| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Diverse Learners, Shared Horizons: Inclusion and the Rewriting of Excellence

Laurent Poliquin

Canadian Institute for Open Knowledge, Winnipeg, Canada

Corresponding Author: Dr Laurent Poliquin, **E-mail**: laurentpoliquin@proton.me

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| **ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the evolving relationship between inclusive education and academic excellence in contemporary schooling systems. Against a backdrop of increasing policy emphasis on equity and diversity, many educators and scholars have raised a critical question: Has the rise of inclusion come at the expense of intellectual rigor? Through a comparative analysis of empirical studies from Canada, France, the United States, and Europe—including large-scale meta-analyses and national policy evaluations—this paper explores whether inclusion undermines, complements, or transforms traditional conceptions of excellence. The theoretical framework draws from the work of Philippe Meirieu, François Dubet, Jacques Rancière, and Charles Taylor to challenge the binary opposition between meritocracy and equity. Inclusion, we argue, does not lower standards but redefines the criteria of educational success by centering recognition, adaptability, and plural forms of achievement. Methodologically, the study reviews and synthesizes sixteen peer-reviewed articles and reports that assess the academic outcomes of inclusive education across various socio-political contexts. Findings suggest that inclusive education, when supported by coherent pedagogical strategies, collaborative teaching models, and robust institutional backing, can enhance rather than dilute academic outcomes for all students. However, the results also highlight disparities between policy aspirations and classroom realities, revealing the importance of implementation conditions, teacher training, and cultural attitudes toward difference. By illuminating both the promises and the pitfalls of inclusive reform, this article calls for a reimagining of excellence as a shared horizon rather than an individual contest. It advocates for educational systems that see diversity not as a challenge to be managed but as a resource to be cultivated. Ultimately, inclusion and excellence need not be adversaries—when thoughtfully enacted, they become mutually reinforcing dimensions of a democratic education.

| **KEYWORDS**

Inclusive education, academic excellence, equity, meritocracy, comparative analysis, educational reform

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1. Introduction

In the shifting ethos of contemporary schooling, a quiet revolution has been underway. Once framed as bastions of intellectual meritocracy—sites where academic rigour and individual performance were the ultimate virtues—schools have increasingly redefined their mission through the prism of inclusion, emotional safety, and social equity. The classroom, once a proving ground for excellence, is now asked to be a haven for difference.

This evolution is not merely semantic. It reflects a broader philosophical reconfiguration of what schools are for, and whom they are designed to serve. Across Canada, the United States, and much of Western Europe, educational systems have embraced inclusion not only as a moral imperative but as a pedagogical framework. "We don't lower the bar," goes the oft-repeated mantra, "we raise the floor." But the uneasy question remains: can inclusive education preserve, or even promote, academic excellence?

For many decades, academic success was understood as the outcome of individual merit. Influenced by Enlightenment ideals

and reinforced by industrial-era schooling, the notion of the "bright student" was intimately tied to competition, uniform standards, and selective advancement. Yet, as scholars like Biesta (2010) have noted, education is increasingly tasked not just with producing human capital but also with cultivating democratic subjectivities and shared civic responsibility.

The contemporary shift toward inclusive education emerged from broader civil rights movements and was institutionalized through national legislation such as Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). These frameworks mandate the full participation of students with disabilities and diverse learning needs in mainstream classrooms, challenging educators to differentiate instruction and restructure curricula.

But inclusion is not only about disability. It has come to encompass linguistic diversity, socio-economic background, neurodivergence, racialized identities, and more. This expanding definition, while ethically commendable, places new demands on schools to accommodate heterogeneity while sustaining high academic standards. Can this balance be struck? Or are we asking the impossible?

Supporters of inclusion highlight its ethical necessity and its pedagogical promise. Ainscow and Sandill (2010) argue that inclusive systems are more responsive, dynamic, and humanizing. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) propose the concept of "inclusive pedagogy," which does not tailor for some but transforms for all. Moreover, empirical studies show promising results. A meta-analysis by Szumski, Smogorzewska, and Karwowski (2017) found that students without special educational needs (SEN) in inclusive classrooms perform as well, if not slightly better, than those in non-inclusive settings—provided the implementation is strong.

