Blinded by Diversity: Exploring Inclusion

A Qualitative Study on Employees' Understanding and Experience of Inclusion

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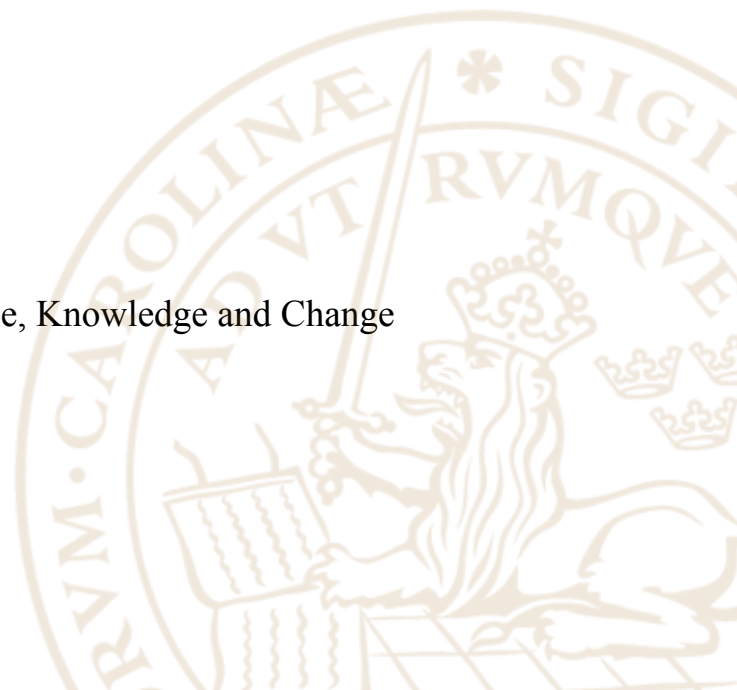
Abstract

Title	Blinded by Diversity: Exploring Inclusion A Qualitative Study on Employees' Understanding and Experience of Inclusion
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Aim	This research aims to better understand inclusion and how it can contribute to the development and creation of diversity policies that are reflective of employees' experiences. Specifically, we seek to explore employees' understanding and experiences of inclusion.
Methodology	The study is a single case study of qualitative character, influenced by symbolic interactionism and an abductive approach. The empirical data was collected from ten semi-structured interviews at our case organisation, SchoolAB.
Contributions	The findings have theoretical implications by expanding the current knowledge base on inclusion and diversity policies. The empirical findings uncover how employees understand and experience inclusion, both intuitively and consciously, and identify the barriers to inclusion. The interpretation of the findings highlights the crucial role of a sense of uniqueness, communication and organisational culture in fostering inclusion in the workplace. Moreover, the findings have theoretical contributions and practical implications about the importance of implementing inclusive policies that consider the employee perspective.
Keywords	inclusion, diversity policy, diversity management, sense of belonging, uniqueness, organisational culture, communication.

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1. Introduction

In a globalised world, where diversity and diversity management have become buzzwords, inclusion has been left wandering aimlessly. While the overall experience of inclusion is 83 percent globally, the benefits associated with inclusion only extend to 66 percent (ILO, 2022). Thus, diversity management has received great attention and has become an increasingly important and essential topic in modern organisations and organisational studies.

Diversity management is a widespread organisational approach and can be seen as a kind of human resource management (Shen, Chanda, D'Netto & Monga, 2009). While it was introduced as a way of combating inequalities and discrimination relating to gender and race, primarily in the United States, it today also includes other dimensions such as age, ethnicity, disability, religion and other individual traits that differentiate individuals and groups from each other (Köllen, 2019). Diversity management refers to the practices and policies organisations adapt to, on the one hand, promote greater diversity, and on the other hand, address inclusion in an already diverse setting (Köllen, 2019). Diversity and inclusion are therefore related concepts, often treated and used interchangeably, but they are not equivalent and need to be distinct from each other in order to reach their full potential (Roberson, 2006). Thus, both concepts are needed and organisations should adopt diversity management and develop practices that welcome diversity and encourage inclusion. Sabharwal (2014) argues that diversity alone does not improve workplace performance, and does not automatically translate into an organisation that is inclusive. Dobbin and Kalev (2016) argue that unconscious bias, among other factors, is a major barrier to achieving inclusion in organisations. Furthermore, managing diversity in the workplace necessitates a concerted effort to overcome bias and establish an inclusive environment that accommodates everyone's needs and differences (Cox & Blake, 1991). Therefore, organisations are seeking ways to address inclusion through various forms of practices, as a way to manage the opportunities and challenges associated with a diverse workforce (Shore, Cleveland & Sanchez, 2018). Thus, diversity is nothing without inclusion.

