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Listening to Students with Learning Difficulties: Student Voice, Participation, and Recommendations for Inclusive Practice in Primary Education

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Abstract

Inclusive education (IE) aims to promote meaningful participation and a sense of belonging for all learners. However, limited research has examined how students with learning difficulties (LDs) experience inclusion in everyday school life. This study explored how primary school students with mild LDs perceive their participation, relationships with teachers and peers, and the role of inclusive classes (ICs) within mainstream Greek primary education. A qualitative design was adopted, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten Grade 6 students receiving support through ICs. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicated that participation was associated with perceived competence in academic tasks, with language-based activities frequently described as cognitively demanding and stressful. Belonging was predominantly felt through peer acceptance and supportive teacher practices rather than solely through classroom placement. The ICs were perceived as providing individualized support and emotional safety, although some ambivalence regarding withdrawal from the mainstream classroom was reported. Students stressed the need for flexible assessment and clearer instructional guidance to enhance fairness and participation. Overall, the findings show that inclusion is experienced as a dynamic interaction between academic accessibility, interpersonal relationships, and supportive learning environments. They also underline the importance of incorporating student voice into inclusive practice.

Keywords: inclusive education (IE); student voice; learning difficulties (LDs); inclusive classes (ICs); primary education; participation; sense of belonging; qualitative research; thematic analysis; Greece

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1. Introduction

Learning difficulties (LDs) refer to persistent challenges in acquiring foundational academic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics, despite average or above-average intelligence and adequate educational opportunities (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Manchester & Roberts, 2024; Zhang et al., 2018). They encompass a heterogeneous range of specific learning difficulties, including dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, and are generally understood as neurodevelopmental in nature (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Although LDs may co-occur with emotional, motivational, or other developmental difficulties, they are not primarily caused by such factors. International estimates suggest that between 10% and 15% of school-aged children experience some form of LDs, highlighting the educational significance of this population (Manchester & Roberts, 2024; Zhang et al., 2018).

Within the Greek educational context, the term LDs is commonly used to refer to specific learning difficulties affecting literacy, written expression, and mathematical performance, particularly dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, as recognized through school-based and multidisciplinary assessment procedures (Anastasiou & Polychronopoulou, 2009; Fefe et al., 2025; Lioliou et al., 2025). This conceptualization aligns broadly with international diagnostic frameworks while reflecting the terminology adopted in Greek educational legislation and support services (Anastasiou & Polychronopoulou, 2009; Koutsoklenis & Karagianni, 2024).

Students with LDs face multidimensional challenges extending beyond academic underachievement. Difficulties in reading fluency, written expression, spelling, mathematical reasoning, working memory, and metacognitive regulation may substantially affect classroom participation and self-regulated learning (Mason & Mason, 2005; Norman et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). Academic difficulties often coincide with social and emotional weaknesses, such as diminished self-esteem, anxiety, academic fatigue, and depressive symptoms (Bergey et al., 2018; Vuori et al., 2008). Many students report difficulties in peer relationships and experiences of marginalization, which may compromise their sense of belonging within the school environment (Gal & Ryder, 2025). The manifestation of LDs is highly individualized, requiring flexible and context-sensitive support (Sainz et al., 2025). These interrelated academic, social, and emotional dimensions indicate the importance of inclusive educational practices that promote meaningful participation for all learners (Woodcock et al., 2022).

Inclusive education (IE) aims to ensure equitable participation within mainstream classrooms by recognizing diversity as an integral dimension of schooling. Core inclusive practices include differentiated instruction, collaborative and participatory learning, adaptive assessment, and structured emotional support (Woodcock et al., 2022). Teacher self-efficacy and positive attitudes toward inclusion are strong predictors of successful implementation (Malinen et al., 2013; Woodcock & Vialle, 2016). However, educators frequently report insufficient training, limited time, and structural constraints that hinder inclusive practice (Alsolami & Vaughan, 2023). As a result, a persistent gap often exists between inclusive policy commitments and everyday classroom realities (Woodcock et al., 2022).

IE is widely conceptualized as a dynamic, ongoing process aimed at identifying and removing barriers to presence, participation, and achievement for all learners in mainstream settings. Its core goal is to ensure that every student, regardless of ability, language, culture, or background, can participate meaningfully, experience belonging, and succeed within the ordinary life of the classroom (Ardenlid et al., 2025; van Steen & Wilson, 2020). Beyond physical placement, IE is expected to offer both academic and socio-emotional benefits by promoting equitable access to learning opportunities, supporting motivation and engagement, and fostering positive peer relationships and classroom climates (Buchs et al., 2023; Eren et al., 2025). In this sense, inclusion is frequently framed as a protective and enabling context for children at risk of marginalization, as it emphasizes supportive teaching, structured socio-emotional scaffolding, and the development of a school culture in which diversity is treated as an educational resource rather than a deficit (Ardenlid et al., 2025; MacKenzie et al., 2020).