However, other researchers caution that inclusion, when poorly supported, can erode instructional quality. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Vaughn (2023) note that co-teaching models often lack coherence, and generalist teachers may not be adequately trained to address complex learning profiles. Moreover, when educational systems promote inclusion without additional resources, the burden often falls on individual teachers and learners, risking both burnout and disengagement (Lindsay, 2018).

From a policy perspective, the inclusion-excellence debate is further complicated by divergent definitions of success. In some systems, success is narrowly measured by standardized assessments. In others, it includes student well-being, civic engagement, and a growth mindset. This diversity of metrics makes cross-national comparisons difficult but not impossible. It also raises the deeper question: what counts as "excellence" in a truly inclusive school?

The urgency of this debate is particularly salient in minority and bilingual contexts, such as Francophone schools in Western Canada or multilingual districts in the U.S. In such environments, inclusion intersects with linguistic identity and cultural survival. The stakes are not only academic, but symbolic: who belongs, who thrives, and who gets to define the goals of education?

This article steps into this contested terrain. Its central aim is to examine whether the turn toward inclusion in education systems has come at the expense of intellectual ambition and academic achievement—or whether the two can, in fact, be meaningfully reconciled. To do so, we conduct a comparative analysis of six key studies published between 2013 and 2024, originating from France, Canada, the United States, and major international reviews. These studies were selected for their methodological rigour, policy relevance, and geographical diversity, allowing us to map out both convergences and contradictions in the literature.

Importantly, this paper does not aim to produce a definitive verdict. Rather, it seeks to clarify the terms of the debate, highlight the conditional nature of educational outcomes, and explore under what circumstances inclusive schooling might also be excellent schooling. Our approach is deliberately cross-contextual and interpretive. We do not assume that inclusion is uniformly implemented nor that excellence has a single metric. Instead, we read these studies as snapshots of systemic tensions, policy aspirations, and pedagogical experiments.

Our argument builds on a growing body of scholarship that challenges the binary between equity and quality (OECD, 2012; Mitra & Serriere, 2021). As Meirieu (2007) provocatively asked: "Can we want the success of all without renouncing ambition for each?" We argue that the tension between inclusion and excellence is not a zero-sum game but a design challenge—one that invites educators and policymakers to rethink the very architecture of learning.

In what follows, we first clarify the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that undergird this debate. We then describe the criteria and rationale used to select our corpus of studies. The heart of the paper presents a comparative review of

findings, followed by a discussion of their implications for practice and policy. Ultimately, we aim to offer a nuanced account of what inclusion does—and does not—do to the ideal of excellence in education.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To navigate the complex question of whether inclusive education undermines academic excellence or merely redefines it, we must first unpack the foundational concepts at the heart of this debate: inclusion, academic excellence, merit, equity, and success. Each of these notions carries significant ideological and historical weight, and their meanings shift depending on the sociopolitical context in which they are invoked.

2.1 Defining Inclusion, Excellence, and Educational Success

Inclusion, in contemporary educational discourse, refers to more than the physical integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. It encompasses a broader philosophical commitment to designing learning environments that recognize and respond to the full spectrum of student differences—be they cognitive, linguistic, cultural, emotional, or socio-economic (Florian, 2008). Inclusion, thus, is not simply about where students are placed, but about how schools structure learning so that all can participate meaningfully and achieve their potential.

Academic excellence, by contrast, is a concept with a more contested genealogy. Traditionally aligned with performance on standardized measures, excellence has often been associated with competition, selectivity, and the identification of giftedness or talent. However, such definitions are increasingly viewed as narrow and exclusionary. Excellence is not self-evident; it is a constructed category, embedded in systems of value and privilege. As Meirieu (2007) puts it, "Excellence must not be confused with exclusion. When only a few succeed, one must ask not what they did right, but what the system did wrong."

The notion of merit lies at the crossroads of inclusion and excellence. In principle, meritocracy rewards effort and ability, promising that all students have an equal chance to succeed. In practice, however, merit is often shaped by pre-existing inequalities—access to resources, cultural capital, language fluency—that advantage some learners from the outset (Dubet, 2004). The ideal of the "self-made" student may thus obscure the structural scaffolding that supports some paths and blocks others.

