"A Place for Everybody": Students' Perspectives on Inclusive Behavior in School

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Understanding students' perspectives on inclusive behavior is important for addressing the bullying, victimization, and exclusion that many middle school and high school students, particularly marginalized students, continue to face at school. This study explored how students give meaning to inclusive behavior at school and the conditions that support inclusive behavior. Using data from 30 focus groups conducted with students, the findings expand on three primary themes: students' broad descriptions of inclusive behavior, their understanding of the qualities and characteristics of an inclusive person, and their beliefs about what makes a school inclusive. Findings from this study can inform organizational practices to facilitate inclusive behavior in schools in a manner consistent with how students themselves view inclusivity.

Keywords: adolescence; diversity; focus group interviews; high schools; middle schools; peer interaction/friendship; qualitative research; student development

Although some adolescents experience school as a positive environment, full of social opportunities and connection, many other middle and high school students instead face daily social challenges (Killen et al., 2009; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). Students who are marginalized often experience a greater share of these negative social interactions, effectively excluding them from the social fabric of their schools. For instance, higher rates of bullying, physical victimization, exclusion, structural discrimination, and prejudice events are reported by students with disabilities (Bear et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2011), transgender and other LGBTQ+ youth (Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Scherr & Mayer, 2019), youth from immigrant families (Maynard et al., 2016), and racial and ethnic minority students (Xu et al., 2020). Experiences of marginalization increase the risk of negative proximal and distal outcomes, including dropout, suicide attempts, incarceration, and school truancy (Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Rose et al., 2018; Scherr & Mayer, 2019), making it critical that schools create inclusive and safe environments for all students.

Prosocial behavior—in which students act in a way that "benefits others or promotes harmonious relationships with others" (Bergin, 2019, p. 93)—provides a framework for how schools can support students in moving away from behaviors that are negative or exclude others (e.g., bias-based bullying) and toward behaviors that promote social inclusion (e.g., inviting a peer to join a group). Inclusive behavior, as a subset of prosocial behavior that explicitly focuses on benefitting others by welcoming them, is of particular relevance to schools as they move to decrease marginalization and create overall more welcoming and supportive climates. While studies on prosocial behavior have tended to focus on decontextualized behaviors captured by surveys or experiments (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2015; Güroğlu et al., 2014), research on prosocial behavior in a real-world setting may prove more informative for schools because it demonstrates that prosocial behavior encompasses a broader range of practices, such as sharing, helping, and supporting one another, among other such inclusive behavior (Bergin et al., 2003).

The present study explores how students in school define and describe inclusivity along three dimensions: how peers exhibit inclusive behavior in school, the characteristics of students who are inclusive, and the broader school context that supports inclusive behavior among the students. Although existing research has found that personal characteristics (e.g., social competence, prosocialness) and environmental factors (e.g., school climate) impact students' tendencies toward inclusive behavior (Nishina

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et al., 2019; Siperstein et al., 2018, 2019), relatively little is known about how students interpret behaviors to be inclusive or exclusionary. It is important to understand how students give meaning to behavior in terms of what they perceive to be inclusive in the context of interactions at school. As stakeholders in their own education and "expert observers" of peer relationships and the social world around them (Avramidis et al., 2017, p. 70), students have valuable insights that can help researchers understand how students define and make meaning of inclusive behavior, including social and contextual factors that support inclusive behavior. This understanding can then inform how schools select practices and policies to promote inclusivity.

Recent research on inclusive behavior toward students who are marginalized does suggest that socially inclusive behaviors occur naturally at the interpersonal level within school contexts. For instance, studies have found that a majority of students without disabilities report interacting socially with students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Siperstein et al., 2019) and identify students with disabilities as part of the peer group structure of the classroom (Farmer et al., 2019). Inclusive behaviors toward marginalized students, like students in special education or ethnic minorities, are more likely to be initiated by students who are more prosocial and empathetic and perceive their school as an inclusive environment (Albert et al., 2016; Nishina et al., 2019; Siperstein et al., 2018, 2019). However, there is less research that incorporates the perspectives of students regarding inclusive behavior, which is needed to enhance schools' understanding of how to promote inclusivity.

To understand students' perspectives of inclusive behavior, the researchers conducted focus groups with middle school and high school students to elicit their interpretations of inclusivity. The goal was to explore how students give meaning to inclusive behavior in general and in reference to a specific example of a marginalized student group, students with disabilities, based on the historical association between the concept of inclusion and students with disabilities (Francisco et al., 2020). Focus groups allow students to describe typical behavior within their everyday contexts while also allowing for the interactive dynamics of a group discussion to enrich and elaborate student dialogue (Liamputtong, 2011). Previous focus group studies have demonstrated that students have a multifaceted understanding of kindness behaviors (Cotney & Banerjee, 2019), prosocial behaviors (Bergin et al., 2003), and their own well-being at school (Simmons et al., 2015). Additional research has examined inclusive education practices and found that students with and without disabilities contributed meaningful perspectives on what schools can do to help support students with disabilities be socially included within their classroom (Shogren et al., 2015; Tsang, 2013).

