

EMPATHY-DRIVEN CURRICULUM PRACTICES: MODELLING SOCIAL INCLUSION BEYOND DISABILITY LABELS IN NIGERIAN UPPER BASIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Empathy is often regarded as an individual trait rather than a structured practice embedded in pedagogy and school culture. This study investigates empathy-driven curriculum practices, with a specific focus on social inclusion beyond disability labels in Nigerian upper basic schools. It aims to examine how students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion and to identify curriculum practices that promote social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools, employing a mixed-method design. A stratified random sampling technique was used to determine the sample size, consisting of 152 participants from two upper basic schools in Lagos State. A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, while a checklist was used for structured classroom observations. The instrument demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, means, and standard deviations. The Kruskal-Wallis test and chi-square (2) test of independence were used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that students, teachers, and principals have a limited understanding of empathy. Furthermore, curriculum practices such as applying differentiated instruction to meet diverse learning needs and using inclusive language in all classroom communication promote social inclusion. It is recommended that workshops and seminars be organised to equip teachers with practical skills and strategies for implementing an empathy-driven curriculum. Moreover, teachers should encourage and facilitate students' collaboration in class, such as working in groups with peers of varying abilities, to foster an appreciation of others' capabilities and mutual support.

Keywords: empathy, curriculum practices, social inclusion, disability labels, upper basic schools

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Efforts to promote inclusive education in Nigerian upper basic schools are frequently hindered by narrow perceptions of disability that depict learners with special educational needs as marginal to mainstream education. Although national policies support equity and participation, classroom practices often focus on categorisation, remediation, and a deficit-oriented approach rather than fostering social inclusion. In the context of inclusive pedagogy, empathy is the

capacity to recognise, value, and respond to learners' diverse experiences, which serve as a transformative foundation for rethinking curriculum development and classroom interactions.

Social inclusion is now widely recognised as a central aim of education systems globally. This shift has been shaped by international frameworks, including the Salamanca Statement of 1994 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006 and implemented in 2008 (Wolff et al., 2021). These agreements promote the education of all learners within mainstream classrooms, regardless of individual differences. In practice, however, inclusion is frequently interpreted as physical placement rather than meaningful participation (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Kiuppis & Hausstätter, 2015). As a result, a clear disconnect persists between policy commitments and the everyday realities students experience.

Mainstream schools usually implement inclusion by identifying and categorising students. They use terms such as special educational needs, behavioural difficulties, learning disability, or autism to organise support and allocate resources. While these labels help students get the services they need, they also shape how people in schools view and interact with them (Norwich, 2013). Sometimes, labelling can unintentionally position some students as problems to be managed instead of valued members of the school community.

As reported by Avramidis (2013) and Jørgensen and Allan (2020), in mainstream classroom settings, students with labels are more likely to face social marginalisation, peer rejection, and fewer opportunities for meaningful engagement. In these situations, inclusion is no longer relational but simply administrative. Students may share the same physical space while remaining socially marginalised.

The dominance of label-driven approaches reflects a broader deficit orientation in education. Difference is framed as something that resides within the child and requires remediation or accommodation. This way of thinking overlooks how school cultures, peer interactions, and classroom practices actively shape experiences of exclusion (Slee, 2011). It also narrows inclusion to procedural compliance, rather than viewing it as a process that requires change in everyday teaching and learning practices.

Social inclusion is largely shaped by everyday interactions rather than written policies. How students experience inclusion is shaped by teachers' responses to difference, peer interpretations of behaviour, and the organisation of classroom life (Riehl in Yusuf & Alasoluyi, 2017; UNICEF, 2022). Nevertheless, these relational aspects of inclusion remain insufficiently theorised and examined, especially in mainstream settings where exclusion is often quiet, routine, and taken for granted.

Empathy has been put forward as one way to respond to these relational gaps. In educational research, it is often described as the ability to recognise and engage with others' perspectives and emotions (Cooper, 2011). Evidence indicates that when teachers adopt empathetic approaches, students tend to experience stronger relationships, a more supportive classroom environment, and lower levels of marginalisation (Wentzel, 2012). However, empathy is often treated as an individual trait rather than a structured practice embedded in pedagogy and school culture.

There is also a tendency to treat empathy as an optional or moral add-on rather than a core mechanism of inclusion. Teacher education programmes may promote caring attitudes without offering concrete guidance on how empathy can shape instructional decisions, behaviour management, or peer relationship management (McAllister & Irvine in Trujillo, 2025). As a result, empathy remains disconnected from everyday practice and has little impact on challenging exclusionary norms.

