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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mapping Belonging in Inclusive French Immersion Classrooms in Canada

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| ABSTRACT

In inclusive classrooms, participation is often documented through adult reports, service plans, or behavioural observations. This study asks what becomes visible when children map participation for themselves. Using qualitative visual inquiry, we analyzed 118 participatory maps and accompanying micro-narratives produced by 7- and 8-year-old children in six Grade 2 and Grade 3 French immersion classrooms across two public schools in Winnipeg, Canada. The corpus included whole classroom communities with overlapping support profiles, including autism, ADHD, significant learning difficulties, and behavioural or social-emotional concerns. Visual coding, reflexive thematic analysis, and descriptive patterning generated four constructs: refuge as regulated participation, voice gradients in a second-language ecology, rough temporalities and transition strain, and cartographic agency through child-led redesign. Refuge spaces appeared in 54 maps, voice or silence markers in 82, transition-related motifs in 68, and redesign proposals in 51. Findings show that children experienced inclusion not as placement, but as an ecological fit among space, rhythm, sensory demand, relationship, and language. The study positions French as part of the occupational environment and presents participatory mapping as a practical tool for school-based occupational therapy, teacher collaboration, and inclusive classroom design. It also foregrounds children as credible designers of the conditions that support belonging.

| KEYWORDS

school-based occupational therapy; inclusive education; French immersion; participatory mapping; child participation; classroom ecology; occupational justice; visual methods

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

Children do not encounter inclusion only through policy, placement, or support hours. They encounter it in the ordinary thresholds of the school day, in the hallway that rushes the body, the table where reading becomes possible, the corner where regulation returns, and the language circle where speaking may feel playful one moment and precarious the next. For children in inclusive classrooms, participation is not an abstract educational outcome. It is lived through space, time, sensory demands, relationships, classroom routines, and the small permissions that make it possible to act, speak, wait, move, withdraw, return, and belong. This understanding is closely aligned with occupational therapy's long-standing attention to the dynamic relationship between persons, occupations, and environments. Models such as the Person-Environment-Occupation model and Canadian occupational therapy frameworks have emphasized that participation emerges through the interaction of individual capacities, meaningful occupations, and environmental affordances or barriers (Law et al., 1996; Polatajko et al., 2007).

In school settings, this perspective is especially important because children's occupations are woven into daily routines. Children line up, read, draw, listen, change activities, play, ask for help, manage materials, navigate peer relationships, and participate in classroom talk. Inclusion, from an occupational perspective, therefore requires more than physical placement in a shared classroom. It requires access to meaningful, recognizable, and sustainable forms of participation. Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual orientation of the study by showing how children's occupational participation in French immersion classrooms is shaped through the interaction of space, time, relationships, and language.

Figure 1. Mapping occupational participation in French immersion

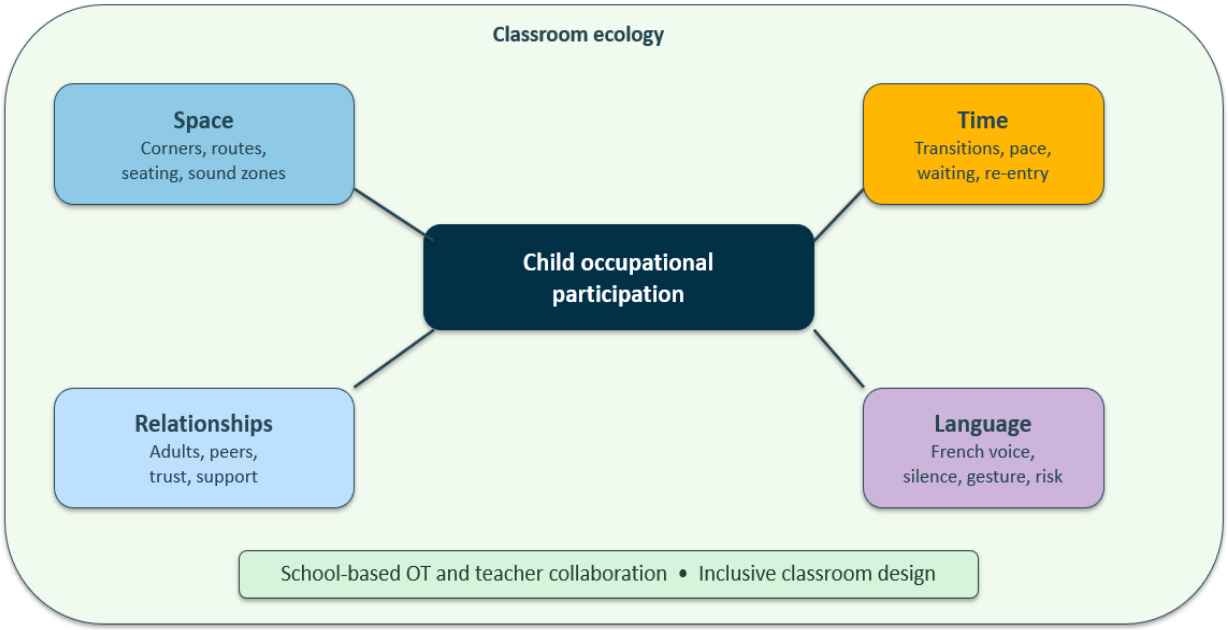

Figure 1. The model positions child occupational participation at the centre of four interacting dimensions: space, time, relationships, and language. These dimensions are embedded within classroom ecology and connected to school-based occupational therapy, teacher collaboration, and inclusive classroom design.

Yet the participation of children with support needs is still often interpreted through adult-centred forms of knowledge, including teacher reports, professional observations, individualized plans, service records, and diagnostic categories. These forms of knowledge are necessary, but they do not always reveal how children themselves perceive the classroom conditions that support or interrupt their participation. A child may be present in an inclusive classroom and still experience parts of the day as inaccessible, unpredictable, or socially risky. Conversely, a small change in rhythm, spatial arrangement, language support, or relational cue may transform an ordinary school activity into a more manageable and meaningful occupation. Research on childhood participation has similarly emphasized that environments are not passive backdrops. They actively shape what children can do, how they can engage, and whether participation becomes possible or constrained (Anaby et al., 2013; Imms et al., 2017).