The exploration of students' perceptions of inclusive behavior was guided by three research questions:

Research Question 1: How do students define inclusive behavior?
Research Question 2: What do students identify as the qualities of inclusive peers?
Research Question 3: What do students view as characteristic of an inclusive school?

These three questions were intended to capture perspectives across multiple dimensions of inclusive behavior—from the features of inclusive behavior itself to the broader interpersonal and structural context in which inclusive behavior occurs. By gathering students' understanding of what inclusive behavior is, their interpretation of the qualities and characteristics of an inclusive person, and their perspectives of what makes a school inclusive, this study sought to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how to support and promote inclusive behavior and prosocial engagement in schools.

Methods

Participants

A total of 30 focus groups were conducted with students without disabilities at eight middle schools and eight high schools across 10 states in the Northeast, West, Midwest, and South regions of the United States. This article is an analysis of focus groups conducted with students without disabilities; see van Gaasbeek et al. (2022) for the results of a parallel study with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Focus group sites were selected to reflect a geographically, socioeconomically, and racially/ethnically diverse sample (see Table 1 for school-level demographic information). Schools were recruited through an ongoing collaboration with Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS; Special Olympics, 2021), an inclusive extracurricular program that aims to bring students with and without IDD together through inclusive sports and clubs, youth leadership opportunities, and whole school awareness events (e.g., pep rallies, assemblies).

To capture a variety of perspectives on inclusive behavior, school staff were asked to purposefully sample from UCS participants (those actively engaged in inclusive school activities) and non-UCS participants (those not engaged in inclusive school activities). Differentiating groups based on participation in UCS allowed each group to draw from shared experiences that may have influenced their perspectives. In addition, most high school focus groups were separated by grade (e.g., ninth and 10th graders and 11th and 12th graders) to reduce social pressures created by upperclassmen-lowerclassmen dynamics (Adler et al., 2019). Within these guidelines, staff contacts at each school were asked to select a representative, racially and gender-diverse student sample. The participants included 77 middle school and 119 high school students. See Table 2 for detailed sample demographics.

Procedures

Three members of the research team conducted the focus groups during the 2018–2019 school year. Two project coordinators and one director of program evaluation, all graduate-educated White females with several years of experience conducting research related to the inclusion of students with IDD, took turns serving as either the primary facilitator, who moderated the focus group according to a semistructured protocol, or secondary facilitator, who observed student behavior and engagement and asked clarifying follow-up questions as necessary (Greene & Hogan, 2005).

Table 1
School Demographics

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Region		
West	4	25
South	5	31
Northeast	1	6
Midwest	6	38
Income (city)		
$25,000–$45,000	6	38
$46,000–$65,000	5	31
$66,000–$85,000	3	19
$86,000–$105,000	2	13
Population size (city)		
5,000–25,000	5	31
25,001–50,000	2	13
50,001–75,000	3	19
70,000–100,000	6	38
Percentage White (city)		
0–25	3	19
26–50	2	13
51–75	7	45
76–100	3	19

Note. Percentages and total may not add up to total sample because of missing data and/or being permitted to select more than one option.

Focus groups contained seven students on average (ranging from three to nine students in each group) and took approximately 45 minutes during the school day. Following each focus group, a survey was distributed to collect student demographics. An initial round of 15 groups was conducted in the fall, with an additional 15 focus groups conducted in the spring to follow up and expand on emerging data with new groups of students.

The researchers used a semistructured protocol during the focus groups to explore students' perspectives on inclusive behavior in their school. This format allowed for both consistency between focus groups and flexibility to follow up on student responses. The protocol included questions related to the students' school environment and culture, students' understanding of the characteristics of an inclusive person, and the factors that support and promote inclusive behavior (see Table 3 for protocol questions). The protocol was iteratively revised throughout the study based on ongoing review of the data. Minor changes involved modifying introductory questions to better elicit specific information about students' social activities (e.g., questions about the school were changed to questions about the students' friend groups) and adding optional probes to elicit greater discussion among focus group participants (e.g., "Are there any other reasons that might have influenced that decision?"). One hypothetical scenario from the fall protocol, involving including a student with a disability during lunchtime (Scenario 2a; see Table 3), was replaced in the spring protocol with a scenario involving inviting a student with a disability to hang out on a weekend (Scenario 2b; see Table 3) to better elicit social factors relevant to inclusion.

In addition to general questions, the protocol included scenarios in which students were asked about certain situations involving a hypothetical student. The scenarios varied in terms of setting (e.g., cafeteria, classroom, weekend hangout), characteristics of the person to be included (e.g., new student, student with a disability), and level of familiarity (e.g., stranger, friend). In one scenario, students were asked to consider a situation in which a hypothetical student is faced with including a new student in a class project; in the other, students were asked to consider a situation involving a hypothetical student and another student with a disability. These variations were intended to reflect a range of situations that adolescents encounter in their social lives at school and encourage candid responses associated with inclusive behavior. Scenarios were presented in the third person to decrease social desirability bias, reducing social pressure for students to present themselves favorably to the moderators and focus group peers by discussing hypothetical students in hypothetical situations.