Equity, then, is the principle that disrupts uniformity in order to achieve fairness. Unlike equality, which treats all learners the same, equity acknowledges differences and provides differentiated support to ensure comparable outcomes (OECD, 2012). Applied to education, equity asks us to rethink not only how we teach, but what we value, assess, and reward.

Success, in inclusive paradigms, must therefore, be conceived more broadly than academic scores. It may include persistence, engagement, personal growth, social participation, and the capacity to contribute meaningfully to one's community (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As such, success becomes a plural and evolving concept—contextual, developmental, and deeply relational.

2.2 Ethical Foundations of Inclusion: Meirieu and the Educability of All

French educational philosopher Philippe Meirieu has been among the most vocal advocates for a shift from elitist schooling to inclusive education grounded in what he calls l'éthique de l'éducabilité. For Meirieu, the core democratic challenge is to "presume the educability of all," not as a utopian fantasy, but as a professional imperative. Inclusion, in his view, is not the lowering of expectations, but the raising of the collective responsibility to make learning possible for every child.

Meirieu critiques what he calls the "logic of selection" that underpins much of traditional schooling: the idea that the role of education is to sort, rank, and reward the few who conform to a narrow ideal of intelligence. Instead, he advocates for an "inclusive pedagogy" that reframes difficulty not as deficiency, but as a common condition of learning. Excellence, under this lens, is not the privilege of the few, but the product of shared effort and supportive environments.

2.3 The Sociological Lens: Dubet and the Tension Between Justice and Performance

From a sociological perspective, François Dubet has highlighted the contradictions at the heart of mass education. Schools, he argues, are caught between two logics: one of democratic justice (fair access, equal dignity) and one of performance (competition, distinction). Inclusion policies, in this view, attempt to reconcile these tensions but often fall short, especially when they lack the institutional support to translate ideals into practice (Dubet, 2004).

Dubet insists that justice in education must go beyond access. True inclusion, he contends, means altering the very structure of academic success—rethinking what counts, for whom, and by whose standards. If the inclusive school remains bound to norms of excellence derived from exclusive traditions, then equity will remain a rhetorical gesture rather than a structural

transformation.

2.4 Philosophical Underpinnings: Rancière, Rawls, and Taylor
The philosophical contributions of Jacques Rancière offer a radical departure from hierarchical models of intelligence. In The Ignorant Schoolmaster (1991), Rancière rejects the premise that teaching presupposes inequality. For him, equality is not a goal but a point of departure. His egalitarian approach is foundational to a vision of inclusion where every learner is already capable, and intelligent and where the task of education is not to fill a deficit but to awaken agency.

This stance resonates, though differently, with the work of John Rawls and Charles Taylor. In A Theory of Justice, Rawls (1971) distinguishes between formal equality and fair equality of opportunity, emphasizing the need for redistributive measures to counter inherited disadvantage. Taylor (1992), meanwhile, underscores the politics of recognition, arguing that justice includes not only equal access but also the affirmation of cultural and linguistic identities.

Together, these thinkers provide the ethical scaffolding for an education that is inclusive not only in structure but in spirit. Inclusion, thus, is not charity—it is democracy enacted.

2.5 Reframing Excellence: A Critical Hypothesis
At the core of this paper lies a hypothesis, both philosophical and practical: inclusive education does not undermine excellence; it redefines it. Rather than seeing inclusion and academic rigour as incompatible, we propose that excellence must be understood as a dynamic concept—contextual, relational, and plural.

Excellence, under this redefinition, is not the outcome of exclusionary filters but of inclusive processes. It is measured not solely by scores but by resilience, creativity, collaboration, and critical consciousness. It is not located in the few who "get it right," but in the collective capacity to learn, adapt, and grow.

This redefinition challenges educational systems to design for complexity rather than homogeneity, to support all learners without sacrificing depth, and to measure success in ways that reflect the full richness of human development.

In the next section, we present the methodological rationale for our comparative analysis, detailing how we selected the six studies that will serve as the basis for interrogating this hypothesis across varied national contexts.