Notably, much of the existing literature on inclusive education gives limited attention to how empathy might contribute to inclusion without depending on student labels. Most studies (such as Jung, 2025; Lomellini, Lowenthal, Snelson, & Trespalacios, 2025) assume labels as a starting point and then explore how to manage them more sensitively. As Allan (2010) argues, this approach ultimately sustains the same structures that create differentiation and hierarchy. There is limited work that asks what inclusion might look like if empathy guided practice before categorisation.

As a result, mainstream schools continue to struggle with a contradiction. They are expected to be inclusive, yet they operate within systems that reward labels and standardisation. Teachers are asked to meet diverse needs while working within rigid curricular and accountability frameworks. Without alternative models, social inclusion remains uneven and fragile. This study, therefore, explores how empathy-driven curriculum practices can model social inclusion beyond disability labels in Nigerian upper basic schools. Addressing this gap is necessary if inclusion is to move beyond placement and towards genuine belonging.

1.1 Research Questions

To address the identified problem, the following research questions were raised to guide the study.

1. How do students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion?
2. What curriculum practices promote social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools?

1.2 Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance.

H01: There is no significant difference in how students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion.

H02: There is no significant relationship between curriculum practices and promotion of social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Empathy-driven curriculum practices refer to teachers and school communities' ability to understand, respond to, and value learners' perspectives in ways that promote social participation, belonging, and mutual recognition beyond categorical labels (Cooper, 2011; Slee, 2011). Empathy is often highlighted in inclusive education discussions as a key factor

that fosters social inclusion. However, much of the research conflates empathy with good attitudes or emotional intelligence, without examining the principles that support it.

A recent systematic review of teachers' emotional competence conducted by Calandri et al. (2025) highlights that studies often treat empathy as one of several overlapping constructs alongside emotional intelligence and emotion regulation, rather than as a distinct predictor of inclusive practice. The review finds that, while emotional competence broadly relates to an inclusive classroom climate, the empirical evidence that empathy itself drives inclusion outcomes remains limited and heterogeneous, and studies rarely model inclusion in schools beyond categorical labels of disability or special needs.

As revealed by De Klerk and de Klerk (2018), empathy was linked to the creation of a supportive learning environment characterised by differentiated and creative teaching methods, resulting in increased student motivation. Graziano et al. (2024) also discovered that higher empathy correlated with greater self-efficacy in inclusive education, especially when emotional self-efficacy was elevated, which challenges the idea that empathy always benefits inclusion. In other words, because high levels of empathy might cause excessive emotional involvement and stress, which can hinder teachers' abilities, they are not always associated with a greater capacity to deliver inclusive education.

Additionally, the structural and relational framework in which empathy functions is often overlooked in the literature. Social inclusion results from relationships between students, teachers, and institutional support rather than from individual empathy alone. Kolleck's (2025) examination of the conceptual model of inclusive school development proposes a multi-level framework that includes psychological, relational, and structural aspects. According to this model, processes of inclusion and exclusion are influenced by the interaction of peer dynamics, institutional logics, and teacher expectations. However, the role of empathy within this framework remains unclear, highlighting a gap in understanding how empathy translates into systemic practices that influence everyday school social life beyond labels.

In response to these inadequacies, modelling approaches have started to emerge. Lugo, Alatríste-Contreras, and Coutiño-Vázquez (2025) developed a theoretical model that simulates how student empathy patterns might lead to inclusive outcomes using complex systems and segregation dynamics. By conceptualising empathy as a process that interacts with social incentives, this work goes beyond straightforward correlational explanations. It demonstrates how minor changes in the incentives for recognising others as equals can lead to either permanent segregation or emergent inclusivity. While promising, it remains a theoretical simulation rather than an empirical test conducted in real classrooms, underscoring the need for practical validation.

There is also a dearth of empirical research that specifically examined how social inclusion outcomes are related to empathy. The majority of studies on social behaviour and inclusion often test general concepts, such as attitudes towards diversity or peer acceptance, without highlighting the special role that empathy plays. For instance, inclusive learning environments that prioritise interactive, dialogic group work have positive effects on peer relationships and respect for diversity (Molina-Roldán, Marauri, Aubert, & Flecha, 2021). However, they do not specifically test empathy as a mechanism separate from general social interaction or

collaboration. Such studies often assume that social interaction leads to empathy, yet this assumption is rarely examined.