Data Analysis

Three members of the research team (including the first two authors; a PhD-level researcher, a master's-level graduate assistant, and a master's-level project coordinator) analyzed the data using an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012) within the guiding framework of the three dimensions (i.e., inclusive behavior, inclusive students, and inclusive schools). After reviewing all transcripts, analysis took place in three rounds. In the first round, a preliminary coding guide was developed by the first author and project coordinator during an exploratory analysis of selected transcripts. These initial codes were iteratively adapted to incorporate new data, including adding codes, combining codes, removing codes, and modifying codes. Codes were finalized when all researchers agreed they accurately captured the data and data saturation was reached. In the second round, the first two authors independently coded all 30 transcripts using the finalized coding guide; all transcripts were reviewed by the project coordinator to assess coding reliability and adjudicate any discrepancies based on firsthand focus group knowledge. In the third round, the researchers used QSR's NVivo 12 software to review the coded data, group codes, query transcripts, and view total occurrences of each code. This facilitated the identification, review, and definition of larger themes through the clustering of data into themes and subthemes within the larger three-dimensional framework. Themes were thoroughly reviewed to assess their representation of the data and overall quality (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Other validity procedures throughout the study included adequate sampling for data saturation, extensive discussion of data and documentation of the research process, reviewing and reconciling disconfirming evidence, and reaching theme consensus (Nowell et al., 2017).

Results

Throughout the focus groups, students drew from personal experiences of being excluded, being included, and including others to describe their interpretations of inclusive behavior. In the following sections, findings are presented on students' perceptions

Table 2
Student Demographics

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	75	39
Female	119	61
Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	44	23
White	125	68
Black or African American	43	23
American Indian or Alaskan Native	14	8
Asian	17	9
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	10	6
Age		
12 or younger	13	7
13	45	2
14	29	15
15	29	15
16	26	13
17	34	18
18+	18	9
Grade		
6	4	2
7	21	11
8	52	27
9	29	15
10	23	12
11	28	14
12	37	19

Note. Percentages and total may not add up to total sample because of missing data and/or being permitted to select more than one option.

around the three dimensions of inclusive behavior explored in the focus groups: students' descriptions of inclusive behavior, their understanding of the qualities and characteristics of an inclusive person, and their beliefs about what makes a school inclusive.

Inclusive Behavior

In defining inclusive behavior, students provided examples and descriptions that suggested they understood inclusive behavior as encompassing a wide variety of actions. As one student noted: "I feel like there's different levels and forms of inclusion. Inviting someone to work with you on a group project or sit with you at lunch is different than inviting someone to hang out with you" (S7, G28), illustrating that a number of different behaviors could be considered inclusive. Some of the behaviors perceived as inclusive involved reaching out to others. As one student described, inclusive behavior can "just be simple things...you don't need to sit down and have a full conversation, but just like 'Hey, how are you?'" (S4, G5). Another student similarly noted that being inclusive includes "mak[ing] a point to go up and say hi if there's someone new in the class" (S5, G20) or acknowledging a fellow student with a smile or a wave.

Other behaviors perceived as inclusive were described as involving more effortful and engaging gestures. These examples

included actions such as "being social with people that don't have the opportunity to be with friends...just giving them the option to be part of the group... [and] included in other activities rather than sitting by themselves" (S3, G10) or being willing to "include somebody in the lunch table" (S3, G30). Other students described actions such as taking "the big step of inviting someone in...it's harder or it's more work, but...you're still making them feel included" (S6, G28). These examples highlight the wide variety of behaviors that students interpreted as inclusive, which were informed by their personal experiences of including others and being included or excluded themselves.

Across these various examples, students noted that they looked to the intent of a person's behavior to determine whether it was inclusive or not; the primary intention was often perceived as helping someone feel accepted by their peer group. For example, in discussing why someone might include a new classmate, one student noted that "they wanted him to feel welcome and that they're not alone" (S4, G12); another student expressed, "You want to make the kid feel part of the group...you want him to feel happy" (S6, G18). Similarly, other students described inclusive behavior as intending to "mak[e] sure that everyone's involved in everything that you're doing and not leaving people out" (S7, G10). Ultimately, inclusive behavior was perceived as being intended to build community and relationships, with one student describing it as "inviting that person into their group and making them feel as though they fit in with everybody else" (S8, G15). As these examples illustrate, students perceived inclusive behaviors as intended to help students feel part of a group.

Students further explained how their desire to welcome others into a group through inclusive actions was intended to support others and create a sense that everyone was cared about at school. One student said being inclusive was about "show[ing] them kindness. You treat others how you want to be treated" (S7, G5). Another student, when discussing how they decided to include another, described thinking "maybe I should [include] to make someone else's day feel better" (S5, G10). Students repeatedly emphasized that even a small gesture could go a long way, as one explained: "I feel like the people that make an effort to [be] like, 'Oh, how are you? We haven't talked. Oh, what's going on?' Just stuff like that, simple stuff, means a lot" (S4, G5).

Students interpreted these acts as inclusive because it "kind of show[s] them you that you really, genuinely, want to be their friend" (S8, G4). This was particularly important for situations in which students might appear sad, lonely, or upset. Students talked about how they wanted to "make that person's day by giving them your attention, making them feel special" (S4, G14). This desire to help create positive experiences for others is further illustrated in one students' comment that "if it makes them feel a lot better about themself, it's worth doing it" (S6, G19). As reflected throughout the focus groups, students felt that inclusive behavior was a way of helping students feel supported at school.