However, empirical research indicates that the social promises of IE do not always materialize. Even when students with special educational needs (SEN) are educated in mainstream classrooms, they may still experience limited social participation, lower peer acceptance, and loneliness, indicating that inclusion must be examined as a lived experience shaped by everyday interactions and school culture rather than assumed as an outcome of placement alone (Avramidis & Aroni, 2020; Toulia et al., 2022). These findings highlight the importance of understanding how students themselves perceive participation, belonging,

and support and of using their perspectives to inform the continuous development of inclusive practice (Ainscow, 2025; Messiou, 2023).

In Greece, IE has been progressively institutionalized through legislation promoting the mainstream placement of students with SEN. Researchers estimate that approximately 6.5% of students in public education present educational needs that require additional support, with the majority being educated in mainstream school settings (Vlachou et al., 2023). Previous national data indicate that around 5% of primary school students experience serious academic difficulties, while a further 10–15% present milder but still educationally significant learning problems (Zafiriadis et al., 2005). Law 3699/2008 and subsequent legislation guarantee the right to individualized educational planning and access to support services, including inclusive classes (ICs, in Greek: *tmimata entaxis*) and, where necessary, special support assistants (Koutsoklenis & Karagianni, 2024; Nteropoulou-Nterou, 2023; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015).

Within the Greek educational system, ICs constitute a central support structure implemented alongside mainstream classroom placement. Students with mild to moderate LDs typically attend general education classrooms but are periodically withdrawn to resource rooms of the ICs, where special education teachers provide individualized or small-group instruction based on interdisciplinary assessment and support recommendations (Mamas & Avramidis, 2013). Although this arrangement aims to enhance participation and access to the mainstream curriculum, research indicates that its implementation frequently relies on traditional pull-out models and limited collaborative co-teaching practices between general and special education teachers (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2008; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015). Educators generally report neutral to positive attitudes toward inclusion; however, concerns persist regarding limited resources, insufficient professional training, and curriculum-related pressures that may constrain inclusive practice in everyday classroom contexts (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011).

Greek primary schools are also characterized by increasing sociocultural and linguistic diversity. Students from immigrant, minority, and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds may experience compounded educational challenges that intersect with LDs, complicating both identification and support processes (Lyra et al., 2023; Vouyoukas et al., 2017). These contextual factors further underscore the need to examine inclusion not only as a structural arrangement but also as a lived experience shaped by classroom practices, peer dynamics, and school culture (Ainscow, 2025; Andriana & Evans, 2020; Messiou, 2023).

Within this landscape, the concept of student voice has emerged as a central mechanism for strengthening IE. Listening to students' perspectives is considered essential for identifying barriers to participation and co-constructing more equitable learning environments (Ainscow, 2025; Messiou, 2023). Research demonstrates that students can articulate experiences of marginalization, inequity, and support and can offer concrete recommendations for improving inclusive practice (Andriana & Evans, 2020). Engaging directly with students' lived experiences enables schools to move beyond formal compliance toward relational and participatory forms of inclusion (Obrovská et al., 2025; Woodcock et al., 2022).

While there is an increasing body of literature on student voice in inclusive education, important limitations remain, particularly regarding students with learning difficulties. Existing research highlights both the growing use of participatory, dialogical, and collaborative approaches and the persistent barriers that constrain students' meaningful involvement, such as stigma, limited teacher preparedness, and structural constraints within school systems (Colley, 2020; de Leeuw et al., 2020; Herz & Haertel, 2016; Verhage et al., 2024). Recent studies emphasize methodological innovations, including participatory and arts-based approaches, multimodal data collection, and the integration of digital and assistive technologies to support students' expression and participation (Denhart, 2008; Nomtshongwana

& Manyakaza, 2025; Poikola et al., 2024; Tancredi & Graham, 2025). Despite these advances, the literature remains uneven, with a predominant focus on students with moderate learning difficulties, while the voices of students with more complex or severe educational needs remain underrepresented in current research (Carballo et al., 2024; Herz & Haertel, 2016; Majoko, 2018). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that students' experiences of inclusion are often mixed, reflecting both supportive practices and ongoing challenges related to social participation, stigma, and inconsistent implementation of inclusive policies (Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Percival et al., 2025; Woodcock & Moore, 2021). These findings underline the importance of developing more inclusive, flexible, and context-sensitive research approaches capable of capturing diverse student perspectives across educational settings (Denhart, 2008; Majoko, 2018; Muñoz-Martínez et al., 2023). Although student voice is increasingly recognized as central to inclusive education, further research is needed to ensure that the perspectives of students with learning difficulties are systematically and meaningfully incorporated into both research and practice (de Leeuw et al., 2020; Herz & Haertel, 2016; Muñoz-Martínez et al., 2023).