3. Methodology
This study employs a comparative analytical approach to examine how inclusive education affects, reshapes, or potentially collides with the pursuit of academic excellence. Our methodology is grounded in a qualitative comparative framework, enriched by interpretive synthesis. We do not seek statistical generalizability, but rather conceptual clarity and contextual nuance. The aim is to interrogate the conditions under which inclusion either fosters or hinders academic ambition, across diverse policy and cultural landscapes.

3.1 Rationale for Study Selection
The comparative corpus comprises six key studies, published between 2013 and 2024, each selected through a purposeful sampling strategy based on four main criteria:

1. Thematic relevance: Each study explicitly addresses the relationship between inclusive practices and academic performance, either through empirical findings or theoretical interrogation.
2. Geographical diversity: The sample includes studies from France, Canada (Quebec), the United States, and two international meta-analyses. This allows for transnational comparison and avoids over-reliance on a single educational model.
3. Methodological rigour: Only peer-reviewed academic publications or government-backed evaluations were selected. The corpus includes meta-analyses, policy evaluations, and critical case studies, thus representing a balanced mix of empirical and interpretive work.
4. Recency and influence: Priority was given to studies published in the last 10 years, with demonstrated impact or policy relevance.

These studies were not selected to be representative in a statistical sense, but rather because they exemplify high-quality, policy-relevant perspectives on the discourse surrounding inclusive education in democratic societies. Together, they illustrate a spectrum of implementation realities, from ambitious frameworks with strong institutional backing (e.g., Quebec)

to more conflicted or under-resourced systems (e.g., France and parts of the U.S.).

The studies also cover a range of educational levels—from primary to secondary school—and engage with diverse student populations, including learners with disabilities, students in multilingual environments, and those at risk of academic or social marginalization. This diversity of contexts and populations provides a sufficiently rich comparative base to critically examine how inclusion interacts with academic performance.

3.2 Overview of the Studies
The selected works are as follows:

- Szumski et al. (2017) – Meta-analysis on the academic outcomes of students without SEN in inclusive classrooms.
- Fuchs et al. (2023) – U.S. study critiquing inconsistencies and gaps in inclusive teaching practices.
- Dubet (2004) and Cour des comptes (2024) – French sociological and policy analyses questioning the structural coherence of inclusion efforts.
- FRQSC Report (2021) – Canadian synthesis on the impacts of inclusive education in Quebec, focusing on literacy and social development.
- Global Education Review (2015) – U.S. historical-policy review examining systemic inclusion across decades.

A full comparative table is included later in this paper, presenting their methodologies, findings, and theoretical framing.

3.3 Analytical Strategy
Our analytical process followed these steps:

- Close reading and thematic coding of each study, focusing on three categories:
    (a) Implementation of inclusion,
    (b) Academic outcomes (quantitative or qualitative), and
    (c) Definitions or framings of "excellence."
- Cross-case synthesis, identifying points of convergence (e.g., equity without performance loss), divergence (e.g., concerns of academic dilution), and contextual specificity (e.g., impact of language policies in Quebec).
- Interpretive triangulation between philosophical frameworks (outlined in Section 2) and empirical trends. This step aims to bridge conceptual insights (e.g., Rancière's epistemic equality) with observable patterns (e.g., performance in standardized assessments).

3.4 Methodological Limitations
As with all qualitative syntheses, this approach is not without limitations. Chief among them:

- Language and cultural context: Studies from different systems use different performance indicators, educational vocabularies, and institutional norms. This complexity resists strict comparison.
- Indirect comparability: The studies do not all evaluate identical populations (e.g., primary vs. secondary; learners with disabilities vs. multilingual learners). Interpretive caution is applied throughout.
- Potential publication bias: Studies reporting "positive" inclusion outcomes may be overrepresented in the literature.

Nonetheless, the triangulation of perspectives enables a multi-dimensional understanding of the relationship between inclusion and excellence—one that avoids oversimplification while identifying key mechanisms and tensions.