Overall, students' interpretations of inclusive behavior were broad, ranging from simple gestures to more effortful and engaging actions. A crucial element of which behaviors were described as inclusive was the implied intent of the action. Inclusive behaviors, in contrast to common courtesies such as being polite, were distinguished by their intention to help others feel welcome as part of a group and generate positive emotions.

Table 3
Focus Group Questions

Group introductions	• What is your first name? • What grade are you in? • How long have you been in UCS? (for UCS participants) • What do you like best about school right now? (for non-UCS)

School structure questions	• We're interested in what this school is like. Tell me about your school.
	• What are the hallways like before school and in between classes?
	• What are your classes like? What's it like to be in the classroom?
	• What's the cafeteria/lunchtime like?
	   ○ How do you/kids decide where to sit?
	   ○ Are there kids who eat alone/don't have friends to sit with?
	• Do you get recess? What is recess like?
	• What do other people think of your school (students who don't go here or other adults).
	   ○ Is it different than how you think about your school?
	• We're interested in what students are like in middle/high school. Tell is what the students at your school are like.
	   ○ PROBE: Are most students at your school the same, or are there a lot of different types of students?
	   ○ (If necessary) If you had to describe the study body to someone else, how would you describe them? How would someone else describe the student body?
	   ○ PROBE: What is your friend group like at school?
	   ○ (If necessary) If you had to describe your group to someone else, how would you describe them?
	   ○ (If necessary) What do you think other people think of your group?

Scenario 1	We're interested in the relationships between students and schools. I'm going to describe a situation to you and then I have a few questions about it. The situation is: In a social studies class, students form groups to work on a project. A student quickly forms a group with their friends, where they begin discussing their ideas, but the student notices a new kid in the class looking around for a group. This student wants to ask the new kid to join their group, looks around the room, and decides to invite the new kid over. • So, why do you think this student decided to invite the new kid to join their group? • What are some reasons that might have influenced that decision? • Do you think that's what most students would do? (Who wouldn't/why wouldn't they?) • In that situation, are there things that would make it easier or harder to go over and say hi? • What if the student wants to ask the new student to join their group but their friends don't want to? Let's imagine the student decides to invite the new student over anyway. Why do you think they student did that?
Scenario 2a	Now we're going to do a different scenario: It's lunchtime in a high school and a student sees a friend sitting across the cafeteria. This student's friend has a disability and is in a special education classroom that sits together during lunch on the other side of the cafeteria. This student wants to go over and say hi to their friend but looks around the cafeteria and decides not to. • Why do you think they decided not to go over and say hi to their friend? • What are some reasons that might have influenced that decision? What do you think they would say about why they didn't go over? • Do you think that's what most students at [NAME OF SCHOOL] would do? (Who wouldn't/why wouldn't they?) • In that situation, are there things that would make it easier/harder to go over and say hi? • PROBE: If these students at your school were here, what do you think they would say about why they didn't go over?
Scenario 2b	• Now we have another situation we'd like to ask you about. The situation is: A student is planning to meet up with friends to hang out on Friday night and thinks about inviting their friend with a disability. This student's friend is not in their immediate friend circle, but they hang out at school. This student wants to invite their friend with a disability but ultimately decides not to. • So, why do you think they decided not to invite their friend to hang out? • In this situation, are there things that would make it easier or harder to invite their friend with a disability to hang out? • Do you think most students at [SCHOOL] wouldn't invite their friend with a disability to hang out on Friday night? If not, why not?

Inclusive behavior	• Have you ever heard of the word "inclusion" or "inclusive"?
	   ○ What do you know about it? What does it mean? Where have you heard about it?
	• What are some words that describe an inclusive person? Just throw some words out there.
	   ○ Why those words? What do they mean to you?
	• Are there things that make it hard for a person to be inclusive? Are there things that make it easier?
	• How do you think people become inclusive? Is it taught? Born that way?
	• Do you think you act the same or different with friends in your neighborhood as you do at school?
	   ○ If differently: How do you act different, and why do you think that is?
	• Have there been situations for you that lead you to become more inclusive?
	   ○ PROBE: Has there ever been a time when you did not feel included? How has that impacted you?
	• Can you think of a time when you realized you wanted to be inclusive or that being inclusive was important to you?
	• Do you think a school can be "inclusive"?
	   ○ Describe what an inclusive school might look like.
	   ○ Who influences this?
	   ○ Who do you think is responsible for this?
	• (For UCS participants) Why did you first get involved in UCS? Did someone suggest joining? Was a friend involved?

Wrap-up	• Anything else you want to say about the discussion we had today?

Note. USC = Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools.

Inclusive Students

In addition to describing inclusive actions, students also identified a series of personal characteristics that exemplified students who engaged in these behaviors. When students were asked about what types of people were inclusive, many students initially responded with personality characteristics such as "kind" (S8, G17), "caring" (S6, G7), and "nice" (S2, G15); these traits were echoed by many students. When prompted to describe an inclusive person beyond these attributes, one student commented that an inclusive person was "a people person. Like, they're friends with everybody" (S4, G3). Other students similarly used "outgoing" (S5, G22), "well known" (S3, G10), or "social" (S2, G12) to describe the types of students who were inclusive.

