second important finding concerns the paradox of support in teacher practices. While teachers were consistently described as caring and supportive, parents also reported practices that may unintentionally limit children's development, including reduced expectations, over-support, and protective approaches. These findings suggest that support, although well-intentioned, may sometimes constrain rather than enhance inclusion. This reflects a tension between emotional care and pedagogical effectiveness, where attempts to accommodate students may inadvertently communicate lower expectations. Emerging research indicates that help, particularly when unsolicited or excessive, may signal low competence and undermine children's self-concept and motivation (Sierksma & Shutts, 2020; 2025). From a transactional perspective (Sameroff, 2009), these patterns may evolve over time through reciprocal interactions between teacher expectations and children's responses, reinforcing cycles of reduced opportunity and perceived limitation.

The findings further point to the paradox of belonging, where inclusion does not necessarily translate into a sense of acceptance. While inclusion aims to promote equality and participation, children's awareness of difference and experiences of being treated differently may undermine their sense of belonging (Bossaert et al., 2013). Children were described as seeking equal treatment, yet often encountering subtle or explicit differentiation that contributes to emotional discomfort and self-doubt. This highlights that inclusion is not only a structural process but also a relational and psychological one, dependent on the quality of interactions and the extent to which children feel valued. From an ecological perspective, these experiences are shaped not only within the school environment but also by broader social attitudes, including those of peers and families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In a similar way, the paradox of peer inclusion emerges, where peer relationships function as both a source of support and a source of exclusion. While peers can facilitate social learning, participation, and friendship, parents also reported experiences of bullying, rejection, and limited interaction beyond



structured school settings. This suggests that inclusion within formal educational environments does not necessarily extend to informal social contexts, where meaningful relationships are developed. These findings highlight the importance of addressing wider social dynamics and ecological influences that shape peer interactions beyond the classroom (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Humphrey & Symes, 2011).

Finally, a central contribution of this study lies in its identification of bidirectional and transactional processes linking relationships and well-being. The findings demonstrate that children's emotional well-being influences their engagement in social relationships, while at the same time these relationships shape their well-being. Positive experiences were found to create reinforcing cycles of engagement, confidence, and belonging, whereas negative experiences may lead to withdrawal and reduced participation. These dynamics are consistent with Sameroff's transactional model (2009), which conceptualizes development as an ongoing process of reciprocal interaction between the individual and their environment. Within this framework, inclusion and well-being are not static outcomes but evolving processes shaped through continuous exchanges across multiple contexts.

The findings of this study highlight the need to move beyond formal inclusion toward practices that ensure meaningful participation and well-being for children with disabilities. Addressing the identified tensions and paradoxes requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels of the educational system. At the school level, there is a need to strengthen teacher capacity not only in terms of technical skills but also in balancing support with appropriate expectations. Providing access to teaching assistants, assistive technologies, and adapted learning materials is essential to enable teachers to implement inclusive practices effectively (Ainscow, 2020).

At the relational level, schools should actively foster inclusive peer environments that promote authentic social interactions rather than solely structured or teacher-mediated support. This may include implementing social-emotional learning programs, peer awareness activities, and anti-bullying initiatives that address stigma and encourage acceptance of diversity (Bossaert et al., 2013). Creating opportunities for interaction beyond formal classroom settings may further support meaningful social integration.

From a systemic perspective, the findings point to the importance of aligning policy with practice. While inclusive education is supported by strong legal frameworks, greater investment is needed to ensure consistent implementation across schools (UNESCO, 2020). This includes improving resource allocation, strengthening institutional support mechanisms, and enhancing collaboration between schools, families, and specialized services.

Finally, the bidirectional nature of relationships and well-being suggests that interventions should address both children's emotional development and their social environments. Supporting children's self-confidence, sense of competence, and emotional well-being may enhance their engagement in relationships, while improving relational experiences can further reinforce positive developmental outcomes (Sameroff, 2009).

Beyond the specific context of Kosovo, these findings contribute to broader international debates on inclusive education by highlighting that inclusion cannot be understood solely as access or placement, but must be examined as a relational and dynamic process shaped by ongoing interactions between individuals and their environments. The identification of tensions and paradoxes suggests that inclusive education inherently involves navigating competing demands, rather than resolving them entirely, which has important implications for how inclusion is conceptualized and implemented across diverse educational systems.

This study provides a nuanced understanding of inclusive education in Kosovo by demonstrating that children's psychological and social well-being is shaped by a dynamic interplay of structural, relational, and experiential factors. Rather than representing a linear or uniformly positive process, inclusion emerges as a complex and context-dependent phenomenon characterized by underlying



tensions between policy intentions and everyday practices. The findings are in line with other studies conducted recently in the context of Kosovo (Zabeli et al. 2021; Zabeli et al. 2020; Kadriu et al, 2024; Devolli & Zabeli, 2024).

By adopting an ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and bidirectional perspective (Sameroff, 2009), the study highlights that children are not only influenced by their environments but also actively shape their relational experiences through their well-being, behaviors, and interactions. The identification of key tensions and paradoxes offers a deeper understanding of how inclusion is simultaneously enabling and constraining, depending on how it is enacted within specific contexts.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of moving beyond access-oriented approaches toward more holistic models of inclusion that prioritize meaningful participation, relational quality, and emotional well-being. Addressing these dimensions is essential for creating inclusive educational environments that support not only presence, but also belonging and development for children with disabilities.

Limitations of the Research and Recommendations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the use of purposive sampling and a relatively small sample size limits the generalizability of the results. Second, data were collected solely from parents, which may not fully capture the perspectives of children, teachers, or peers involved in inclusive education processes. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for the examination of changes over time or the directionality of relationships between variables. Future research employing longitudinal and multi-informant approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

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Ethics and Conflict of Interest

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants, including the Declaration of Helsinki. In the context of the authors' institutions, formal ethical approval is not required for interview-based research of this nature. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were removed from the data, and codes (P1 to P15) were used in reporting the findings to protect participants' identities. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. The author declares that they acted in accordance with ethical rules in all processes of the research. The author declares that there is no potential conflict of interest in the work.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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