School-based occupational therapy is well positioned to attend to these everyday conditions of participation. In Canadian contexts, school-based occupational therapists have increasingly worked through collaborative and ecological models that support teachers and school teams in adapting tasks, routines, environments, and expectations, rather than focusing only on individual remediation (Campbell et al., 2012; Missiuna et al., 2012; Villeneuve & Shulha, 2012). Such approaches invite a broader question. How might children themselves contribute to the design of inclusive classroom environments? If occupational therapy seeks to enable participation, then children's own accounts of where participation becomes possible, difficult, or meaningful should be treated not as supplementary anecdotes, but as essential forms of situated knowledge.

Participatory visual methods offer one way to access this knowledge. Drawing, mapping, and other child-centred visual approaches can help children express experiences that may be difficult to capture through conventional interviews alone (Clark, 2010; Literat, 2013; Mitchell, 2011). In the context of occupational therapy, participatory mapping has particular promise because it allows children to represent participation as it is lived spatially, temporally, relationally, and affectively. A quiet corner, a jagged arrow, a speech bubble, a crossed-out doorway, or a newly invented label may reveal how a child organizes the school day, where regulation becomes possible, where communication becomes risky, and where belonging is felt or withheld. These maps do not merely decorate children's accounts. They can function as occupational probes, as visual, child-authored tools that make visible the conditions under which school occupations are enabled, strained, or redesigned.

French immersion classrooms provide a particularly generative setting for examining these questions. In immersion education, language is not only a subject of instruction. It is part of the occupational environment. It shapes who speaks, who hesitates, who translates, who performs competence, who relies on gesture, and who finds alternative ways to participate. Canadian research has raised important questions about access, inclusion, and support for students with disabilities or learning needs in French as a second language and immersion programs (Genesee, 2007; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Muhling & Mady, 2017). At the same time, immersion classrooms may also create distinctive possibilities. Because many children are learning through a language that is not dominant in their home lives, expertise may be redistributed in unexpected ways. For some children, this shared linguistic vulnerability may soften hierarchies and open new identities as capable participants. For others, the same environment may intensify fatigue, anxiety, or fear of public error.

These tensions are especially significant for children with autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, learning disabilities, language-based challenges, sensory differences, or behavioural and emotional support needs. Neurodiversity scholarship has challenged deficit-based interpretations of communication and participation, emphasizing that children's differences must be understood in relation to social, sensory, and relational environments (Milton, 2012; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). From this perspective, a child's silence, movement, withdrawal, or reliance on visual cues cannot be understood only as an individual limitation. These responses may also signal that the environment has become too fast, too loud, too linguistically demanding, too socially exposed, or insufficiently predictable. For occupational therapists and educators, the question becomes not only how to help children adapt to classrooms, but how classrooms might be redesigned with children's perspectives at the centre.

The present study examines this question through an empirical extension of an earlier exploratory inquiry into children's participatory maps in inclusive French immersion classrooms. The extended corpus includes 132 students from six Grade 2 and Grade 3 classrooms across two French immersion schools in Winnipeg, Canada. Students were between 7 and 8 years old. Of the 132 children who participated in the mapping activity, 118 produced maps that were sufficiently complete and usable for analysis. Within the classroom communities, support profiles included children identified as autistic, children with ADHD, children with significant learning difficulties and individualized intervention plans, and children receiving counsellor follow-up for behavioural concerns. These categories were not mutually exclusive, reflecting the complex and overlapping nature of children's school-based support needs.

Rather than isolating children with formal diagnoses from their peers, the study examines inclusive classrooms as shared occupational ecologies. This approach allows us to ask how patterns of participation, regulation, communication, transition, and belonging appear across whole classroom communities, while also attending to the experiences of children with identified or emerging support needs. Children completed the mapping activity in French between October 2024 and March 2025. Their maps and accompanying micro-narratives were analyzed through a combination of visual coding, reflexive thematic analysis, and descriptive mapping of recurring patterns. Ethical approval, parental consent, child assent, and permission to reproduce or reconstruct anonymized map excerpts were obtained as part of the study procedures.

The study is guided by two research questions. First, what spatial, temporal, relational, sensory, and linguistic patterns of occupational participation become visible through children's participatory maps of inclusive French immersion classrooms? Second, how can these patterns inform school-based occupational therapy and collaborative inclusive classroom design?

We do not claim that children's maps provide a complete account of inclusion, nor that visual methods can replace teacher knowledge, family perspectives, clinical reasoning, or direct observation. Rather, we argue that participatory maps add a crucial child-authored layer to the understanding of school participation. They allow children to show where the school day opens, narrows, accelerates, shelters, silences, or invites them. For occupational therapy, this matters because inclusive practice depends not only on identifying barriers, but also on recognizing how children experience and redesign the everyday occupations through which belonging is made.

By centring children's maps, this study contributes to occupational therapy in three ways. First, it offers a visual and participatory method for identifying environmental affordances and barriers that may remain hidden in adult-centred assessments. Second, it positions second-language learning as a meaningful dimension of the occupational environment in Canadian school contexts. Third, it proposes participatory mapping as a practical tool for collaboration among children, teachers, occupational therapists, and school teams. At its core, the article argues that belonging is not simply delivered to children through inclusive policy. It is negotiated in the grain of everyday classroom life, and children are often its most precise cartographers.

Method

This study used a qualitative visual inquiry design with descriptive mapping of recurring visual and narrative patterns. The design was informed by occupational science, school-based occupational therapy, and participatory visual research with children. The study did not seek to measure inclusion as a fixed outcome or to compare diagnostic groups statistically. Rather, it examined how children represented the everyday conditions of occupational participation within inclusive French immersion classrooms.

Participatory mapping was selected because it allows young children to express experiences of space, movement, regulation, communication, and belonging through visual and narrative forms. In this study, maps were treated as child-authored accounts of

school participation. They were analyzed not only for what children drew, but also for how they organized classroom space, marked transitions, represented voice or silence, identified places of comfort or discomfort, and imagined possible changes to their school environment.

This study represents an empirical extension of earlier work on occupational participation in French immersion classrooms (Poliquin & Abakar Moussa, 2025). The earlier article developed the conceptual relevance of French immersion as a participation context for children with autism and learning disabilities. The present article differs in corpus, method, analytic focus, and contribution. It analyzes 118 child-generated participatory maps and accompanying micro-narratives from six whole Grade 2 and Grade 3 classroom communities. No maps, reconstructed fragments, descriptive counts, coding framework, or four-construct findings reported in the present article were published in the earlier work. The present study therefore extends the earlier inquiry by centring participatory mapping as the primary empirical object and by examining inclusive classroom ecologies across a substantially larger visual corpus.