Students explained why these social characteristics were important for being inclusive: One student expressed that "more outgoing people are more easier to get involved first because they're more open and more approachable" (S6, G13); another noted that "you have to be outgoing to be inclusive...because you have to be willing to change. And you have to be willing to meet a new person" (S8, G11). The inclusive peer, according to one student, is "social, because in order to be inclusive of others, you have to interact with other people, and you can't just be to yourself all the time" (S2, G12). A willingness to socialize with others was seen as necessary to being inclusive.

However, not all students agreed that social and outgoing qualities were associated with inclusive behavior. Some students noted that an inclusive student went beyond being well known or social, expressing that some "people who are really popular are kind of...fake" (S5, G4) and may engage in disingenuous inclusive behavior. Students saw some well-known and socially popular peers as engaging in inclusive behavior only to "make them look better" (S3, G1) rather than caring about others; thus, these qualities were not perceived as enough to make a person inclusive.

Instead, students suggested it was also important that an inclusive person also express an openness to new people and ideas. As one student noted, "You have to be very open-minded all the time. If you're close-minded then you're never going to get anywhere with being inclusive. You're just going to stay in your little group of people" (S7, G5). Students saw this ability to be open-minded and "not very quick to judge" (S4, G10) others who are different from them as requiring more effort than socializing, looking beyond oneself and being open to the needs of others by "tak[ing] into consideration what other people want to do" (S2, G9). For example, one student suggested than an inclusive student went above and beyond common courtesies:

> Anybody can see someone in the hall and just smile. That's common courtesy. It takes an outgoing person to stop someone in the hall that you've, maybe never seen before and give them a smile and talk to them about their day. Maybe, if you've just seen someone that's sad, too, you can go to them and ask them what's wrong. Like, "Can I help you with something?" (S7, G11)

In this case, the student suggested that the inclusive student went beyond being outgoing, approaching another student and offering to help them in a difficult moment, even without knowing them. Students perceived this demonstration of caring about others as more effortful than the typical behavior they might extend when socializing with a friend or familiar classmate.

Furthermore, students commented that they viewed leadership as an important quality of an inclusive student. For example, as one student described,

> A lot of peer tutors step up and they're like, "Hi." And then all of their friends are like, "Hi." Because a lot of people in the group, they have leaders and followers. And a lot of people are influenced by good leaders. (S9, G11)

This student explained that inclusive students can have a positive impact on a school's culture. As another student noted, "I think a big part of it is really being a leader and being understanding of the people around you" (S5, G4). Inclusive students lead others by understanding and treating their peers as they would like to be treated. In some cases, inclusive leadership involved sacrificing one's own needs for the sake of other students and "put[ting] themselves behind and other people first" (S4, G3). Students perceived inclusive peers as those who were willing to lead by example, engaging in inclusive actions and encouraging others to do the same.

Students also expressed that the ability to empathize with the experiences of others was an important characteristic of the inclusive student. They described empathizing with the experience of being new at school, which contributed to their own inclusive behaviors: "I guess I've been the new kid a lot throughout school...and I guess every time I see a new kid I know how they would feel and I would always try to invite people in" (S2, G6). This response illustrates the process by which students drew from their own experiences to understand why others might be left out.

Students who had been included before described being positively impacted by that inclusion and in turn motivated to give back. As one student described it, "If you've been included before, you just feel like, 'Oh, that was a good experience, so I need to do that back,' like give that good deed back to people" (S5, 12). Another student noted, "I know how it feels to be left out, or be sad, or not invited to something. So, I guess I just want to make everyone not feel like that" (S2, G11). In some instances, students described empathy as helping students understand when another person might *not* want to be included and when a student might be "hoping they could be by themselves" (S6, G20). In those cases, empathy might influence a student to refrain from engaging in inclusive behavior. However, most students said empathy motivated them to include and agreed that the ability to connect with others' feelings was an important capacity for inclusive students.

In some cases, students did not directly connect to their peer's experiences or identities but could still imagine what it might be like to be left out. Students noted differences between themselves and their peers, including the fact that "each student does have different things that make us upset" (S2, G28), but they did not necessarily perceive this as a barrier to inclusive action. For example, in the case of choosing whether to include a peer with a disability, one student said, "If it was me in that [student's] place, I

wouldn't like it, people discriminating me, because of my disability" (S4, G2). This student's example illustrates the ability to take the perspective of a peer despite the differences between them.