To further conceptualize inclusion in relation to students' lived experiences, inclusive education has been widely described as a process that promotes students' presence, participation, and learning within mainstream educational settings (Oliveira et al., 2025; Prater, 2010). Within this framework, presence refers to students' access to shared educational environments through the removal of physical, curricular, and structural barriers, participation encompasses students' active engagement in academic and social classroom life alongside their sense of belonging, and learning concerns access to meaningful and responsive educational opportunities that address diverse learner profiles (Bertills, 2023; Kocaj, 2025). Empirical research suggests that inclusive practices support these dimensions through adapted instruction, flexible grouping, supportive resources, collaborative learning, and scaffolded assessment approaches (Ayaya, 2024; Kocaj, 2025; Mamas et al., 2021; Woodcock et al., 2022).

These dimensions are further reflected in broader conceptual frameworks of inclusion. The Index for Inclusion conceptualizes inclusive education as a dynamic interplay between inclusive cultures, policies, and practices that support participation and equity in schools (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), while the Universal Design for Learning framework emphasizes the proactive design of flexible learning environments through multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to address learner variability (CAST, 2018). Together, these frameworks reinforce the view that inclusion extends beyond physical placement and requires the intentional design of educational environments that foster accessibility, participation, and achievement for all learners (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; CAST, 2018).

Despite the progressive institutionalization of IE in Greece and internationally, most existing research has concentrated on legislative frameworks, teacher attitudes, and parental perspectives. The lived experiences of primary school students with LDs themselves have received relatively less attention. While ICs constitute a central support mechanism within the Greek system, little empirical evidence exists regarding how students interpret their participation, belonging, and support within these arrangements. Understanding students' perspectives is particularly important in primary education, where early experiences of inclusion or exclusion may shape long-term academic and social trajectories (Bergey et al., 2018).

The present study seeks to foreground the voices of primary school students with LDs attending mainstream Greek schools. Although IE has been widely promoted at the policy level, research emphasizes the importance of engaging directly with students' perspectives to identify barriers to participation and strengthen inclusive practice (Ainscow, 2025; Messiou, 2023). By exploring students' experiences of participation, teacher support,

peer relationships, and the role of ICs, this study responds to calls for more contextually grounded and student-informed approaches to inclusion (Andriana & Evans, 2020; Obrovská et al., 2025). Examining how students interpret their everyday school experiences may provide empirically grounded insights for the development of more responsive and equitable inclusive practices within primary education (Woodcock et al., 2022). Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students with LDs describe their school experiences and participation in primary education?
2. How do students perceive teacher practices, peer relationships, and their sense of belonging?
3. How do students evaluate the contribution of ICs to their learning and inclusion?
4. What recommendations do students propose for strengthening inclusive educational practices?

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

A qualitative, student-centered research design was adopted to foreground the voices of students with LDs attending mainstream primary schools. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate when the aim is to explore lived experiences, subjective meanings, and contextual interpretations rather than to test predefined hypotheses (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method, as they allow depth, flexibility, and responsiveness to participants' perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach is especially suitable for research involving children, as it supports authentic expression while maintaining conceptual coherence (Christensen & James, 2017). The study focused on students' experiences of participation, belonging, teacher and peer relationships, the role of ICs, and their recommendations for strengthening inclusive educational practices.

2.2. Participants

The study involved 10 students attending ICs in public primary schools in Greece. School support services identified all participants as presenting mild LDs through school-based assessment and support procedures, and all were enrolled in the final grade of primary education (Grade 6). At the time of data collection, all students were receiving targeted educational support through ICs (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Variable	Category	*n*
Gender	Boys	5
	Girls	5
Grade level	Grade 6	10
Level of LDs	Mild LDs	10
Educational support	ICs	10

Participant demographic data focused on gender and educational characteristics; detailed information regarding race or ethnicity was not systematically collected, as the study did not aim to examine demographic differences.

All participants had been attending ICs for approximately three years prior to the study, indicating sustained exposure to inclusive support structures. Support in the ICs was provided by a special education teacher with 12 years of professional experience in

special education and a postgraduate degree in special and inclusive education. This contextual information enhances the interpretation of students' experiences within their specific educational environment.

Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases relevant to the study's objectives (Patton, 2015). Participants were intentionally selected from the final grade of primary education, as they had accumulated several years of schooling experience and were able to articulate their perspectives on participation, support experiences, and sense of belonging within mainstream primary education. The sample size is consistent with qualitative research approaches that prioritize depth of understanding over generalizability, allowing for a detailed exploration of students' lived experiences.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles governing research involving minors. Written informed consent was obtained from all parents or legal guardians prior to participation, and informed assent was obtained from all participating students. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

No identifying personal data were collected, and anonymized identification codes were used during transcription and reporting. The study involved minimal-risk qualitative procedures conducted within the regular educational context and was carried out in accordance with established ethical standards for research with children and educational settings. All data were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes to ensure confidentiality and data protection.