Setting

The study took place in two public French immersion elementary schools in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Both schools served linguistically and culturally diverse communities and included children with a range of learning, sensory, attentional, behavioural, and social-emotional support needs. The participating classrooms were inclusive Grade 2 and Grade 3 classrooms. Students were generally 7 or 8 years old at the time of data collection.

French immersion provided a distinctive context for examining occupational participation. Classroom routines, peer interaction, teacher direction, literacy activities, transitions, and oral participation were all shaped by the use of French as the language of instruction. Because children were navigating both school occupations and second-language participation, the study treated language as part of the classroom environment rather than as a separate academic variable.

Participants and Corpus

A total of 132 students from six Grade 2 and Grade 3 classrooms participated in the mapping activity between October 2024 and March 2025. Of these, 118 student maps were sufficiently complete and usable for analysis. Table 1 summarizes the classroom corpus, participant context, and support profiles represented in the visual and narrative analysis.

Table 1. Corpus and Participant Context

Corpus feature	Description
Study setting	Two public French immersion elementary schools in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
Classrooms	Six inclusive Grade 2 and Grade 3 classrooms
Student age range	Approximately 7 to 8 years old
Data collection period	October 2024 to March 2025
Students who participated	132
Usable maps analyzed	118
Maps excluded from analysis	14
Map-linked micro-narratives and annotations	Available through brief explanations, field notes, or annotations made during or immediately after the mapping activity
Language of activity	French, the language of classroom instruction
Autistic students	5
Students with ADHD	13
Students with significant learning difficulties and individualized intervention plans	15
Students receiving counsellor follow-up for behavioural or social-emotional concerns	7
Support profile distribution	Categories were not mutually exclusive, and some students belonged to more than one support category
Analytic focus	Whole-classroom occupational ecologies, with attention to support needs, regulation, communication, transitions, and child-proposed redesign

Fourteen maps were excluded for reasons related to data integrity, interpretability, consent, or confidentiality. Five maps were incomplete or almost blank. Three maps did not represent a school experience, classroom space, routine, or situation of participation. Two maps could not be interpreted responsibly because no usable micro-narrative or accompanying field note was

available. Two maps contained identifying information that could not be anonymized without altering the meaning of the document. Two maps were excluded because consent, assent, or permission to reproduce or reconstruct visual material was incomplete.

No map was excluded because of drawing quality, French-language proficiency, spelling, neatness, or the presence of a support profile. This distinction was important because the study sought to preserve children's varied modes of expression, including brief, unconventional, symbolic, or minimally verbal forms of representation.

The classroom communities included children with a range of overlapping support profiles. Five students were identified as autistic. Thirteen students had attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Fifteen students had significant learning difficulties and individualized intervention plans. Seven students received counsellor follow-up for behavioural or social-emotional concerns. These categories were not mutually exclusive. Some students belonged to more than one support category, reflecting the complex and intersecting nature of school-based needs in inclusive classrooms.

The study did not separate children with formal diagnoses from their classmates during the mapping activity. All students in the participating classrooms were invited to take part in the same child-friendly mapping process. This whole-class approach reduced the risk of singling out children with identified needs and allowed the analysis to consider inclusion as a shared classroom ecology. At the same time, the analysis remained attentive to how support needs, regulation, communication, learning differences, and behavioural or social-emotional concerns appeared in the maps and narratives.

Participatory Mapping Procedure

The mapping activity was conducted in French, which was the language of instruction in the participating classrooms. The prompt was delivered orally and was designed to be age-appropriate for Grade 2 and Grade 3 students. Children were told that the activity was not a test and that their drawings would not be evaluated for artistic quality, spelling, or French proficiency.

The core prompt invited children to draw a map of their school day. They were asked to show places where they liked to be, places that felt calm or difficult, places where they spoke easily in French or preferred to stay quiet, places where they needed help, and places they would change if they could. Children were encouraged to use colours, symbols, arrows, words, speech bubbles, or invented legends to represent movement, emotion, voice, quiet, stress, help, or belonging. Figure 2 illustrates the sequence through which children moved from drawing their school day to explaining selected map features, proposing changes, and contributing to the visual and occupational analysis.

Figure 2. Participatory mapping and analysis protocol

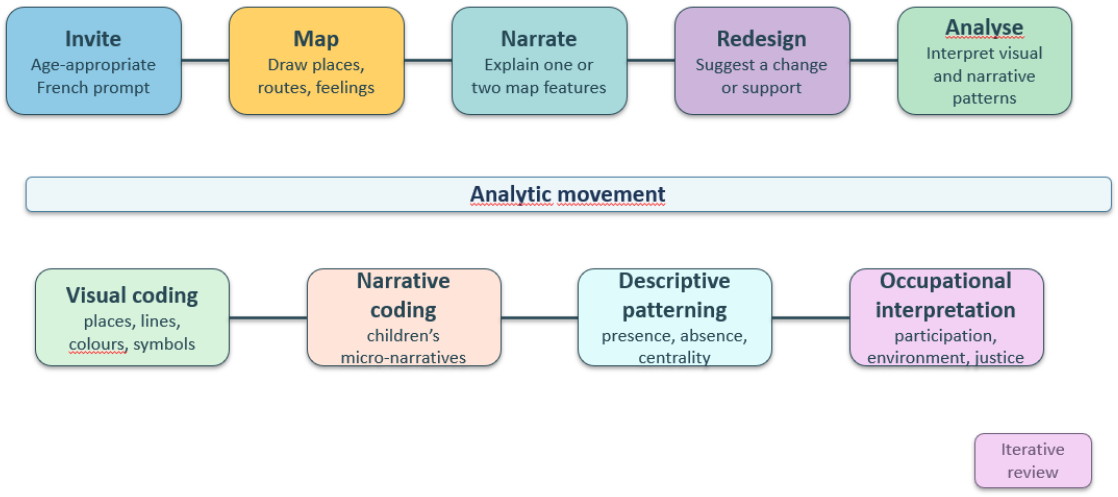

Figure 2. The protocol moved from an age-appropriate French invitation to mapping, narration, redesign, and analysis. The analytic movement included visual coding, narrative coding, descriptive patterning, and occupational interpretation.