Beyond empathy, students expressed that inclusive students held values focused on the well-being and inherent worth of others. For example, one student noted that inclusive students "value somebody [based] on their person" (S7, G13) rather than judge based on appearance or identity; they saw this value as particularly relevant when those identities were considered marginalized, such as having a disability or coming from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. In particular, students explained that "everyone has worth. Everyone has value" (S8, G13), regardless of these identity differences. Furthermore, they expressed that these differences were valuable and important and did not preclude a shared sense of identity or human worth. As one student shared: "Everybody is the same but everyone's different. Everyone is unique, but we still have the same needs and wants and goals, and we all just want to have fun" (S6, G28). Students' understanding and valuing of other people, particularly those who are different from themselves, was the foundation of their belief that including others is "the right thing to do" (S4, G14). As another student said:

It does not matter if you have a disability. It doesn't matter if you look this way. It doesn't matter if you don't understand what I'm saying or whatever. If you're their friend, you can hang out with them whenever you want to. (S6, G20)

As described previously, students believed inclusive values were important motivators of including others who might look different or have different abilities, experiences, and identities than their own.

Overall, students tended to see inclusive students as outgoing and social, with an openness and willingness to engage beyond everyday peer interactions. In addition, they saw inclusive students as peer leaders, who set an example for others. Last, they described the inclusive student as empathetic and valuing inclusion. Students believed that these qualities and characteristics, often in combination, served as the foundation and motivation of inclusive behaviors.

Inclusive School

In addition to their discussions of inclusive behavior and inclusive people, students expressed ideas related to what makes a school inclusive. Their discussions revolved around three primary subthemes: the influence of a school's physical environment, extracurricular programming, and teacher models of inclusive behavior. Each of these was perceived as having the potential to create more inclusive schools by increasing opportunities for inclusive social interactions and modeling an inclusive school culture.

Physical environment. Students noted that the physical and spatial arrangement of the school, especially in relation to students with disabilities, was important in creating opportunities for engaging in inclusive behavior. Even in noninclusive situations, such as schools with separate special education classrooms, students explained that inclusive behavior still occurred when

there were opportunities, both structured and unstructured, for social interactions with peers that were new or different from themselves. For example, one high school student perceived a morning routine of interaction between the students in special education and their general education peers as reflecting an inclusive school:

Every morning…the special needs program over there is in front of the glass doors. Everyone walks through the doors, and they're all sitting right there. They help me out. They open the door and I say, "Good morning. Hi." Or even [student name]'s always there. We always converse in the morning. So, we see them around all the time. (S4, G13)

Despite these situations reflecting a clear separation between students with and without disabilities, the focus group participants perceived these regular interactions as inclusive and as important in creating inclusive school environments. In students' views, schools supported inclusive interactions when students with and without disabilities had the opportunity to encounter each other in the hallway, see each other in classes, or spend unstructured time together at school.

Extracurricular programming. Students further described an inclusive school as one with intentional avenues for sustained, positive experiences with all types of peers, particularly through extracurricular programming. As one student shared,

There's kind of a place for everybody [at this school]. If you don't like sports, you can do dance. If you don't want to do that, you can do [a] musical or play. But there's kind of just a spot for everybody. (S3, G30)

By providing students with opportunities to express themselves and explore different interests, schools conveyed a sense of openness to their students' differences; one student noted, "There's so many opportunities…it kind of brings all different types of people together" (S2, G29), which seemed to create a place in the school community for all students. Students described how their school allowed students to design and run their own clubs: "If you don't have a program that necessarily suits you, you can start a club. The Share The Love Club…started because kids were really looking for options to get involved in the community" (S4, G5). Students interpreted clubs and the ability to start their own clubs as inclusive:

Schools can be accepting of everybody and have clubs for every interest, that's another way that schools can be inclusive. Just letting people know that no matter what your interests are, no matter what you think or what you believe in, you can still come to our school and we have something here for you. (S8, G5)

As exemplified here, students saw an inclusive school as one that offered social opportunities for everyone, facilitated interactions that created an inclusive environment, and celebrated a wide variety of interests.

Students also described some of the clubs in their school as oriented toward student groups that may otherwise be excluded, creating targeted opportunities to encourage inclusive behavior.

For example, many schools had Unified Clubs or peer mentoring programs (e.g., ZLinks, Positivity Project, Best Buddies Club), which bring together students with and without disabilities to plan events and promote inclusion at school. Students often talked about how these clubs created better relationships with previously unfamiliar peers, with one student noting: "You're helping people all the time…you're getting to know people even if you're not necessarily talking to them all the time, but you're still there for the person" (S3, G12). These clubs were particularly helpful as learning experiences for students who may have minimally interacted with students with disabilities. As one student said:

> Going into…Unified [extracurricular programming] last year, I had no idea what was going to happen, how the kids would react—like if they would do the same thing you would do and then as you learn, they look up to other students as their role models because some don't have that. (S6, G26)

As this student suggested, the club helped shape their experience of what it meant to interact with students with disabilities. Although students mentioned many clubs for students with disabilities, there were other examples. One school even had a "new students club so new students here can meet each other" (S2, G8). These descriptions highlight how opportunities to learn about others and engage with peers different from themselves through school-based extracurricular activities encouraged students to engage in inclusive behaviors, in turn creating a greater school environment that was perceived as inclusive.