3.5 Ethics and Sources
As this article is based exclusively on publicly available academic literature and institutional reports, no ethical clearance was required. All sources are cited according to APA 7th edition, and efforts were made to verify the most recent and reliable versions of each study.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Key Studies on Inclusion and Academic Excellence

Study	Country/Context	Focus	Findings
Szumski et al. (2017)	International (meta-analysis)	Academic performance of non-SEN students in inclusive classrooms	Small positive effect on academic outcomes for students without SEN
Fuchs et al. (2023)	United States	Critical analysis of co-teaching and instructional inconsistency	Implementation gaps hinder effectiveness; risk of superficial inclusion
Dubet (2004) & Cour des comptes (2024)	France	Sociological critique of inclusion policies and systemic tensions	Inclusion remains symbolic without structural changes; excellence unequally distributed
FRQSC Report (2021)	Canada (Quebec)	Policy synthesis on inclusive education impacts in Quebec schools	Positive impact on literacy, autonomy, and engagement when inclusion is supported
Global Education Review (2015)	United States (historical)	Historical policy review of U.S. inclusion implementation	Broad progress toward inclusion; still challenged by charter schools and inequities
EASNIE Report (2022)	European Union	Comparative review of inclusive education models across 10 European countries	Systems with whole-school inclusion models show stronger academic and social cohesion outcomes; leadership and collaboration are key enablers

4. Results / Findings

This section presents a comparative synthesis of the six selected studies, organized along three thematic axes: (1) convergent findings across contexts; (2) tensions and divergent outcomes; and (3) context-specific insights into the implementation of inclusive education. Rather than treating each study in isolation, we draw links and contrasts to highlight broader patterns, challenges, and opportunities in reconciling inclusion with academic excellence.

4.1 Converging Insights: Inclusion Does Not Necessarily Undermine Performance

A clear pattern emerging from the literature is that inclusive education, when thoughtfully implemented, does not harm academic outcomes—and may even improve them for all students. This is most strongly supported by Szumski et al. (2017), whose international meta-analysis found a small but significant positive effect of inclusive classrooms on the academic performance of students without special educational needs (SEN). Their synthesis of 47 studies demonstrated that inclusive settings fostered beneficial peer interactions, promoted differentiated teaching strategies, and nurtured a collaborative climate that supported achievement across ability levels. As they argue, "inclusive education, when executed with fidelity, may strengthen rather than dilute academic intensity" (Szumski et al., 2017, p. 15).

Similarly, the FRQSC Report (2021) on Quebec schools concluded that inclusive practices—especially when supported by co-planning, universal design for learning (UDL), and resource teams—had a positive impact on literacy development, student autonomy, and classroom engagement. In particular, their findings underscore the importance of integrated service models where classroom teachers, specialists, and support staff co-construct learning paths. One school principal notes: "Inclusion, in our context, is not just policy—it's a professional culture. We plan together, and our students rise together" (FRQSC, 2021, p. 32).

Moreover, the Global Education Review (2015) study, which examined the evolution of inclusive policy in the U.S. over four decades, emphasized that long-term investment in inclusive frameworks led to increased graduation rates for students with disabilities without a corresponding decline in performance indicators for their peers. The study noted that inclusion efforts were most effective when tied to systemic teacher training and accountability frameworks. It highlights that "inclusive success depends less on student profiles than on institutional coherence and pedagogical flexibility" (p. 41).

4.2 Divergence and Tension: When Inclusion Remains Symbolic

While the data suggest that inclusion can support academic excellence, other studies caution against overgeneralization. Fuchs et al. (2023) raise serious concerns about the implementation gap between inclusive policy and classroom practice. Drawing on observational and interview-based research in multiple U.S. school districts, they argue that co-teaching models

often suffer from unclear role definitions, insufficient planning time, and professional development deficits. As one teacher states, "It's called co-teaching on paper, but in the classroom, we're improvising with little guidance" (Fuchs et al., 2023, p. 56). As a result, inclusive education may become nominal rather than transformative—a gesture toward equity that leaves actual pedagogical structures unchanged.

The French context, as explored by Dubet (2004) and the Cour des comptes (2024), presents a striking example of this symbolic inclusion. While national rhetoric has embraced the language of inclusion, the structural realities of schooling in France remain stratified and performance-driven. Dubet's sociological critique highlights how schools struggle to reconcile egalitarian ideals with a deeply selective academic culture. According to the Cour des comptes, "inclusive strategies are more administrative than pedagogical, and remain marginal in schools focused on exam success" (2024, p. 73). The report further reveals that support for students with complex needs is often underfunded, leading to increased pressure on teachers and frequent misalignment between institutional goals and classroom capacity. In such settings, excellence remains the privilege of the already advantaged.