A typical oral instruction was as follows: "Aujourd'hui, nous allons faire une carte de notre journée à l'école. Ce n'est pas un test et ce n'est pas un concours de dessin. Tu peux dessiner avec des couleurs, des mots, des flèches, des symboles ou des petites bulles. Sur ta feuille, montre les endroits où tu aimes être pendant la journée. Montre aussi les endroits où c'est parfois plus difficile,

plus bruyant, plus rapide, plus stressant ou moins confortable. Tu peux montrer les endroits où tu te sens calme, où tu parles facilement en français, où tu préfères écouter, où tu as besoin d'aide, ou où tu aimerais changer quelque chose" [*Today, we are going to make a map of our school day. This is not a test, and it is not a drawing contest. You can draw with colours, words, arrows, symbols, or small speech bubbles. On your page, show the places where you like to be during the day. Also show the places where things are sometimes more difficult, noisier, faster, more stressful, or less comfortable. You can show the places where you feel calm, where you speak easily in French, where you prefer to listen, where you need help, or where you would like to change something*].

After completing the map, each child was invited to explain one or two parts of the drawing. Children were reminded that they did not have to explain everything and could skip any question. Their explanations were documented through field notes and brief annotations made during or immediately after the activity.

Data Sources

The primary data consisted of 118 child-generated maps. These maps included drawings of classroom spaces, school areas, movement routes, transition points, emotional zones, peer or adult supports, and proposed changes. The maps varied in detail and complexity, which was expected given the children's age and the open-ended nature of the task.

The secondary data consisted of children's brief explanations of their maps, researcher notes, and annotations made during or immediately after the mapping sessions. Micro-narratives were brief child explanations linked to individual maps. They were elicited through one or two open prompts, such as "Can you tell me about this part of your map?" or "Why did you draw this place this way?" Most explanations were one to three sentences in length. They were documented as field-note summaries rather than audio-recorded transcripts, in order to keep the activity low-risk, brief, and classroom-appropriate. When a child used a specific phrase that clarified a visual feature, the phrase was recorded as closely as possible. Each micro-narrative was linked to the corresponding map through an anonymized map identification number. These micro-narratives helped clarify the meaning of visual features that might otherwise have been ambiguous. For example, a jagged line might indicate excitement, stress, rushing, or confusion depending on the child's explanation. Similarly, a coloured corner might represent calm, hiding, safety, friendship, or a preferred activity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in four iterative phases that moved from visual description to occupational interpretation. The process combined inductive visual coding of children's maps, reflexive thematic analysis of micro-narratives, descriptive mapping of recurring visual motifs, and interpretation through occupational concepts. This layered approach allowed the analysis to remain close to children's visual and verbal accounts while also developing a broader understanding of classroom participation as situated, relational, and environmentally shaped.

The first phase involved inductive visual coding of the 118 usable maps. All maps were reviewed repeatedly to develop familiarity with the visual corpus. The researchers attended to recurring visual features, including places, pathways, lines, arrows, colours, speech bubbles, symbols, labels, crowded areas, avoided zones, broken routes, enclosed spaces, and refuge markers. Attention was also given to scale, placement, repetition, omission, and visual intensity. For example, a large speech bubble, a jagged hallway line, a darkly shaded corner, or a crossed-out activity area was treated as potentially meaningful, but not as self-explanatory. In keeping with participatory visual research, drawings were understood as situated representations that require careful interpretation rather than transparent windows into children's experience (Clark, 2010; Literat, 2013; Mitchell, 2011). Visual codes were therefore developed inductively and refined through repeated comparison across maps.

The second phase focused on the children's micro-narratives. These brief explanations, field notes, and annotations were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022). The analysis did not treat themes as facts waiting to be extracted. Instead, themes were developed through sustained engagement with the maps, the children's explanations, and the researchers' interpretive positioning. Micro-narratives were especially important when visual features were ambiguous. A jagged line could indicate excitement, rushing, confusion, stress, or transition strain depending on the child's explanation. A quiet corner could represent calm, isolation, safety, friendship, or avoidance. The visual and verbal data were therefore read together whenever possible, with children's own explanations guiding interpretation.

The third phase involved descriptive mapping of recurring motifs across the 118 maps. Descriptive patterning was used to document recurrence within the visual corpus, not to generate statistical inference. A motif was coded as present when it appeared visually, narratively, or through the combination of a visual feature and the child's explanation. Counts were used to show the relative prominence of patterns across the 118 maps and to support analytic transparency. They were not used to test hypotheses, compare diagnostic groups, or estimate prevalence beyond the participating classrooms. Percentages are therefore reported only as descriptive indicators of the corpus and should be read as part of a qualitative visual analysis. This phase identified the presence or absence of selected visual and narrative patterns, including refuge spaces, difficult transitions, speech or silence markers, sensory stress points, peer or adult support, avoided areas, language-related hesitation, and child-proposed changes. These descriptive counts were used to strengthen analytic transparency and to show which patterns appeared across the broader corpus. They were not used to make statistical claims or to compare diagnostic groups. Because support profiles overlapped, the descriptive layer

was used cautiously, as a way to understand classroom ecologies rather than to assign patterns to fixed categories of children. To support consistency, the researchers used a concise coding framework that defined each final construct through visual indicators, micro-narrative indicators, and interpretive cautions. Initial codes were refined through repeated review of the maps, discussion of ambiguous cases, and comparison between visual and narrative evidence. Disagreements were resolved through reflexive discussion rather than by forcing consensus through numerical reliability procedures, which would have been inconsistent with the interpretive and visual nature of the study. To make this interpretive process more transparent, Table 2 outlines how each map-derived construct was operationalized through visual indicators, micro-narrative indicators, and interpretive cautions.

Table 2. Coding Framework for Map-Derived Constructs

Construct	**Visual indicators**	**Micro-narrative indicators**	**Interpretive cautions**
Refuge and regulated participation	Enclosed spaces, quiet corners, cocoon areas, soft colours, distance from busy zones, headphones, partitions, calming symbols	References to calming down, being quiet, feeling safe, recovering, reading, listening, or returning to work	Refuge was not automatically interpreted as avoidance. Visual evidence was read with the child's explanation when available.
Voice gradients in a second-language ecology	Speech bubbles, crossed-out bubbles, written French words, listening symbols, arrows toward speaking areas, small or enlarged words	References to speaking French, preferring to listen, fear of error, speaking with peers, or feeling more comfortable in routines	Silence was not treated as lack of participation. It could indicate listening, regulation, hesitation, or communicative risk.
Rough temporalities and transition strain	Jagged lines, broken arrows, crowded hallways, intense colouring near doors, repeated paths, compressed spaces	References to rushing, noise, lining up, losing materials, not being ready, or not knowing what comes next	Transition difficulty was interpreted as an environmental and occupational demand, not simply as behavioural resistance.
Cartographic agency and child-led redesign	Proposed quiet areas, help zones, changed seating, alternative routes, renamed places, invented symbols, modified group arrangements	References to wanting to change a place, needing help, wanting more space, preferring a different partner, or imagining a calmer arrangement	Redesign proposals were treated as situated design cues, not as literal architectural plans.