2.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted within the school setting. Interviews took place in a quiet and familiar space to ensure students' comfort and minimize contextual pressure. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 min.

An interview guide was developed using age-appropriate and accessible language to facilitate students' expression of their everyday school experiences. The guide included demographic questions followed by open-ended prompts exploring students' experiences of school participation, relationships with teachers and peers, perceptions of instructional and emotional support, feelings of belonging, and suggestions for improving inclusive practices. Indicative interview questions included: "How would you describe your school life so far?", "What do you enjoy doing most at school? Why?" and "What do teachers do that helps you learn or participate more easily?". The full interview guide is provided in Appendix A. Interview questions were organized around four conceptual domains aligned with the research questions: (a) school experience and participation, (b) teacher and peer relationships, (c) the role of the ICs, and (d) student-generated recommendations for inclusive improvement. This structure ensured coherence between the research aims, the data collection process, and subsequent analysis, while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues they considered meaningful to their everyday school experience.

Students were informed that they could skip questions or withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Participants are referred to using anonymized identification codes (e.g., P1, P2) in all excerpts presented in the findings to ensure confidentiality.

The data collection process was designed to be student-centered, enabling participants to express their perspectives in a safe and supportive environment. In line with qualitative research principles emphasizing authentic student voice, flexibility was maintained during

the interviews, allowing participants to elaborate on issues they considered meaningful. Care was taken to create a non-evaluative and trusting atmosphere in which students felt comfortable sharing their views freely and without pressure. While formal pilot testing was not conducted, the interview guide was developed based on established qualitative research practices and designed to be accessible and age-appropriate.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytic process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Initial open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units of text across the interview transcripts. Codes were generated inductively from the data and captured recurring meanings related to students' participation, sense of belonging, teacher support, peer relationships, the perceived role of the ICs, and students' recommendations for improving inclusive practice. Codes were subsequently compared and grouped into subthemes and broader themes through an iterative process of refinement and constant comparison.

Although the coding process was primarily inductive, it was conceptually informed by the four analytic domains underpinning the research questions: (a) school experience and participation, (b) teacher support and peer relationships, (c) the perceived role of the ICs, and (d) student-generated recommendations for inclusive improvement. This approach ensured analytic coherence while allowing themes to emerge from students' accounts without imposing predetermined categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis was conducted by the author following a systematic thematic analysis process to ensure consistency and transparency. To enhance rigor, repeated engagement with the data was undertaken, and codes and themes were continuously reviewed and refined through constant comparison, ensuring internal coherence and clear distinctions between categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). An audit trail was maintained throughout the analytic process to document coding decisions and the development of themes, supporting transparency and analytic rigor.

The progression from initial codes to categories, subthemes, and final themes was systematically documented in an analytic coding framework. An overview of this process is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of representative codes, subthemes, and final themes.

Representative Codes	Subthemes	Final Themes
Enjoyment of physical education, active engagement in mathematics	Selective and active participation	School experience and participation
Difficulty in language tasks, anxiety during tests	Barriers to engagement and emotional response to evaluation	School experience and participation
Teachers explain with examples, teachers listen sometimes	Perceived teacher responsiveness and relational safety	Teacher support and peer relationships
Friends help with tasks, being included in groups	Peer support and sense of belonging	Teacher support and peer relationships
Quiet environment in ICs, feeling calmer in ICs	Emotional safety and supportive withdrawal	Role of the ICs

Table 2. *Cont.*

Representative Codes	Subthemes	Final Themes
Individualized help	Academic safety	Role of the ICs
Need for more time in tests, more examples from teachers	Fair assessment and inclusive teaching practices	Student recommendations
Opportunity after mistakes, more opportunities for participation	Supportive discipline and inclusive school improvement	Student recommendations

3. Results

3.1. Students' Experiences of Participation and Emotional Engagement in Primary School

Academic demands and emotional responses to learning activities shaped students' accounts of their everyday school experiences, with participation varying across subject areas according to perceived difficulty and task demands. While several participants described school life in generally positive terms, engagement appeared stronger in non-language-based subjects, particularly physical education and mathematics, which were often perceived as more accessible or enjoyable. As one participant noted, *"I like physical education because it is not like a lesson; you play sports"* (P3), while another explained that mathematics was easier because *"the teacher shows you how to do it and then you understand it"* (P5). These responses suggest that participation was closely linked to perceived competence and instructional support.