In recent years, diversity management has received greater attention in contemporary organisations and organisational studies due to the hope that bringing people with different backgrounds together could lead to positive economic effects in terms of increased

innovation, customer relationships and reduced turnover costs (Köllen, 2019; Offerman & Basford, 2013; Riccò & Guerci, 2014). Diversity management involves a range of strategies and initiatives. However, this research will focus on inclusion relating to diversity policies. Diversity policies have become increasingly important for organisations as they offer guidelines to leverage the benefits of a diverse workforce (van Ewijk, 2011). However, due to diversity management's multifaceted approach, many organisations only focus on diversity and "the headcount of diversities", for example, percentages of gender or ethnicity, since this is easier to achieve (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Winters, 2013). Simply hiring a diverse workforce does not always indicate an inclusive workplace environment (O'Leary & Weathington, 2006), because a diverse set of employees only provides the opportunity for the benefits of a diverse workforce, while inclusion actualises it (Hunt, Prince, Dixon-Fayle & Yee, 2018). Thus, diversity management varies a lot in effectiveness, suggesting that there is a gap between adoption and implementation (Mor Barak, Luria & Brimhall, 2022). In other words, this could be attributed to not "walking the talk" and not reaching the expectations of diversity and inclusion in diversity policies. Riccò and Guerci (2014) emphasise the need to bridge the gap between diversity policies and their implementation in organisations. The authors argue that this gap can be attributed to a lack of integration between different stages of the diversity management process, which includes developing policies, implementing them, and assessing their effectiveness. This lack of integration can be a reason why organisations struggle to reach the expectations of diversity policies in terms of inclusion which suggests more resources need to be attributed to creating a truly inclusive environment.

Inclusion is a thoroughly researched concept and scholars have pointed to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, relying on extensively cited and recurring definitions, inclusion is the degree to which workers, regardless of their backgrounds or identities, feel that their unique contribution to the organisation is valued, respected and appreciated (Mor Barak, 2015; Roberson, 2006; Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Holcombe Ehrhart & Singh, 2011). This definition suggests that inclusion is a contextual, individual, momentary, and transient concept (O'Donovan, 2018). Furthermore, due to the unpredictable business landscape, it cannot be taken for granted that an individual will always feel included, as creating and maintaining inclusion is an ongoing process (O'Donovan, 2018). Consequently, inclusion is subjective, so organisations need to continuously assess and evaluate inclusion in order to reap the benefits of a diverse workplace.

The feeling of inclusion can occur both at the organisational and individual levels, thus it is important to understand both individual and organisational influences. Because inclusion is linked to individual feelings and behaviours, as well as the behaviours of coworkers and the workplace. Shore et al. (2011) propose that when an individual feels included, they are treated as an insider and allowed to retain their uniqueness. Hence, they believe the sense of inclusion refers to high belongingness and high uniqueness, which is highly individual. Furthermore, the organisation can influence the feeling of inclusion by developing a culture of inclusivity where effective communication is the foundation (Pless & Maak, 2004). It is therefore critical to understand the employee's perspective of what makes them feel included.