The level of analysis is another significant gap. Peer-to-peer dynamics, which are essential to social inclusion in mainstream settings, are often overlooked in empathy research, which instead concentrates on relationships between teachers and students or the overall classroom environment. According to research by Alhassan et al. (2025), students' views of inclusion are correlated with emotional support; however, these findings do not distinguish between empathy and supportive methods such as scaffolding, feedback, or culturally sensitive teaching. This failure to distinguish constructs limits the conclusions that can be drawn about empathy in general.

Furthermore, a large portion of the research defines inclusion targets implicitly through descriptors such as SEN status or disability categories. This places empathy not as a basic social resource that shapes everyday inclusivity among all learners, but rather as a reaction to "othered" groups. Such a strategy risks perpetuating the same classifications that inclusive education aims to overcome. Richer insights into how empathy influences student interactions and inclusion could be obtained by reframing research to view social inclusion as a continuum of relational involvement rather than as a consequence of distinct categories.

Overall, there is still a lack of conceptual coherence and empirical research on empathy-driven curriculum practices. Though causal pathways and actual classroom dynamics are not well-defined, there is suggestive evidence that emotional competence, including aspects of empathy, correlates with favourable attitudes and climates associated with inclusion. Although they need empirical support, new models that simulate inclusive patterns offer theoretical promise. To fully capture the intricate social processes that underlie true inclusion in mainstream schools, future research needs stronger designs that differentiate empathy from related constructs, examine mechanisms at the peer and institutional levels, and go beyond label-based definitions.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on Relational Inclusion and Labelling Theories. The relational inclusion theory emerged from inclusive education and sociological scholarship in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was primarily developed by Mel Ainscow, Tony Booth, and Alan Dyson through their work on inclusive school development and the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006), and further strengthened by Roger Slee's sociological critique of deficit and special education systems (Slee, 2011).

The theory defines inclusion in terms of connections, participation, acknowledgement, and regular social activities in schools rather than placement, categorisation, or individual rehabilitation. It maintains that interactions, institutional norms, and power dynamics, rather than learner deficiencies, cause exclusion, and that inclusion is achieved when all students can engage in meaningful learning and social interactions.

Becker's 1963 labelling theory also provided significant insight into the nature of labelling and its effects on the person being labelled. Becker's labelling theory can be best understood in terms of statistics and deviation from the norm. According to most sociologists, deviant labels are all stigmatising (Otunyo, 2023). These labels can also be applied to individuals by

organisations or individuals who lack the formal authority to designate someone as deviant. Teacher and other school personnel identifying a student as a "troublemaker" and starting to treat the child as a problem is a legitimate illustration of such an event. Even though the student did nothing to warrant the penalty, they are nonetheless subjected to detainment and other forms of punishment (Charlotte, 2021).

Students are labelled by powerful individuals and professionals in the field of special education based on diagnostic test results and vigorous legal action. Strong language directed at children and adolescents with SEN combines legal action with the rigour of medical science. Because experts and notable individuals provided these labels, they have greater credibility. Some scholars contend that knowing a child's label led teachers to stereotype students, thereby preventing them from understanding each student individually (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Boyle, 2014).

The use of labels can be harmful if society is unable to identify their purpose, understand how to cope with those who have been tagged, and recognise the harm they cause. This is also true when children are stigmatised by labels, which lowers their self-esteem. According to Charlotte (2021), labelling can result in chances being denied, such as lower educational attainment and unstable work; the weak conventional bonds that follow from this lack of opportunity can have a long-lasting impact on the individual. According to Lalvani (2015), some parents have negative views about labelling and react adversely to notions of having a child with disability.

By combining the ideas of relational inclusion theory with labelling theory, a more comprehensive approach to examining social inclusion that goes beyond labels is provided. While the relational inclusion theory implicitly allows the research to examine empathy as a systemic practice that modifies teacher decision-making, peer dynamics, and school culture rather than as an individual moral disposition, Becker's 1963 labelling theory challenges the use of diagnostic classification in mainstream schools. It demonstrates how label-driven inclusion can sustain social marginalisation. Together, they emphasise the importance of reciprocal recognition, comprehension, and response in classroom interactions and have moved the analytical focus from labelling to the structure of relationships.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design

The study used a mixed-method design to examine empathy-driven curriculum practices, with a specific focus on social inclusion beyond disability labels in Nigerian upper basic schools.

4.2 Sample and sampling technique

The study used a sample of 152 participants from two mainstream schools in Lagos State, Nigeria, with stated commitments to inclusive education. Of the participants, 86 (56.6%) were students from upper basic schools, 64 (42.1%) were teachers, and 2 (1.3%) were principals. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across key demographic characteristics, including educational level, gender, and age.