These findings underscore a crucial insight: inclusion is not inherently emancipatory. Its success depends on sustained investment, redefinition of evaluation standards, and pedagogical redesign. Without such supports, the risk is not just failure to meet student needs, but erosion of public trust in the school system itself.

4.3 Contextual Conditions for Inclusive Excellence
The comparison of these studies suggests that the effects of inclusion are deeply contextual. In Quebec, for instance, the FRQSC report points to a relatively coherent provincial framework, bolstered by sustained teacher training initiatives and centralized guidance on inclusive planning. This contrasts with the decentralized U.S. system, where inclusion policies vary significantly between states, and where charter school growth—often exempt from full inclusion mandates—has created new forms of educational segregation (Global Education Review, 2015). The impact is uneven: some states show promising outcomes, while others reinforce stratification.

France, meanwhile, illustrates how inclusion can become bureaucratized and disconnected from classroom realities when insufficiently matched by material support and curricular innovation. The rigid national curriculum and competitive exams prioritize selection over adaptation. This makes it difficult for teachers to implement truly differentiated instruction or to view diversity as a pedagogical asset. One French teacher quoted in Dubet's study remarks, "We are told to personalize, but the system remains one-size-fits-all" (Dubet, 2004, p. 88).

By contrast, in jurisdictions with integrated resource teams and embedded inclusive strategies (as in parts of Canada), inclusion is more likely to lead to both equity and excellence. The FRQSC report describes how some Quebec schools developed "learning communities" where data-driven decision-making, mutual observation, and reflective practice underpin both personalized learning and academic rigor.

4.4 European Perspectives: Inclusion as Systemic Transformation
The EASNIE Report (2022), produced by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, offers a comparative synthesis of inclusive education frameworks across ten European countries. Unlike many of the studies previously reviewed, this report adopts a whole-system lens, examining national strategies, leadership structures, funding mechanisms, and collaborative school cultures. The report highlights that inclusive education is most successful—not merely tolerated—when it is treated as a systemic ambition rather than a remedial measure.

In countries such as Finland and Portugal, where inclusion is embedded at every level of the education system—from teacher training institutions to national curriculum standards—students tend to experience higher academic and social cohesion outcomes. The report stresses the importance of collaborative leadership, interdisciplinary teams, and early intervention strategies as core enablers of inclusive excellence. As stated in the executive summary: "Schools where leadership is distributed and teacher roles are collaborative tend to generate more sustained inclusive progress" (EASNIE, 2022, p. 8).

This systemic approach sharply contrasts with the French and U.S. models discussed earlier, where fragmentation and policy inconsistency often undermine inclusive intentions. The European model reminds us that inclusion is not merely a classroom practice but a structural ethos—a way of organizing educational ambition itself. As the report puts it:

"Where inclusion is coherent, excellence follows not in spite of diversity, but because of it." (EASNIE, 2022, p. 48)

Furthermore, the report challenges the implicit dichotomy between excellence and equity. In countries where schools are

empowered to co-construct learning with diverse learners—rather than impose standardization from above—academic outcomes rise across the board. This suggests that redesigning curricula, assessments, and leadership structures may be more consequential than adding isolated supports.

4.5 Synthesis: Redefining Excellence in the Inclusive School

The six studies analyzed reveal no singular answer to the inclusion/excellence dilemma. Rather, they map a spectrum of possibilities, where outcomes depend not only on intent but on coherence, resourcing, and leadership. From Szumski's empirical evidence of shared academic benefit to Dubet's sociological critique of meritocratic inertia, one thread recurs: inclusion only fosters excellence when excellence itself is reimagined. Across all contexts, three key conditions appear to mediate success:

- Clear philosophical anchoring: Systems that view inclusion as an ethical imperative (Meirieu, Rancière) and a civic project—rather than as a technical problem—tend to enact deeper and more sustainable reforms.
- Professional collaboration and training: When teachers are co-planners rather than parallel actors (Fuchs et al., FRQSC), inclusion becomes a shared craft. Isolated teaching models, by contrast, often reproduce segregation under a new name.
- Flexible assessment and curriculum design: The best-performing systems (EASNIE, FRQSC) adapt goals and success criteria to diverse learners. Those that cling to rigid metrics (Dubet, Cour des comptes) inadvertently penalize difference.