In contrast, language-based subjects were frequently described as challenging, particularly when tasks involved extended writing or reading comprehension. Several students associated these tasks with fatigue, confusion, or difficulty maintaining attention. For example, one participant explained that *"language is difficult when we write a big paragraph because your hand gets tired"* (P5), while another reported that history lessons were challenging because *"I forget things"* (P3). Students' emotional responses to assessment further shaped participation, with several describing tests as stressful or intimidating. One participant noted feeling *"a little scared"* during tests (P7), while another described the experience as "very stressful" (P2), suggesting that evaluation contexts may function as barriers to participation for some students.

Despite these academic challenges, most participants described positive peer inclusion and a general sense of belonging within the school environment. Acceptance into peer groups appeared central to positive school experiences. As one student explained, *"They do not leave me out of the groups; they take me with them"* (P3), illustrating the importance of peer acceptance in fostering belonging. Overall, students' participation appeared to reflect a dynamic interaction between perceived competence, emotional comfort, and classroom expectations.

3.2. Teacher Support, Peer Relationships, and Sense of Belonging in Inclusive Classrooms

Students' responses highlighted the importance of teacher support and peer relationships in shaping their everyday participation and sense of belonging within the school environment. Most participants reported that teachers listened to their questions or difficulties at least in some situations, although several noted that such support was not consistently available across all subjects or contexts. For example, one student stated that teachers listened *"sometimes"* when difficulties were expressed (P3), suggesting variability in perceived responsiveness.

Instructional practices such as explaining tasks step by step and providing examples were described as particularly supportive for participation. Students frequently emphasized that understanding improved when teachers demonstrated how to approach an exercise

or clarified expectations. As one participant noted, *"they show you an example"* (P7), while another explained that teachers help by *"showing the way to do it"* (P6). These practices appeared to strengthen students' confidence and willingness to engage in academic tasks.

Peer relationships were also consistently described as positive and supportive. Several students indicated that classmates offered help when difficulties arose, contributing to both academic participation and emotional comfort. One participant reported that *"in whatever difficulty I have, they help me"* (P3), while another explained that friendships made school enjoyable because *"I have some friends and it is nice"* (P5). Inclusion in peer groups was closely associated with students' sense of belonging, with one student noting that "I belong because they include me" (P3).

Overall, students' accounts suggest that relational safety constituted an important condition for participation, with teacher responsiveness and peer inclusion helping to mitigate some of the academic challenges experienced in other aspects of school life.

3.3. Students' Perceptions of the Role of the ICs in Supporting Learning and Emotional Well-Being

Students' responses indicated that the ICs constituted a meaningful support structure within their everyday school experience, functioning as both an academic support setting and an emotionally safer learning environment. Several participants described ICs as a space where learning demands were perceived as more manageable compared to the mainstream classroom. One student explained that *"in our class we do many lessons, but in the inclusive class we do not do so much"* (P1), suggesting that reduced workload contributed to greater comfort and engagement.

Individualized assistance emerged as a central feature of the ICs. Students frequently associate attendance in this setting with improved reading ability, memory, and academic confidence. For example, one participant noted that the ICs helped *"to read well and remember better"* (P5), while another reported that attending the class enabled them to feel "more like a good student" (P4). These responses suggest that targeted instructional support within smaller group contexts may enhance students' academic self-perception.

Beyond their academic function, the ICs were often described in emotional terms. Some students reported feeling calmer and more comfortable in this environment compared to the demands of the general classroom. One participant described feeling *"calm"* when attending the ICs (P5), while another referred to the setting as providing *"energy"* for learning (P1). These accounts highlight the affective dimension of withdrawal-based support and suggest that ICs may function as a protective space that reduces performance-related stress.

However, a minority of students expressed ambivalent or negative views regarding participation in the ICs. For instance, one participant described the class as *"bad"* and indicated a preference for remaining in the mainstream classroom (P8). Such responses suggest that the perceived benefits of ICs are not universal and may involve tensions between individualized support and separation from peers.

In summary, students' accounts indicate that the ICs served a dual role in supporting both academic engagement and emotional well-being, while also raising questions regarding the balance between individualized assistance and inclusive classroom participation.

3.4. Students' Recommendations for Promoting Fairness and Inclusive Participation in School Life

Students' responses included practical recommendations aimed at enhancing fairness, participation, and inclusivity within the school environment. These suggestions were often grounded in students' own experiences of difficulty, exclusion, or perceived inequity and reflected both academic and social dimensions of school life.

A recurrent recommendation concerned the need for greater flexibility in assessment practices. Several participants expressed a desire for extended time during tests or alternative opportunities to demonstrate their learning. One student suggested that *"when we do something wrong, they should give us other chances"* (P1), highlighting the importance of supportive disciplinary approaches and formative assessment practices.

Students also emphasized the value of differentiated instructional support. Some participants indicated that greater use of examples by teachers would facilitate understanding, particularly in subjects they perceived as challenging. As one student stated, *"to put more examples"* would make lessons easier to follow (P2), emphasizing the importance of instructional clarity and scaffolding in promoting equitable participation.