4.3 Instrumentation

A structured questionnaire, written in simple, easy-to-understand language, was used to collect quantitative data from participants. The questionnaire was divided into two parts, 'A and B'. Part 'A' elicited information on how students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion, while part 'B' sought participants' opinions on curriculum practices that promote social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools. The instrument was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Additionally, qualitative data were gathered through classroom observations, which allow for a triangulation of reported perceptions with observed classroom practices.

A pilot test was conducted with 20 participants before the main study to assess internal consistency, face validity, and item clarity. The instrument's reliability was high, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.85.

4.4 Procedures for data collection and analysis

School administrators aided participant recruitment by distributing invitations and consent forms. To ensure optimal accessibility, questionnaires were available in both digital and paper formats. Participation was completely optional, with the option to opt out at any time without consequence.

To complement and contextualise survey results, the Empathy-Driven Curriculum Practices Checklist, developed by the researchers, was used to undertake structured classroom observations. English and mathematics were the two main subject areas covered by the observations, which were conducted in four classrooms in the sampled schools. To guarantee variability and minimise observer bias, each subject was observed twice. The classroom environment, student engagement levels, teacher-student interactions, and proof of differentiated instruction were among the observation criteria.

The collected data were coded and entered into a computer programme for analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. To answer the research questions, the collected data were organised into themes relevant to the research objectives and analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency count, mean, and standard deviation. Kruskal-Wallis test and chi-square (χ^2) test of independence were used to test hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively, at a 0.05 level of significance.

4.5 Ethical considerations

The study was carried out in compliance with accepted ethical standards governing research involving human participants, including respect for autonomy, informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality protection. All schools involved in the research granted formal approval. Detailed information about the study was provided in clear, accessible language, and participants' right to withdraw without explanation was noted. The study also takes steps to avoid reinforcing labels through research language. Responses were anonymised upon entry, and no personally identifiable information was gathered.

5.0 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The data collected in the study were organised into themes related to the research questions and analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency count, mean, and standard deviation. The Kruskal-Wallis test and chi-square (χ^2) test of independence were used to test the hypotheses formulated in the study. The results and analysis are presented as follows:

Research Question 1: How do students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion?

To answer the research question, a structured questionnaire was used to elicit the participants' opinions. Table 1 presents a summary of the analysis for research question one.

Table 1: How students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion

SN	Item Statements	Respondents	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	SD
1.	Empathy is the ability to understand others' feelings in the school community.	Students	29	17	20	20	-	3.093	1.136
		Teachers	18	16	13	5	12	3.359	1.451
		Principals	1	1	-	-	-	3.571	1.676
2.	Empathy is caring about others' challenges.	Students	41	9	10	26	-	3.244	1.327
		Teachers	26	15	7	9	7	3.317	1.412
		Principals	1	-	-	1	-	2.121	1.055
3.	Empathy entails fairness in school rules and practices.	Students	38	8	12	8	20	3.348	1.335
		Teachers	1	37	18	5	3	3.437	0.852
		Principals	-	1	1	-	-	2.100	1.054
4.	Empathy encourages respect for cultural and social differences.	Students	26	34	9	17	-	3.513	1.286
		Teachers	20	22	14	1	7	3.134	1.237
		Principals	-	-	1	-	1	2.028	0.835
5.	Empathy involves listening respectfully to different opinions during class discussions without judging.	Students	26	30	16	4	10	3.114	1.250
		Teachers	8	25	16	6	9	2.265	1.224
		Principals	1	1	-	-	-	3.357	0.951
6.	Empathy is the ability to feel concern for others' emotions.	Students	36	24	7	10	9	3.405	1.178
		Teachers	13	24	6	9	12	3.078	1.383
		Principals	2	-	-	-	-	3.550	0.967
7.	Empathy helps students from all backgrounds feel seen and heard.	Students	30	27	8	21	-	3.217	1.174
		Teachers	17	16	11	14	6	3.256	1.318
		Principals	1	1	-	-	-	3.107	0.916
8.	Understanding empathy enables teachers to adapt instruction for all learners.	Students	-	40	20	19	7	2.101	1.008
		Teachers	25	11	7	15	6	3.531	1.447
		Principals	-	1	-	1	-	2.250	0.927
9.	Empathy strengthens relationships and trust among students regardless of their differences.	Students	-	42	20	4	20	3.076	1.217
		Teachers	17	18	7	10	12	3.281	1.485
		Principals	1	1	-	-	-	3.321	0.818
10.	Empathy entails creating safer and more welcoming school environments.	Students	-	73	1	8	4	2.803	1.904
		Teachers	16	19	13	9	7	3.125	1.374
		Principals	1	1	-	-	-	3.057	1.432
Average Mean								3.03	1.22