Teachers as models. Students also discussed the role of their classroom teachers in creating an inclusive school environment for students of all abilities, experiences, and identities. Students felt that many of their teachers modeled inclusive instructional practices, helping "get every kid involved even if [they're] new or different from others" (S7, G9). For example, students described how teachers paired students with unfamiliar peers or encouraged them to work with new students for class projects. One student also described different teacher strategies used to tailor lesson content based on individual students' needs, noting that their teachers "take time to make sure…make sure that everyone is going at their own pace…so that they're not just blowing by everything and taking it slow if you need it" (S5, G4). Students expressed that these strategies impacted their personal experience of classes, understanding of different learning needs, and their confidence in working with other students at school outside of their friend group.

According to students, teachers embodied inclusive norms by demonstrating a positive regard for their students. One student commented that "some teachers, they really care about your own personal life if you have problems. I've seen teachers that really actually care" (S7, G4). As one student described, "The teachers are very connected with you on an emotional level" (S6, G4). This sense of connection transcended the classroom, as students explained that their teachers "care about what we do and what kind of people we are. They don't worry just about teaching us" (S8, G6). Even when struggling with personal problems, one student commented that their teacher "was very supportive and

took me aside, and made that her priority" (S5, G4). Students felt that caring and invested teachers helped them feel that adults "want to interact with us and know how we're doing" (S3, G11) whether in or outside of school.

Ultimately, by supporting students academically and personally at school and valuing them as unique individuals, students said that teachers conveyed that they were "really trying to help everyone feel included and not just feel left out" (S8, G4). This led students to feel supported at school and gave them a sense that "nobody really falls through the cracks…because of…the mindset of the teachers" (S8, G18). Although not all teachers were perceived by students as having a positive influence, expressing "you talk to them and it's like talking to a stranger" (S6, G20), most students conveyed that their teachers gave them a sense of support at school, which students expressed helped them to act inclusively. Students' perceptions that teachers engaged in inclusive behavior toward their students created a sense that students were valued as individuals, beyond their academic performance, and served as an important model for students' own inclusive behavior.

Overall, students perceived an inclusive school as one that supported inclusive behavior by encouraging a culture of welcoming and openness. Students noted that schools supported opportunities for inclusive behavior by physically including students, particularly students with disabilities. In addition, they felt that inclusive schools provided extracurricular programming for all students that encouraged inclusive behavior. Last, students said that teachers and other school staff were a crucial element of creating an inclusive school and supporting inclusive behavior by bringing students together and modeling inclusivity for their students.

Discussion

Students' descriptions of what it means to be inclusive in school reflected a multifaceted understanding of inclusive behaviors across multiple dimensions: descriptions of inclusive behavior itself, the qualities of inclusive students, and characteristics of an inclusive school. Students described inclusive behavior as encompassing a wide range of behaviors—including simple gestures (e.g., saying hi in the hallway) and actions requiring more effort (e.g., inviting someone to hang out)—intended to help others feel welcomed, included, and part of a group. Students described the social qualities of inclusive students, such as being outgoing and having leadership skills, while emphasizing the importance of empathy and inclusive values as the foundation of inclusive behavior. Inclusive schools were characterized as places that supported opportunities for inclusive behavior by providing physically inclusive spaces, inclusive extracurricular programming, and staff modeling of inclusive behavior for all students. These findings have implications for schools and researchers across the three dimensions explored in this study: (a) the current conceptualization of inclusive behavior and inclusive relationships; (b) the qualities, characteristics, and skills of inclusive people that schools can support; and (c) the environment schools can provide that is conducive to and facilitates inclusive behavior. Each of these is discussed further below.

First, the current findings have important implications for how researchers and educators alike conceptualize inclusive behavior, which can inform future studies and the development of school-based interventions. For instance, the findings support the conceptualization of inclusive behavior as a subset of prosocial behavior but takes our collective understanding one step further by expanding current conceptualizations of behavior regarded as inclusive. Students described inclusive behavior as intended to welcome others into a group or bring in others who are left out or excluded, which is consistent with the goals of prosocial behavior (Bergin, 2019). Additionally, students' examples of inclusive behavior in this study reinforce examples from previous studies of prosocial behavior, such as befriending someone who is alone (Bergin et al., 2003), further supporting inclusive behavior as a type of prosocial behavior. Rather than describing inclusive behavior itself as one type of action, students took an expansive view of inclusive behavior. Thus, it may be beneficial for educators to conceptualize real-world inclusive behavior as multidimensional and broad, as students do, when attempting to increase inclusive behavior in schools. By being aware of the broad range of behaviors perceived as inclusive, school staff can reinforce and increase incidental inclusive behavior that is already occurring in the school.

The findings also suggest that students conceptualize the dynamics of socially inclusive relationships differently than what is considered "ideal" social inclusion by researchers and educators. Students did describe important elements of social inclusion such as recognition, being asked to join a group, and being interpersonally engaged (Cobigo et al., 2016). However, it is unclear if students recognized the importance of reciprocity in their relationships, involving mutual trust and respect (Cobigo et al., 2016; Simplican et al., 2015; Waitoller & Annamma, 2017). Instead, students appeared to feel a sense of paternalism or benevolent ableism (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019), viewing themselves as the helpers, protectors, or saviors of peers from marginalized backgrounds. For instance, students described a helper/helpee dynamic in which they were "helping people all the time"; this is consistent with prior research in which students described taking on the role of a "facilitator of help and support" in relationships with marginalized peers (Shogren et al., 2015, p. 250). Students in the current study also used "othering" language, describing groups of students as "the special needs group over there." Thus, schools should facilitate the development of truly reciprocal relationships between students of all backgrounds and discourage inequitable social dynamics.