Employees' experience of inclusion allows them to feel accepted and appreciated by the group or organisation, as well as feel like integral members (Jerónimo, Henriques & Carvalho, 2021). According to O'Donovan (2018), inclusion refers to holistically integrating both similarities and differences of the employee in the organisation, allowing employees to be themselves. If employees perceive themselves as included it can contribute to the potential benefits of diversity initiatives, such as increased employee involvement and improved individual performance, ultimately giving the organisation a competitive edge (Jerónimo, Henriques & Carvalho, 2021). Furthermore, as already mentioned, inclusion is subjective and occurs at both the individual and organisational levels, the understanding and experience of inclusion have been proven to have a positive relation between the perception of diversity practices and employee engagement which is mediated by the perception of inclusion (Jerónimo, Henriques & Carvalho, 2021). Thus, comprehending how employees understand and experience inclusion is important for organisations to successfully identify and implement policies to further improve diversity and inclusion.

The feeling of inclusion is an ambiguous concept and there are numerous ways to understand it. When employees feel included, they are more likely to be engaged, committed, and satisfied with their jobs (Roberson, 2006). Hence, as Nkomo (2014 cited in Shore, Cleveland & Sanchez, 2017) points out, there is a need to develop a clearer understanding of what inclusion truly consists of and what behaviours and practices facilitate this experience. Therefore, this research aims to better understand inclusion and how it can contribute to the development and creation of diversity policies that are reflective of employees' experiences. Specifically, we seek to explore employees' understanding and experiences of inclusion. The research aims to answer the following question:

- How do employees understand and experience inclusion?

1.2 Research Outline

This section clarifies the thesis structure. We begin with revisiting some of the major articles and findings on diversity policies. Thereafter, we explore inclusion based on three identified factors crucial for fostering inclusion. Thus, inclusion is understood based on a sense of belonging and uniqueness, how the organisational culture makes employees feel included, and how effective communication in speech and listening impacts inclusivity. Combined, diversity policies and inclusion create our conceptual framework which is found in the 2.3 Chapter Summary and lays the foundation for the discussion. In the following, Chapter 3, we discuss our methodology for the study. Here we present our philosophical grounding, research approach, and how we collected and analysed our data, before concluding with some reflexive and ethical considerations. In Chapter 4 we present our findings through quotes and an analysis of the quotes. Here we explore how employees feel included and potential barriers to inclusion. Chapter 5 consists of a discussion of our empirical findings in light of the conceptual framework, where the Inclusion Loop model is presented. To conclude, we summarise our findings based on our research question in Chapter 6. Additionally, we present theoretical and practical contributions and discuss opportunities for future research.

2. Conceptual Framework

This chapter presents our conceptual framework that is the base for this research. First, we address diversity policies and provide a base for what they are. The chapter then moves on to a general overview of inclusion and what components create a feeling of inclusion. Here we address belonging and uniqueness, inclusive culture and communication. Inclusion and diversity policies are often intertwined, as creating a more diverse workplace can require implementing inclusive practices to ensure that all employees feel valued and included. Inclusion and diversity policies combined serve as the foundation for our conceptual framework, which is introduced in our chapter summary.

2.1 Diversity Policies

Diversity management emerged from the civil rights movement as a response to inequalities and discrimination in the workplace (Legal Highlight: The Civil Rights Act of 1964, 2023). Today it is a common organisational practice as it both complies with legal requirements but also attracts talent, enhances employee engagement and improves performance and innovative capacity among individuals, among others (Riccò & Guerci, 2013). Diversity management refers to the practices, initiatives and policies organisations use to create a more diverse and inclusive workplace. Research has therefore been conducted on the creation, implementation and support of diversity management, but suggesting varying effectiveness (Dobbin & Kalev 2016; Kalev, Dobbin & Kelly 2006; Mor Barak, Luria & Brimhall, 2022; Scarborough, Lambouths & Holbrook, 2019). Research has proven that diversity management with a focus on inclusion has a positive impact on organisational performance (Mor Barak, 2015).