Table 1 shows the participants' understanding of empathy in relation to inclusion. The table indicates the average mean response of 3.03, which equals the benchmark mean of 3.0. Most of the items on the table show moderate levels of agreement. This result implies that students, teachers, and principals have a limited understanding of empathy in relation to respect for differences among learners, including differences in ability, background, and needs, which are key to inclusive education functioning in practice rather than in policy.

Research Question 2: What curriculum practices promote social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools?

To answer the research question, a structured questionnaire was used to elicit the participants' opinions. Table 2 presents a summary of the analysis for research question two.

Table 2: Curriculum practices that promote social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools

SN	Item Statements	Respondents	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	SD
11.	The use of mixed-ability grouping in class tasks enables students to learn from one another and reduces social divisions.	Students	18	31	9	28	-	3.546	1.154
		Teachers	1	47	13	1	2	3.687	0.687
		Principals	1	1	-	-	-	3.428	1.069
12.	Integration of multicultural content across subjects promotes social inclusion.	Students	30	34	4	-	18	3.732	1.589
		Teachers	7	40	13	-	4	3.625	0.806
		Principals	-	1	-	1	-	2.802	0.700
13.	The application of differentiated instruction to meet varied learning needs and abilities promotes social inclusion.	Students	19	35	12	20	-	3.796	1.206
		Teachers	9	42	10	1	2	3.750	0.690
		Principals	1	1	-	-	-	3.107	1.100
14.	Adapting teaching materials for students with varied learning needs, including visual and auditory resources, promotes social inclusion.	Students	-	39	28	12	7	3.151	0.951
		Teachers	2	49	5	5	3	3.656	0.858
		Principals	-	1	1	-	-	3.607	1.286
15.	The use of inclusive language in all classroom communication promotes social inclusion.	Students	8	31	26	21	-	3.357	0.991
		Teachers	2	41	14	1	6	3.500	0.959
		Principals	1	1	-	-	-	3.250	1.456
16.	Encouraging student voice through class discussions, feedback sessions, and decision-making opportunities promotes social inclusion.	Students	7	50	8	-	21	3.500	0.954
		Teachers	4	44	7	4	5	3.593	0.987
		Principals	-	1	-	1	-	3.285	1.013
17.	The use of cooperative learning methods with shared roles promotes social inclusion.	Students	-	42	26	12	6	3.209	0.934
		Teachers	6	36	16	3	3	3.609	0.901
		Principals	-	2	-	-	-	3.000	1.054
18.	Discouraging stereotypes through guided lessons promotes social inclusion.	Students	1	57	19	-	9	3.476	0.954
		Teachers	8	31	18	3	4	3.453	0.871
		Principals	1	1	-	-	-	3.571	0.835
19.	The integration of social learning to build empathy, respect, and self-awareness promotes social inclusion.	Students	2	40	31	8	5	3.290	0.879
		Teachers	3	41	14	4	2	3.578	0.773
		Principals	-	1	-	-	1	2.930	0.951
20.	Flexible assessment methods, such as oral, written, and project-based options, suit different learners and promote social inclusion.	Students	4	36	30	7	9	3.220	1.033
		Teachers	8	44	8	3	1	3.750	0.694
		Principals	-	1	1	-	-	3.642	1.161
Average Mean								3.41	0.98

Table 2 shows curriculum practices that promote social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools. The table presents the average mean response of 3.41, which exceeded the benchmark mean of 3.0. Strong agreement was found across all items in the table, indicating a shared understanding that empathy-driven inclusion practices are not occasional gestures but essential parts of everyday classroom teaching. Curriculum practices such as applying differentiated instruction to address diverse learning needs and using inclusive language in all classroom communication promote social inclusion. Classroom observations support this conclusion, showing that these practices help create an environment where students feel understood, valued, and supported, reinforcing the idea that empathy-driven inclusion is most effective when embedded in daily curriculum practices rather than treated as an addition.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in how students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion.

Data from the questionnaire administered to participants were analysed using the Kruskal-Wallis test. Table 3 summarises the analysis.