The fourth phase returned the analysis to occupational concepts. Visual and narrative patterns were interpreted in relation to participation, environment, rhythm, affordance, occupational justice, and school-based occupational therapy. This interpretive movement was informed by occupational models that understand participation as emerging through the interaction of person, occupation, and environment (Law et al., 1996; Polatajko et al., 2007), and by research emphasizing the role of environmental conditions in children's participation (Anaby et al., 2013; Imms et al., 2017). It was also informed by justice-oriented approaches that ask whether children have meaningful access to occupations that support dignity, agency, and belonging (Hammell, 2015; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004).

Throughout the analysis, the researchers moved back and forth between individual maps and cross-corpus patterns. Both researchers reviewed the full visual corpus. A shared subset of maps was coded independently to refine the coding framework, identify ambiguous cases, and clarify the boundaries between overlapping motifs such as refuge, avoidance, sensory stress, and redesign. The remaining maps were then reviewed using the stabilized coding framework, with uncertain cases discussed jointly. Analytic memos documented changes to code definitions, disagreements, alternative interpretations, and decisions to merge or separate categories. Interpretive memos documented emerging codes, disagreements, alternative readings, and decisions to merge or revise categories. This process generated four map-derived constructs: refuge as regulated participation, voice gradients in a second-language ecology, rough temporalities and transition strain, and cartographic agency through child-led redesign. These constructs were not imposed before analysis. They developed from repeated engagement with children's maps and micro-narratives, then were interpreted through occupational therapy's concern with participation, environmental fit, and inclusive practice.

Researcher Positioning and Reflexivity

The study was conducted by researchers whose professional backgrounds shaped the analytic process. One author brought clinical and health-related attention to regulation, stress, sensory experience, and children's embodied responses. The other brought experience in education, French immersion, classroom routines, language learning, and literary analysis of representation. This interdisciplinary positioning was central to the study.

Reflexive discussion was used throughout the analysis to examine how the researchers' professional assumptions influenced interpretation. The clinical lens helped identify patterns related to regulation, sensory thresholds, and embodied participation. The educational and literary lens supported attention to classroom ecology, language, narrative, symbols, and the child's act of naming or redesigning space. Rather than treating these perspectives as neutral, the analysis used reflexivity to make interpretive decisions more deliberate and transparent.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to support trustworthiness. Credibility was strengthened by analyzing both visual and narrative data and by reading children's maps in relation to their own explanations whenever possible. Dependability was supported through documentation of coding decisions, analytic memos, and revisions to the coding framework. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive dialogue between the researchers and attention to alternative interpretations of ambiguous visual features.

Transferability was supported through thick description of the school context, classroom ecology, participant age range, support profiles, and mapping procedure. Because the study was situated in two French immersion schools in one Canadian city, the findings are not presented as universally generalizable. Instead, they are offered as transferable insights into how participatory mapping can help occupational therapists, teachers, and school teams understand children's lived conditions of participation in inclusive classrooms.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board. Additional authorization was obtained from the participating school division and schools. One researcher had professional familiarity with school-based educational contexts but did not evaluate the participating children, assign grades, provide clinical services, or supervise participating teachers. To reduce potential power dynamics, participation was presented as voluntary, the activity was not connected to assessment or school performance, and children were reminded that they could skip questions, stop drawing, or decline to explain any part of their map. Parents or legal guardians provided written informed consent, and children provided assent before participating. Children were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could choose not to answer, stop drawing, or withdraw from the activity.

Because the study involved young children in a school setting, including children with overlapping support needs, ethical safeguards were especially important. The mapping activity could reveal sensitive information about classroom routines, peer relationships, adult supports, emotional regulation, sensory stress, behavioural concerns, or learning difficulties. For this reason, maps were treated not simply as drawings, but as situated visual documents requiring careful protection.

Confidentiality was addressed at several levels. Names of children, teachers, peers, schools, and classrooms were removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Maps were reviewed for identifying details before analysis and before any use in publication. Permission was obtained to reproduce or reconstruct anonymized excerpts of children's maps. When direct reproduction risked revealing identifying information, composite or reconstructed map fragments were used to preserve the meaning of children's visual accounts while protecting confidentiality.

The mapping activity was designed to be low-risk and child-centred. It was not presented as an assessment of ability, behaviour, drawing skill, or French proficiency. Children were invited to represent their school experience in ways that felt meaningful to them, and the activity was framed as an opportunity to help adults better understand how classrooms could support participation and belonging.

Findings

The analysis generated four map-derived constructs that describe how children represented occupational participation in inclusive French immersion classrooms. These constructs were developed through repeated movement between visual patterns, children's micro-narratives, and occupational interpretation. The descriptive counts reported below indicate the recurrence of visual motifs across the 118 usable maps. They are not presented as statistical comparisons between diagnostic or support groups, particularly because support profiles overlapped. Rather, they show how children, across whole classroom communities, made visible the spatial, temporal, relational, sensory, and linguistic conditions of participation. Figure 3 presents reconstructed composite fragments that illustrate the main visual motifs identified across the corpus while protecting children's confidentiality.