Social inclusion emerged as another area for improvement. Participants referred to the importance of being included in peer groups and avoiding exclusion from collaborative activities. One student suggested that students should *"not be taken out of groups"* (P1), while another referred to the need *"to reduce conflicts among classmates"* (P7), highlighting the role of classroom social climate in shaping participation.

Finally, students proposed structural adjustments related to the organization of school time and activities. Suggestions included increasing time allocated to physical education or reducing time devoted to subjects perceived as demanding, such as language-based lessons. Although not always explicitly framed in terms of inclusion, these recommendations suggest efforts to align school practices more closely with students' perceived strengths and needs.

Overall, students' accounts indicate that their recommendations reflected diverse but meaningful suggestions for improving fairness and participation in everyday school life. To enhance analytic transparency, a summary of the prevalence of the main thematic patterns across participants is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Prevalence of main thematic patterns across participants.

Theme/Subtheme	Students Referring (*n*)	Percentage
Enjoyment of physical education and preferred subjects	8	80%
Active participation in mathematics	7	70%
Difficulty in language-based tasks	9	90%
Assessment-related anxiety	6	60%
Perceived teacher responsiveness	7	70%
Positive peer relationships and peer support	9	90%
Sense of belonging in the classroom	8	80%
Positive perceptions of ICs	8	80%
Ambivalent perceptions of ICs	2	20%
Flexible assessment recommendations	5	50%
Need for instructional differentiation	4	40%
Recommendations for peer inclusion and fairness	5	50%

4. Discussion

The present study explored how primary school students with LDs experience participation, belonging, and educational support within inclusive mainstream classrooms. A central finding was that students' participation appeared to be closely associated with their perceived competence in specific academic tasks. Participants reported greater engagement in subjects such as mathematics and physical education, where instructional demands were perceived as manageable, while language-related activities involving extended writing or dictation were frequently described as confusing or tiring. This pattern indicates that participation is shaped by task accessibility and perceived success rather than reflecting stable motivational dispositions. Recent research similarly shows that students with LDs participate more actively in learning environments where success is attainable and instructional demands are aligned with learner profiles (Buchs et al., 2023). These findings

underline the importance of aligning instructional practices with learners' perceived capabilities through differentiated instruction and adaptive task design (Ardenlid et al., 2025; Woodcock et al., 2022).

Across participants' accounts, students' narratives suggest that inclusion is primarily experienced through everyday participation opportunities, relational interactions, and access to meaningful academic support rather than as a structural condition of classroom placement. Participants described their school experience in terms of how capable, accepted, and supported they felt during routine classroom activities, indicating that inclusion is constructed through lived experience rather than institutional arrangement alone (Avramidis & Aroni, 2020; Messiou, 2023). Across accounts, participation emerged as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by perceived competence and instructional demands. Students reported greater engagement in subjects where they experienced success, whereas language-based tasks involving extended writing or reading were frequently described as cognitively demanding and emotionally taxing. This pattern suggests that academic participation fluctuates according to task accessibility and instructional design (Buchs et al., 2023; Woodcock et al., 2022).

At the relational level, students consistently described belonging in socially negotiated rather than structural terms. Inclusive participation was experienced through peer acceptance, group membership, and opportunities for collaboration rather than through physical placement within the classroom alone. Being included in peer groups or receiving assistance from classmates emerged as central indicators of belonging. These accounts demonstrate that belonging is constructed through everyday social interactions rather than ensured by placement alone. This finding is consistent with research showing that students with SEN may still experience marginalization within formally inclusive settings despite mainstream placement (Avramidis & Aroni, 2020; Toulia et al., 2022). In this sense, inclusion can be understood as an interactional and relational process shaped by peer dynamics and classroom climate (Messiou, 2023; Strogilos et al., 2023).

Teacher practices also emerged as a significant factor influencing participation. Students frequently associate support with instructional clarity, modelling, and the use of examples that enabled them to understand and complete academic tasks. Teachers who explained activities step by step or demonstrated procedures were perceived as facilitating engagement. These findings underline the role of explicit instructional scaffolding in supporting participation for students with LDs. This aligns with inclusive teaching approaches that emphasize structured guidance, clarity, and responsiveness as key elements for equitable participation. Teacher responsiveness appears to function as a mediating mechanism that enhances students' perceived competence and willingness to engage in learning activities (Buchs et al., 2023).

Participation in the ICs was generally perceived as beneficial for both academic learning and emotional regulation. Students described this environment as calmer and less demanding than the mainstream classroom, suggesting that individualized support may reduce performance-related pressure and support concentration. However, some participants expressed ambivalence, indicating that withdrawal from the mainstream classroom may also be experienced as socially complex. These contrasting accounts illustrate the dual role of ICs as both supportive and potentially isolating spaces. Similar tensions have been identified in research on pull-out support models, which may facilitate academic support while simultaneously limiting opportunities for social participation (Mamas & Avramidis, 2013; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015). The effectiveness of such arrangements therefore appears to depend on their coordination with mainstream classroom practices and peer inclusion processes (Messiou, 2023).