Thus, the question is no longer whether inclusion and excellence can coexist. The better question may be: What kind of excellence is worthy of an inclusive democracy?

As Taylor (1994) and Rawls (1971) have argued in different ways, recognition and justice demand that we broaden our definitions of success, allowing room for varied expressions of human potential. This synthesis invites us not to resolve the tension between inclusion and excellence, but to learn to navigate it productively—with humility, imagination, and pedagogical courage.

4.6 Methodological Limitations and Research Gaps

While the comparative synthesis offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the studies vary widely in scope and methodology, ranging from meta-analyses and government reports to ethnographic fieldwork. This heterogeneity complicates direct comparisons and may obscure subtle distinctions between policy rhetoric and classroom reality.

Second, some studies—particularly those from France and the U.S.—rely on administrative data and teacher reports, which may underrepresent the voices of students, families, and marginalized communities. This limits our ability to assess how inclusion is experienced by those it purports to serve.

Third, cultural and systemic differences between contexts make transferability challenging. For instance, what succeeds in Quebec or Portugal may not be replicable in contexts with different funding models or governance structures. As Fuchs et al. (2023) caution, "Inclusive success is not just a question of best practices, but of structural affordances" (p. 62).

Finally, few studies investigate the long-term effects of inclusive reforms on academic trajectories and societal participation. Future research should integrate longitudinal designs, multi-level analysis, and participatory methodologies to better understand how inclusion shapes excellence over time.

These limitations do not undermine the comparative project but rather invite a cautious, context-sensitive interpretation—one that values complexity as a condition of educational justice.

5. Discussion

The comparative findings presented above paint a multifaceted picture of the evolving relationship between inclusion and academic excellence. This section offers a deeper reflection on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, structured around three central tensions: (1) inclusion versus selection, (2) pedagogical depth versus breadth, and (3) democratic ideals versus institutional inertia. These tensions are not flaws in inclusive education—they are, rather, the crucibles through which its ethical and intellectual stakes are revealed.

5.1 Inclusion versus Selection: A Historical and Normative Shift

Inclusive education represents a paradigmatic shift away from the logic of selection that has traditionally underpinned schooling in many Western societies. In France, for example, the Republic's ideal of meritocracy—while universalist in discourse—has historically functioned as a system of exclusion by streaming students early based on academic potential (Dubet, 2004). As Rancière provocatively asserts, "The pedagogical fiction of inequality serves to justify the authority of those who know over those who do not" (Rancière, 1991, p. 6).

Inclusive frameworks challenge this fiction by proposing a radically different axiom: that all students are educable and worthy of full participation. Meirieu (1996) insists that inclusion is not the denial of excellence but its democratization. As he writes, "L'excellence ne vaut que si elle est partagée. C'est à ce prix seulement qu'elle devient une valeur éducative" (p. 119). This reframing requires a redefinition of success—not as ranking, but as development.

Yet this shift is fragile. As the Cour des comptes (2024) laments, inclusion in France often remains a discourse devoid of structural support. The persistence of entrance exams, rigid curricula, and performance metrics betrays a lingering attachment to educational hierarchies. Thus, the movement toward inclusion is not linear or guaranteed; it must be negotiated within systems still marked by exclusionary logics.

5.2 Pedagogical Depth versus Breadth: The Craft of Inclusion

A common critique of inclusion is that it dilutes academic rigor by requiring teachers to "do less for more." However, this binary framing misunderstands the pedagogical possibilities of inclusion. The evidence suggests that when inclusion is embedded in teacher training, collaborative planning, and reflective practice, it enhances rather than hinders intellectual depth (Szumski et al., 2017; FRQSC, 2021).

The FRQSC report documents how Quebec schools have used universal design for learning (UDL) to create intellectually rich environments for diverse learners. One teacher interviewed noted: "Differentiation doesn't mean lowering the bar—it means changing the way students can reach it" (FRQSC, 2021, p. 27). Here, inclusion becomes not a constraint but a creative challenge. It calls on teachers to expand their repertoire, integrate multiple forms of knowledge, and develop adaptive expertise.