Second, students' interpretations of the qualities of an inclusive person have important implications for how schools can teach students to be more inclusive. In addressing and teaching underlying social and emotional skills to students in the context of school-wide expectations of inclusive behavior, schools can foster the development of inclusive behavior and promote an overall inclusive environment. For instance, classroom teachers can provide direct instruction to all students focused on increasing skills like empathy and leadership, which are linked with inclusive and prosocial behavior in the current study and past research (e.g., Karagianna & Montgomery, 2018; Siperstein et al., 2018; Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2014). In addition, schools can embed this direct classroom instruction within a larger school-wide approach that reinforces these qualities and skills (e.g., Caring School Community; Collaborative Classroom, n.d.), thereby creating a school-wide environment in which inclusive behavior is socially normative in and outside of the classroom.

Third, the current findings have implications for how schools can structure physical spaces, extracurricular programming, and teaching practices to create inclusive school environments. For instance, some students in the focus groups mentioned the impact of location (e.g., hallway) and timing (e.g., between classes) on inclusive behavior in that when students were more spatially segregated, opportunities for inclusive behavior became more limited (e.g., Soja, 2013; Waitoller & Annamma, 2017). As such, schools should look to increase inclusive behavior through efforts to bring all students physically together throughout the school day and school building. The physical inclusion of all students can create increased opportunities for simple gestures of inclusion and help reduce spatial injustices. However, physical inclusion and efforts toward spatial justice in special education may not result in *social* inclusion (Carter et al., 2005; Simplican et al., 2015).

To go beyond physical inclusion, schools can turn to structured programming that offers opportunities for social inclusion and personal engagement for students of all backgrounds. For students with disabilities, schools can offer programs like Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools, which brings students with and without intellectual and developmental disability together through inclusive sports and clubs. For LGBTQ+ students, these structured opportunities could take the form of Gender-Sexuality/Gay-Straight Alliances (Poteat et al., 2017). Schools can also offer various affinity groups for marginalized populations (e.g., Parsons & Ridley, 2012), which can increase marginalized students' feelings of inclusion and belonging by creating culturally affirming spaces. Schools should go beyond offering unstructured social opportunities based on physical proximity toward intentional programming that fosters positive social interaction and cooperative learning activities. These structured opportunities allow all students to engage in normative school activities and create a sense of connection.

The findings also highlight the critical role of teachers in promoting inclusive behavior. Inclusive teachers were seen as helping bring students together through actions such as pairing unfamiliar students to work together and encouraging students to reach out to new students. The characteristics of inclusive teaching practices are consistent with findings from previous research regarding culturally inclusive teachers, who were seen as having a kind disposition, being available to students, showing a personal interest in students' well-being, and providing affective support and instructional scaffolding (Garza, 2009). Teachers are crucial to increasing inclusive behavior among students in schools through instructional practices that bring students together and proactively establish inclusive classroom dynamics (Farmer et al., 2019; Tsang, 2013). Thus, schools seeking to facilitate inclusive behavior should encourage and reward teachers who show personal interest in their students and embed inclusive practices within their instruction.

Limitations and Future Directions

Focus group methodology allowed for rich data collection and in-depth exploration of individual perspectives; however, some aspects of the methodology introduced potential limitations. For instance, moderators used a semistructured protocol and asked students to respond to hypothetical vignettes to reduce social desirability by allowing students to discuss an imaginary student. This may have influenced student responses by predefining the context and subject of each scenario; however, students enriched the data with personal insights and experiences that went well beyond the hypothetical vignettes. In addition, the group setting may have influenced participants' comfort in expressing ideas, given that they were speaking in front of peers, despite efforts to group older students separately from younger students. While this may have reduced some willingness to respond candidly, it also allowed students to express their perspectives firsthand while building on the insights of others.

Future work should focus on giving students more opportunities to voice their opinions and perspectives on inclusive behaviors across contexts and identities. For instance, future work could include a broader array of student identities and scenarios to elucidate a more comprehensive picture of how students define and describe inclusion in their schools. Follow-up studies could utilize a more participatory action research framework and allow students to generate their own scenarios or omit the scenarios and allow students to discuss inclusive behavior in a different format.

Conclusion

By examining the perspective of students about inclusive behavior, this study explored how young people define and interpret inclusive behavior in the school context. Given that students often identify issues not readily perceived by adults and offer valuable opinions of their own, students are critical stakeholders for intervention strategies and reform policies in schools. Thus, students have the potential to be problems solvers and changes makers around issues of inclusion (Cook-Sather, 2013; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001). Using their insights, schools can begin to understand the individual and contextual factors that facilitate and hinder inclusive behavior, helping schools identify which already occurring practices to support (e.g., teacher modeling) and which practices might need changing (e.g., spatial separation). These findings provide additional support for the idea that educators are uniquely positioned to play a key role in facilitating inclusive behavior by supporting both individual students and schools in becoming more inclusive.

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