Students' recommendations for improving school inclusivity frequently centered on assessment practices. Requests for extended time, clearer explanations, and alternative ways of demonstrating knowledge suggest that conventional evaluation practices may function as barriers to participation. These findings are consistent with research emphasizing the importance of flexible and differentiated assessment in inclusive education (Woodcock et al., 2022). When assessment is experienced as inaccessible or stressful, students' participation may decrease even in otherwise supportive learning environments (Buchs et al., 2023). This highlights the need for assessment practices that enable students to demonstrate learning through diverse and accessible modalities (Ardenlid et al., 2025).

Notably, students' reported challenges closely aligned with their recommendations for improving school inclusivity, particularly regarding flexible assessment, clearer instructional guidance, and enhanced opportunities for participation. This alignment highlights the value of student voice as a mechanism for identifying barriers and informing responsive educational practices. Students were not only able to articulate difficulties but also to propose practical and contextually grounded suggestions for improving fairness and participation, reinforcing arguments that student perspectives can meaningfully contribute to school improvement processes (Ainscow, 2025; Messiou, 2023).

At a broader interpretive level, the findings suggest that students experience inclusion as a dynamic interplay between academic accessibility, interpersonal relationships, and supportive instructional environments. Feelings of competence, acceptance, and emotional safety appear to shape participation in everyday classroom activities, mediating students' willingness to engage in learning and social interaction. These findings reinforce the view that inclusion is not a static condition, but an ongoing relational and pedagogical process shaped by classroom practices and school culture (Ainscow, 2025; van Steen & Wilson, 2020).

Overall, the findings indicate that structural inclusion alone does not guarantee meaningful participation. Although students were physically placed within mainstream classrooms, their accounts suggest that participation depended on whether instructional demands aligned with their perceived competence, whether peer relationships fostered belonging, and whether support structures reduced emotional pressure rather than reinforcing separation. These findings support the view that inclusive education should be understood not merely as placement, but as the ongoing creation of learning environments that promote accessibility, relational belonging, and emotional safety (Ainscow, 2025; Avramidis & Aroni, 2020; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015; Woodcock et al., 2022).

Within the Greek educational context, the observed gap between formal provision and students' lived experiences further underlines the importance of systematically integrating student voice into the development of inclusive practices. This interpretation is consistent with Greek and international literature showing that inclusive arrangements may remain only partially effective when participation is not supported through responsive pedagogy, social inclusion, and coordinated support structures (Nteropoulou-Nterou, 2023; Toulia et al., 2022; Vlachou et al., 2023). The findings may also be interpreted through broader inclusive pedagogical frameworks, including Universal Design for Learning, which emphasizes flexibility in engagement, representation, and expression to address learner variability (CAST, 2018). From this perspective, inclusive practice is strengthened when learning environments are proactively designed to reduce barriers to participation rather than responding to them retrospectively (Messiou, 2023; Obrovská et al., 2025).

Although the sample size was intentionally limited in line with qualitative research principles, the inclusion of information-rich cases enabled an in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences of participation, belonging, and support within mainstream primary education settings.

5. Implications for Inclusive Educational Practice

The findings of the present study suggest that inclusive educational practice in primary schools should move beyond structural placement and attend more closely to the everyday pedagogical and relational conditions that shape students' participation. Since participation appeared closely associated with students' perceived competence in specific academic tasks, instructional approaches that reduce cognitive load and scaffold access to learning may enhance engagement for students with LDs. Differentiated instruction, step-by-step modelling, and the provision of multiple representations of content may support students in sustaining active participation across a wider range of classroom activities.

Students' accounts further indicate that peer relationships play a central role in fostering a sense of belonging within mainstream classrooms. Inclusive practice may therefore benefit from the intentional use of collaborative learning structures that promote peer assistance, shared problem-solving, and group membership. Creating opportunities for cooperative participation may help reduce the risk of social marginalization and strengthen relational inclusion in everyday classroom routines.

ICs were generally experienced as a supportive learning environment that enabled individualized assistance and reduced performance-related pressure. These findings highlight the importance of ensuring effective coordination between general classroom instruction and resource-based support provision to prevent fragmentation of learning experiences. Collaborative planning between general and special education teachers may enhance continuity in instructional strategies and reinforce students' perceived competence across educational settings.

A further implication concerns assessment practices, as students' recommendations highlight the importance of flexible evaluation procedures that allow learners to demonstrate their knowledge through diverse modalities. Extended time, alternative response formats, and opportunities for revision may contribute to more equitable assessment practices. Incorporating students' perspectives into decisions concerning instructional support and assessment can further support the development of more responsive and context-sensitive inclusive environments.

6. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the relatively small sample size and purposive sampling within a limited number of public primary schools restrict the transferability of the findings. Although qualitative research does not seek statistical generalizability, students' experiences may differ across educational contexts, geographical regions, and school cultures within Greece.

Second, the study relied exclusively on self-reported student accounts collected through semi-structured interviews. While this approach enabled an in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences through a student voice perspective, the absence of complementary data sources, such as classroom observations or teacher perspectives, may limit the breadth of interpretation. In addition, participants' responses may have been influenced by social desirability or by their willingness to disclose difficulties within the school environment.

Third, the cross-sectional design does not allow conclusions regarding changes in students' perceptions over time. Experiences of participation, belonging, and academic confidence may evolve as students progress through school or receive additional support, and longitudinal research could provide deeper insight into how inclusive experiences develop across educational stages.

A further limitation concerns the lack of detailed information regarding specific LD profiles and broader demographic characteristics, which may influence students' school

experiences in diverse contexts. Additionally, as the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, the interpretation of qualitative data inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity. Although systematic coding procedures, iterative analysis, and an audit trail were employed to enhance transparency and rigor, alternative interpretations of the data remain possible.

Finally, the findings should be interpreted within the specific Greek educational context and may not be directly transferable to other educational systems or cultural settings.

7. Conclusions

The present study examined how primary school students with LDs experience participation, belonging, and educational support within inclusive mainstream settings. The findings indicate that students experience inclusion as a lived and context-dependent process shaped by opportunities for engagement, relationships with peers and educators, and access to meaningful academic support, rather than merely by placement in general education classrooms. Students' perceived competence in specific tasks was closely associated with their participation, suggesting that engagement varies according to instructional accessibility and assessment demands.

Peer acceptance and teacher responsiveness emerged as central factors in fostering students' sense of belonging within the school environment. Inclusive participation was described as a socially negotiated process, in which group inclusion, peer support, and instructional clarity contributed to feelings of acceptance and competence. ICs were generally perceived as a supportive context that offered individualized assistance and reduced performance pressure; however, their effectiveness appeared to depend on coordination with mainstream classroom practices and opportunities for social inclusion.

Students' recommendations for improving school inclusivity included flexible assessment practices, clearer instructional guidance, and increased opportunities to demonstrate learning. These recommendations highlight the importance of integrating student voice into the ongoing development of inclusive practice, particularly in primary education, where early experiences of participation or exclusion may shape long-term academic and social trajectories.

Overall, the findings suggest that inclusive education in mainstream primary schools requires attention not only to structural provision but also to the relational and pedagogical conditions that shape students' everyday experiences. Systematically incorporating students' perspectives may support the development of more responsive teaching practices and foster more equitable participation across diverse learning environments.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participants involved in the study, and informed assent was obtained from all participating students.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy restrictions related to the protection of participants' anonymity.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

IE	Inclusive education
ICs	Inclusive classes
LDs	Learning difficulties
SEN	Special educational needs

Appendix A. Interview Guide Used for Data Collection

Appendix A.1. Demographic Information

(Completed prior to the interview)
Gender: ☐ Boy ☐ Girl ☐ Other/Prefer not to say
Age:
Grade level:
Years of attendance in the inclusive classes (ICs):

Appendix A.2. Interview Questions

Introductory statement

Thank you for being here today. I will ask you some questions about your experience at school. There are no right or wrong answers. You may choose not to answer any question or stop the interview at any time if you wish.

Warm-up Question

1. Before we begin, is there anything you would like to ask me?

Opening Question

2. How would you describe your school life so far?

Main Questions

School experience and participation:

3. What do you enjoy doing most at school? Why?
4. If you had to describe your school experience with one feeling, what would it be?
5. During which moments or activities of the school day do you feel that you participate more actively?
6. Are there moments or subjects where you find it difficult to participate? What makes participation more difficult for you?

Teacher support:

7. Do you feel that teachers listen to you when you express your thoughts, questions, or difficulties? In what situations do you feel more supported?
8. What do teachers do that helps you learn or participate more easily?

Peer relationships and belonging:

9. How would you describe your relationships with your classmates?
10. Do you feel that you belong to your school? Why or why not?

ICs:

11. If you had to describe the ICs with one feeling, what would it be?
12. How would you describe the way the ICs work?
13. What do the ICs offer you in your daily school life?
14. Is there anything you would like to change about the ICs or how they work?

Assessment and fairness:

15. How do you feel about tests and evaluation at school?
16. What would help you show better what you know or what you have learned?
17. What would you like teachers to know about how you learn best?

Inclusive improvement:

18. If you could change three things at school to make it fairer and more inclusive for all students, what would they be?

Closing Question

19. Is there anything important that I did not ask and you would like to add?

Thank you very much. What you shared is very important.

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