Figure 3. Composite anonymized map fragments

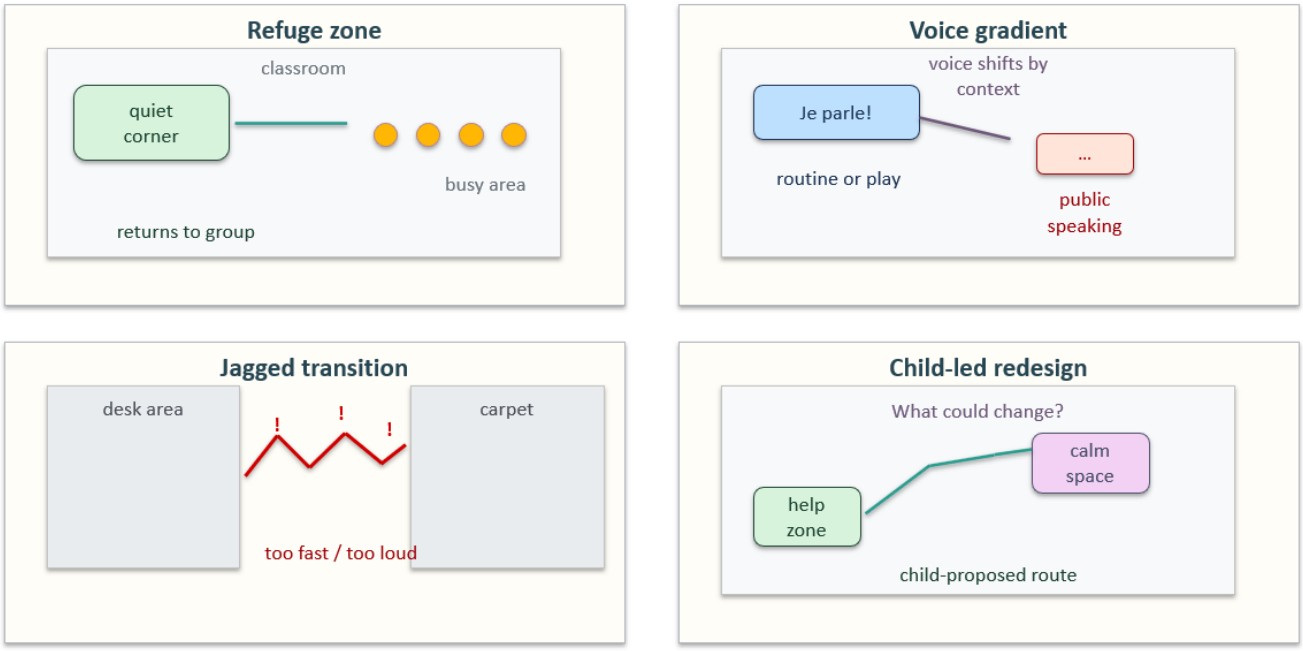

Figure 3. The reconstructed fragments illustrate four recurring visual patterns identified across the corpus: refuge zones, voice gradients, jagged transitions, and child-led redesign. These fragments are composites rather than direct reproductions of children's maps.

Refuge and Regulated Participation

Refuge spaces appeared as one of the most consistent visual patterns across the corpus. These spaces were represented in 54 of 118 maps, or 45.8%. Children drew them through enclosed areas, softer colours, small corners, labelled quiet places, repeated calming symbols, or areas placed at a distance from busier classroom zones. They often marked these spaces as places where they could breathe, think, listen, calm down, read, or return to the group after feeling overwhelmed.

The refuge motif appeared in several forms. Some children identified formal classroom spaces, such as reading corners, carpet areas, small tables, support areas, cocoon corners, or spaces partially separated by partitions. Others marked informal or self-created refuges, such as the edge of a rug, the space beside a trusted adult, a place near a window, or a desk positioned away from high movement areas. In 36 maps, refuge was linked primarily to sensory regulation. These maps often used quieter colours, enclosed shapes, headphones, distance from noisy zones, or visual separation from the classroom centre. In 18 maps, refuge was more relational, associated with a teacher, educational assistant, counsellor, peer, or another trusted person.

A recurring map pattern showed a small calming area drawn at the edge of the classroom, sometimes labelled or visually separated from louder zones. In several micro-narratives, children described these spaces as places where they could be quiet, recover, or feel ready to return to work. For example, one reconstructed map fragment showed a small quiet corner separated from the centre of the classroom by a visual boundary. The accompanying micro-narrative described the area as a place to "be quiet and then go back." This pairing of visual enclosure and return-oriented explanation supported the interpretation of refuge as regulated participation rather than simple withdrawal. The visual organization of these maps suggested that refuge was not simply withdrawal from participation. It was a condition that made participation possible again. Children did not consistently mark refuge spaces as outside the classroom world. More often, they placed them within a route through which the school day could become manageable.

This pattern was especially important from an occupational perspective. Children's maps suggested that participation depended not only on tasks or expectations, but on the availability of places where regulation could be restored. Refuge was not the opposite of inclusion. It was one of inclusion's conditions. For school-based occupational therapy, this finding points to the importance of identifying and designing spaces that allow children to regulate without being removed, isolated, or marked as failing to participate. In these maps, belonging often began in small places.

Voice Gradients in a Second-Language Ecology

A second pattern concerned children's representation of voice, silence, and communicative risk in French immersion classrooms. Voice-related motifs appeared in 82 of 118 maps, or 69.5%. These included speech bubbles, crossed-out bubbles, small or large written words, arrows toward speaking areas, listening symbols, labels identifying places where French felt easier, and marks showing where children preferred not to speak.

The maps did not present communication as a simple opposition between speaking and not speaking. Instead, they revealed gradients of voice. Some spaces invited louder or more confident participation, while others produced hesitation, silence, or reliance on gesture. In 45 maps, children associated oral French with group routines or classroom speaking spaces, such as carpet circles, calendar routines, presentations, partner work, songs, or repeated classroom phrases. These predictable routines appeared to make speaking more structured and therefore more accessible. In 37 maps, children marked speaking zones as difficult or risky, especially when the activity involved performance, public correction, fast-paced questioning, or fear of making mistakes in front of peers.

A common visual contrast involved larger speech bubbles near playful or familiar routines and smaller, crossed-out, or displaced speech markers near more public speaking spaces. This contrast suggested that children's voices expanded and contracted across classroom situations. Speaking French was not represented as a stable individual ability. It changed with audience, activity, predictability, peer response, sensory load, and the degree of linguistic risk involved.

This finding matters because French immersion makes language part of the occupational environment. Children were not only completing school tasks in a second language. They were navigating how language shaped visibility, competence, risk, play, and belonging. Some maps showed French as an opening, especially in drama, drawing, song, routine phrases, and playful peer exchange. Other maps showed French as a threshold, particularly in public speaking or fast-paced oral activities. For occupational therapists and educators, the implication is that communicative participation should be designed across multiple modes. Speech, gesture, drawing, peer rehearsal, visual supports, predictable routines, and playful language use can all become ways of participating. The maps suggest that voice is not located only inside the child. It is co-produced by the classroom ecology.

Rough Temporalities and Transition Strain

The third construct concerned children's experience of time, pace, and transition. Transition-related motifs appeared in 68 of 118 maps, or 57.6%. These motifs included jagged lines, broken arrows, crowded hallways, compressed spaces, repeated movement paths, intense colouring near doors, and visual markers showing moments when the school day felt rushed, noisy, or disorganized.