Table 3: Summary of Kruskal-Wallis test on how students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion

Group	N	Mean Rank	Kruskal-Wallis H	df	α	P-value	Decision
Students	86	30.94					
Teachers	64	23.50	19.108	2	0.05	.006	Rejected
Principals	2	35.00					

Table 3 revealed a significant difference in how students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion. The Kruskal-Wallis test yielded $H = 19.108$, $p = .006$, with 2 degrees of freedom. Since the p-value of .006 was below the alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis that there was no significant difference in how students, teachers, and principals understand empathy in relation to inclusion was rejected.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between curriculum practices and promotion of social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools.

Data from the questionnaire administered to participants was analysed using the chi-square (χ^2) test of independence. Table 4 summarises the analysis.

Table 4: Summary of Chi-square (χ^2) test of independence on the relationship between curriculum practices and promotion of social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools

N	χ^2 cal.	α	df	χ^2 crit.	P-value	Decision
152	119.95	0.05	36	48.946	.011	Rejected

Table 4 revealed a significant relationship between curriculum practices and promotion of social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools. The result showed that the χ^2 calculated value of 119.95 is greater than the critical value of 48.946 with 36 degrees of freedom. Since the p-value of .011 was below the alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis that there was no significant relationship between curriculum practices and promotion of social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools was rejected.

6.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In exploring empathy in relation to inclusion, the findings indicated that students, teachers, and principals have a limited understanding of empathy within this context. However, the results of the hypothesis tested in Table 3 showed a statistically significant difference ($p = .006 < 0.05$) in how these groups understand empathy concerning inclusion. Consequently, the null hypothesis, which proposed that there was no significant difference in understanding empathy among students, teachers, and principals, was rejected. This finding supports Cooper (2011), who states that a clear understanding of empathy strengthens educators' ability to connect with and respond to students' perspectives and emotions. It also aligns with Slee (2011), who found that understanding empathy within the framework of inclusion helps teachers and school communities appreciate, respond to, and value students' perspectives in ways that promote social participation and mutual recognition beyond labels. On the flip side, Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) and Boyle (2014) suggested that when teachers focus too much on labels, it can lead to stereotyping students; however, viewing empathy as a fundamental element of inclusion assists teachers in adapting instruction for all learners.

The study also found that empathy-driven inclusion practices are not occasional gestures but rather essential components of everyday classroom instruction. Curriculum practices such as applying differentiated instruction to meet diverse learning needs and using inclusive language in all classroom communication promote social inclusion. Classroom observations support this finding, showing that these practices help create an environment where students feel understood, valued, and supported, reinforcing the idea that empathy-driven inclusion is most effective when embedded in daily curriculum activities rather than treated as an addition. The hypothesis tested in Table 4 showed a statistically significant relationship ($p = .011 < 0.05$) between curriculum practices and the promotion of social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools. Therefore, the null hypothesis, that there was no significant relationship between curriculum practices and the promotion of social inclusion among students in Nigerian upper basic schools, was rejected. This result corroborates Wentzel's (2012) findings, which revealed that empathetic teacher practices are linked to stronger student relationships, an improved classroom climate, and reduced marginalisation. The finding also aligns with Calandri et al. (2025) and De Klerk and de Klerk (2018), who found that empathy was associated with the implementation of a supportive learning environment characterised by differentiated and creative teaching approaches, leading to higher student motivation.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded from the findings that empathy-driven curriculum practices in Nigerian upper basic schools goes beyond disability labels by building understanding and respecting differences among learners, including differences in needs, ability, and background, which are key conditions for inclusive education to function in practice rather than in policy. Curriculum

practices such as applying differentiated instruction to address diverse learning needs and using inclusive language in all classroom communication promote social inclusion. The classroom observations carried out also lend credence to this finding, as they revealed that these practices help create a classroom environment where students feel understood, appreciated, and supported. This reinforced the Relational Inclusion Theory, which holds that empathy-driven inclusion is most effective when integrated into daily practices rather than treated as an add-on.

In light of the conclusion, it is recommended that workshops and seminars be organised to equip teachers with practical skills and strategies for implementing an empathy-driven curriculum. This will promote greater understanding, inclusivity, and emotional awareness in the classroom. Teachers should consistently model empathy in their daily practices by paying attention to learners' needs, using inclusive language, and responding to differences with understanding rather than stereotypes. Additionally, teachers should encourage and facilitate students' collaboration in class, such as working in groups with peers of different ability levels. This will help them appreciate others' abilities and support one another.

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