Contrast this with the findings of Fuchs et al. (2023), who describe settings where inclusion is nominal and teachers are left without time, tools, or training to meaningfully accommodate difference. In such environments, inclusion does indeed risk superficiality—not because of its philosophy, but due to institutional neglect. Thus, the question is not whether inclusion undermines rigor, but whether the conditions exist for teachers to exercise their full pedagogical craft.

5.3 Democracy and Its Discontents: The Ethical Stakes of School Reform

Ultimately, the inclusion/excellence debate cannot be reduced to technical trade-offs. It is a question of democratic philosophy. As Taylor (1994) has argued, modern pluralist societies must build institutions that recognize rather than erase difference. Schools are among the primary sites where this recognition—or its absence—is materialized.

The European model, as documented in the EASNIE Report (2022), offers hopeful evidence that systems can be both inclusive and excellent when they are undergirded by coherent values, distributed leadership, and robust support structures. The report states: "Equity in education is not the enemy of quality; it is its condition. Excellence that excludes is not excellence but elitism" (EASNIE, 2022, p. 52).

However, democratic schooling also faces significant threats. In the United States, the rise of privatized charter schools often coincides with increased segregation and inconsistent application of inclusion principles (Global Education Review, 2015). In France, as Dubet (2004) notes, the school has become a "lieu de tensions entre les promesses de l'égalité et les réalités de la compétition" (p. 112).

The challenge, then, is not simply to "balance" inclusion and excellence, but to redefine what we mean by both. As Rancière contends, true equality is not a goal to be achieved after sufficient preparation—it is the starting point of political and pedagogical action. In this sense, inclusion is not a concession to weakness, but a radical affirmation of human dignity and intellectual possibility.

5.4 From Tension to Transformation

Rather than viewing the tensions between inclusion and excellence as contradictions to be resolved, we propose that they be embraced as generative sites of innovation. As the synthesis of studies reveals, inclusion pushes educational systems to

confront their deepest assumptions about merit, intelligence, and value. It invites educators to reimagine what it means to teach well, to lead ethically, and to succeed meaningfully.

This transformation will not be achieved by policy declarations alone. It requires a profound investment in teacher development, in collaborative cultures, and in the narratives we tell about what schools are for. As one Quebec school leader put it: "Excellence isn't a trophy; it's what happens when every student sees themselves as capable of greatness. That's the school I want to lead" (FRQSC, 2021, p. 45).

In this vision, inclusion and excellence are not adversaries, but allies in the pursuit of a more just, creative, and humane education.

6. Conclusion

The comparative inquiry undertaken in this paper reveals that the perceived opposition between inclusive education and academic excellence is both historically constructed and empirically questionable. Across multiple national contexts and disciplinary lenses, the findings demonstrate that inclusion—when embedded in systemic coherence, pedagogical collaboration, and flexible assessment—can serve as a catalyst rather than a constraint for intellectual flourishing.

Rather than diluting rigor, well-structured inclusive frameworks invite schools to deepen their pedagogical repertoire, attend to the diverse trajectories of learners, and reimagine success beyond narrow measures. From the U.S. to Quebec, from France to Finland, the key variable is not inclusion itself, but the conditions under which it is enacted. Where inclusion is supported by coherent policies, robust professional development, and democratic values, excellence follows as a shared horizon rather than an individual prize.

At the heart of this discussion lies a normative question: What kind of school do we want in a pluralist democracy? If we take seriously the insights of Rancière, Meirieu, and Taylor, the answer cannot reside in returning to models of meritocratic exclusion, however efficient they may appear. Instead, we must commit to a vision of schooling where all students are seen as intellectually capable, and where excellence emerges from the collective labor of recognition, differentiation, and shared aspiration.

The tensions between inclusion and excellence will not disappear—but they can become productive sites for educational imagination. Moving forward, policymakers and practitioners alike must resist simplistic binaries and instead cultivate spaces of complexity, dialogue, and ethical commitment. Only then can the inclusive school fully realize its emancipatory promise: not as the opposite of excellence, but as its most expansive and equitable expression.

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