Transitions were often represented as places where participation became fragile. Children marked movement between classroom and hallway, carpet and desk, recess and learning time, French oral work and written work, or whole-class instruction and small-group activity. In 49 maps, the most difficult transitions were associated with noise, speed, lining up, lost materials, or uncertainty about what came next. In 19 maps, children used broken arrows or jagged lines to show transition strain. In one reconstructed example, a jagged route connected the desk area to the carpet, with visual intensity clustered around the moment of movement. The child's explanation referred to the transition as "too fast" and "too loud." The map and micro-narrative together suggested that the difficulty was not located only in the child, but in the pace, sound level, and organizational demands of the transition. These marks often appeared around doors, corridors, cubbies, carpet areas, or shifts between activities.

A recurring map pattern showed smoother lines around predictable classroom activities and broken or angular marks around movement between spaces. This visual contrast suggested that children were not simply resisting instructions or routines. The transition itself had become an occupational demand. It required children to reorganize attention, body movement, materials, language, social expectations, and emotional regulation at the same time.

Across the maps, rough temporality was not only about time management. It was about the fit between classroom rhythm and children's capacity to organize their bodies, materials, attention, language, and emotions. For some children, transitions appeared to interrupt regulation. For others, they intensified organizational demands or made social expectations harder to read. These findings suggest that inclusive classroom design must attend to rhythm as much as space. Predictable sequences, visual schedules, transition warnings, slower movement routines, material organization supports, and quiet re-entry moments may help children remain occupationally engaged. The maps made visible that time can include or exclude. A classroom can be welcoming in space, yet difficult in pace.

Cartographic Agency and Child-Led Redesign

The fourth construct concerned children's use of maps to redesign their classroom worlds. Redesign motifs appeared in 51 of 118 maps, or 43.2%. These included renamed spaces, added symbols, proposed quiet areas, alternative routes, requests for help zones, changes to seating, imagined calming spaces, modified group arrangements, or visual markers showing what children wished adults would notice.

These features were important because they showed that children were not merely reporting barriers. They were also interpreting and reworking their environments. In 33 maps, children proposed changes to physical space, such as quieter corners, more room to move, clearer places for materials, flexible seating, individual work zones, or reduced crowding. In 14 maps, proposed changes were relational, including help from a teacher, a different peer pairing, a calmer group arrangement, or more time before speaking. In 4 maps, children created new names or symbols for places, which suggested ownership, imagination, and agency.

A common redesign pattern involved a proposed quiet area, a help zone, a more organized route, or a changed seating arrangement. These suggestions were often modest, but occupation-focused. They did not require a complete transformation of the classroom. Instead, they pointed to small environmental adjustments that could make participation more possible. In this sense, children's maps did more than identify problems. They offered design cues.

This construct reframes children as contributors to inclusive design rather than only recipients of support. Their maps showed knowledge of classroom flow, peer dynamics, sensory strain, language risk, transition pressure, and places of competence. Some proposed changes were practical and immediately actionable. Others were imaginative, but still analytically valuable because they revealed what children experienced as missing. For school-based occupational therapy, this is a significant finding. Participatory mapping can function not only as a research method, but also as a collaborative practice tool. It can help occupational therapists and teachers identify where small environmental changes might support participation, regulation, communication, and belonging.

Taken together, the four constructs show that children mapped inclusion as an everyday occupational condition rather than a static placement. Refuge spaces showed where regulation could be restored. Voice gradients revealed how communication shifted across second-language situations. Rough temporalities exposed transitions as moments of occupational strain. Cartographic agency showed children's capacity to imagine and propose more supportive classroom arrangements. Across the corpus, the maps suggested that belonging was not located in one place or one intervention. It emerged through the fit between classroom spaces, rhythms, relationships, language demands, and children's own ways of making meaning.

Discussion

This study examined how children in inclusive French immersion classrooms used participatory maps to represent the everyday conditions of occupational participation. Across 118 usable maps from six Grade 2 and Grade 3 classrooms, children did not portray inclusion as a fixed state or as simple classroom placement. They mapped it as a shifting relationship among spaces, rhythms, language, sensory demands, and people. The four constructs developed in this study, refuge and regulated participation, voice gradients in a second-language ecology, rough temporalities and transition strain, and cartographic agency through child-led redesign, show that children's participation is both fragile and designed. It is made possible, or made difficult, in the grain of ordinary classroom life.

The first contribution of this study is methodological and conceptual. Children's maps changed what could be seen. Adult-centred accounts of inclusion often begin with services, diagnoses, accommodations, or observed behaviours. These forms of knowledge remain essential, but they can miss how children experience participation from inside the school day. The maps revealed thresholds that may otherwise remain small or invisible. A quiet corner, a crowded doorway, a speech bubble, a broken arrow, or a proposed help zone became evidence of how children understood the conditions of their own participation. In this sense, participatory mapping extended the occupational therapy concern with person, occupation, and environment by giving children a way to show environmental fit from their own perspective (Law et al., 1996; Polatajko et al., 2007). The frequency of refuge spaces was especially revealing. Refuge appeared in 54 of 118 maps, with 36 maps linking refuge primarily to sensory regulation and 18 linking it to relational support. These findings suggest that refuge should not be understood as escape from participation. In many maps, refuge functioned as a return route. Children marked spaces where the body could settle, where noise could recede, where adult or peer support could be accessed, and where the school day could become manageable again. This finding aligns with occupational justice perspectives that frame participation not only as access to activities, but as meaningful access to conditions that support dignity, agency, and belonging (Hammell, 2015; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). A child who needs a calm place is not outside inclusion. The calm place may be what allows inclusion to hold.

The maps also complicated the meaning of classroom behaviour. Transition-related motifs appeared in 68 maps, while 49 maps connected difficult transitions to noise, speed, lining up, lost materials, or uncertainty. These patterns suggest that moments often interpreted as behavioural difficulty may also be moments of occupational overload. Transitions required children to reorganize attention, language, body movement, materials, sensory input, and social expectations at once. In this light, a jagged arrow or crowded hallway was not merely a drawing of movement. It was a visual account of temporal strain. Occupational participation, then, is shaped not only by where activities occur, but by how quickly children are expected to move between them.

The second contribution concerns French immersion as an occupational ecology. In this study, language was not a background variable. It was part of the environment children inhabited. Voice or silence markers appeared in 82 maps, making communication the most frequently coded motif in the corpus. Children represented speaking French as uneven, situated, and relational. In 45 maps, oral French was associated with predictable group routines or classroom speaking spaces. In 37 maps, speaking zones were

marked as difficult or risky. This contrast suggests that the same language environment can enable and constrain participation depending on rhythm, audience, task structure, and emotional safety.

This finding adds nuance to discussions of inclusion in French immersion. Language learning is often treated as an academic issue, but the maps show that it is also an occupational issue. Speaking, listening, waiting, repeating, gesturing, rehearsing, and remaining silent are all forms of classroom participation. For children with learning difficulties, ADHD, autism, or social-emotional support needs, French immersion may create both openings and thresholds. Predictable routines, songs, visual prompts, partner rehearsal, and playful language use can make oral participation safer. Public performance, rapid questioning, correction in front of peers, or unclear expectations can make the same participation precarious. The maps therefore invite occupational therapists and educators to treat language as part of environmental design.

This has theoretical significance. If participation is co-produced by children and environments, then linguistic environments must be included in occupational analysis. French immersion classrooms are not simply classrooms where another language is used. They are bilingual participation systems where competence, hesitation, peer recognition, and self-expression are continuously negotiated. This is especially relevant in early elementary grades, where children are still developing executive functioning, literacy, emotional regulation, peer confidence, and second-language expression at the same time. The maps show that voice is not located only inside the child. It expands or contracts according to the social and sensory conditions that surround it.

The third contribution is practical. The findings suggest that participatory mapping can support collaboration between occupational therapists, teachers, and school teams. Recent Canadian work on occupational therapist-teacher collaboration in inclusive education has emphasized the importance of shared practices, contextual understanding, and collaborative relationships in school settings (Ianni et al., 2025). The present study extends this conversation by adding children's visual knowledge to the collaborative process. If occupational therapists and teachers are to design inclusive environments together, children's own maps can help identify where that design work should begin. Several implications follow. First, refuge spaces should be planned as legitimate participation supports rather than improvised retreats. These spaces may include cocoon corners, visual boundaries, quieter seating, headphones, predictable access to adult support, or small re-entry routines. Their purpose should not be to remove children from classroom life, but to help them remain connected to it. Second, transition routines deserve occupational attention. Visual schedules, slower pacing, preview cues, material organization supports, hallway routines, and calm re-entry moments may reduce the strain that appeared so often in children's maps. Third, communicative participation in French immersion should be multimodal. Children may need gesture, drawing, rehearsed phrases, peer modelling, visual vocabulary, predictable oral routines, and low-risk speaking opportunities before public speech becomes accessible.

Fourth, children's redesign proposals should be treated as actionable data. Redesign motifs appeared in 51 maps. Physical redesign appeared in 33 maps, relational redesign in 14, and renamed spaces or invented symbols in 4. These proposals were often modest, but they carried practical intelligence. Children asked for quieter areas, clearer routes, more organized materials, different seating, help zones, or altered peer arrangements. Such suggestions can guide classroom-based consultation. They can also help occupational therapists move from individualized recommendations toward ecological interventions that benefit the whole class. This does not mean that participatory mapping replaces standardized assessment, teacher observation, family consultation, or clinical reasoning. Rather, it adds a child-authored layer that can sharpen them. A map can make visible what an observation only hints at. It can show where a transition breaks, where voice disappears, where support gathers, or where the child imagines a more workable classroom. Used thoughtfully, participatory mapping may become both a research method and a practice tool for school-based occupational therapy.

Overall, the study suggests that belonging is not delivered through inclusion policy alone. It is negotiated through classroom ecologies that can be seen, adjusted, and redesigned. Children's maps remind occupational therapists and educators that participation is not only a matter of access to activities. It is a matter of fit, timing, language, sensory safety, relational trust, and agency. When children are invited to map their school day, they do more than describe where they are. They show adults where inclusion begins to work, where it frays, and where it might be redrawn.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the corpus was drawn from two French immersion schools in one Canadian city and from six Grade 2 and Grade 3 classrooms. Although the sample included whole classroom communities and a substantial number of usable maps, the findings remain situated in a specific educational, linguistic, and provincial context. French immersion programs vary across Canada in their histories, resources, staffing models, language policies, and approaches to inclusion. The patterns identified here should therefore be understood as transferable insights rather than generalizable conclusions.

Second, children's maps provide access to situated representations of participation, not objective measures of classroom participation. A map can show what a child noticed, felt, emphasized, avoided, or wished to change. It cannot, on its own, measure frequency of participation, academic achievement, clinical functioning, or the full complexity of classroom interaction. For this reason, the maps were interpreted alongside micro-narratives and field notes, and the findings are presented as visual and occupational patterns rather than as behavioural measures.

Third, the support profiles represented in the participating classrooms were not evenly distributed and were not mutually exclusive. Some children had more than one identified support need, while others had no formal designation but still represented stress, silence, refuge, or redesign in their maps. This overlap reflects the reality of inclusive classrooms, but it limits any attempt to attribute specific map patterns to specific diagnoses or categories of need.

Finally, the descriptive frequencies used in the findings were intended to strengthen analytic transparency, not to support statistical inference. Counts such as refuge spaces, voice markers, transition strain, and redesign motifs indicate recurrence across the visual corpus, but they do not establish causal relationships.

These limitations are also part of the study's value. The corpus is ecological, visual, and situated. It shows how children in real classrooms represent the ordinary conditions through which participation becomes possible, difficult, or open to redesign.

Conclusion

This study shows that children's participatory maps can reveal dimensions of school participation that often remain difficult to see through adult-centred accounts alone. Across 118 usable maps from inclusive French immersion classrooms, children represented participation as spatial, temporal, relational, sensory, and linguistic. They identified refuge spaces, marked gradients of voice and silence, traced transition strain, and proposed concrete ways to redesign classroom life. For school-based occupational therapy, these findings suggest that inclusion should be understood not only as placement or support, but as the ongoing design of environments where children can regulate, communicate, move, learn, and belong. Participatory mapping offers a practical and child-centred tool for collaboration among occupational therapists, teachers, school teams, and children themselves. It can help identify small environmental adjustments with meaningful occupational consequences.

The study also positions language as part of the occupational environment in French immersion, shaping access to participation in ways that are both enabling and demanding. Children are not only beneficiaries of inclusion. They are cartographers of its possible conditions.

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