One aspect of diversity management is diversity policies. Diversity policies have been researched by many including Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006), van Ewijk (2011) and Groeneveld and Verbeek (2012). Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006) found that the effectiveness of policies is uncertain due to rigorous evaluation and the tendency of organisations to implement them without fully understanding them. They also suggested that organisations need to move beyond a focus on representation and instead focus on creating an inclusive workplace culture that values diversity. Van Ewijk (2011) introduces an analytical framework for practitioners to reflect on the underlying assumptions of the policies and to align them for a more cohesive approach. The framework consists of *'the what'* (defining

diversity), *'the why'* (incentives for diversity) and *'the how'* (diversity policy as the organisational strategy). Groeneveld and Verbeek (2012) researched the effectiveness of diversity policies and showed that policies aimed at improving the management of a diverse workforce appear to have the greatest impact on the representation of ethnic minorities in organisations in the short term. Furthermore, all these studies have focused on diversity representation and not inclusion, implying that more research is needed on inclusion and how it can contribute to diversity management policies.

Managing a diverse workforce requires both formal and informal practices, where diversity policies represent the formal practices, even though they can include informal practices (Jin, Lee & Lee, 2016). Diversity policies therefore take on a wide form and include diversity training, mentorship programs and diversity managers to name a few, although they depend on 'the why' of the policy (Scarborough, Lambouths & Holbrook, 2019; van Ewijk, 2011). Jin, Lee and Lee (2016) found that policies are an important first step towards an inclusive workplace, but require supporting factors, such as inclusive leadership and organisational culture, for all individuals to feel included, accepted and respected. Leaders must exhibit a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion by leading by example and holding themselves accountable for success in this area (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

As mentioned already, diversity management is aimed to increase both diversity and inclusion (Köllen, 2019). Organisations tend to adopt diversity management practices that focus on diversity and forget the inclusion part. Mor Barak, Luria and Brimhall (2022) therefore differentiate between policies aimed to promote inclusion and those that promote diversity. The authors make this distinction since policies that promote diversity focus on formal procedures such as hiring practices, while policies that promote inclusion ensure that the diverse workforce is incorporated into work-related processes and decision-making. This would argue for two distinctive but interrelated policies focusing on either concept to fulfil the expectations of the diversity policies. Furthermore, what is said in the policies needs to be translated into practice, otherwise, an implementation gap between policies and practice is likely to affect employees' perception of an inclusive workplace, which in the worst case could lead to unproductivity, decreased job satisfaction and increased turnover rates (Mor Barak, Luria & Brimhall, 2022).

Diversity policies are versatile and require support and commitment from all members of the organisation. Scarborough, Lambouths and Holbrook (2019) research found that women,

blacks and Latina/os are more supportive of diversity policies because of their belief that discrimination causes inequality. Moreover, since adopting diversity management by organisations is voluntary, diversity policies that are freely interpreted, flexible and voluntary are more likely to be embraced by the employees, since mandatory diversity training has been shown to be less effective (Dover Kaiser & Major 2020; Scarborough, Lambouths & Holbrook, 2019). Van Ewijk (2011) and Begeç (2013) therefore suggest continuous assessment and evaluation from employees to determine its effectiveness and ways to improve the practices. To this end, establishing diversity policies that are integrated and optional by everyone in the organisation, may be the first step in creating an inclusive organisational culture.

Despite the widespread scholarly representation of diversity policy implementation, studies also point to the resistance to and unintended effects of diversity initiatives (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Dover, Kaiser & Major 2020). According to these studies, diversity and inclusion programs are aimed at creating a more equitable and fair workplace while also benefiting from the innovative thinking and creativity that a diverse workforce can provide. These can, however, cause tension and disputes within organisations, as well as opposition from some employees as different individuals and groups perceive diversity and inclusion efforts differently (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Dover, Kaiser and Major (2020) present several explanations for the resistance such as the mere presence of diversity policies can lead to the assumption that underrepresented groups are treated more fairly, but in fact, the policy is just making discrimination harder to identify. On the contrary, the researchers also argue that overrepresented groups may experience the policy unfairly, increasing the likelihood of them seeing themselves as victims. Furthermore, diversity management increases the attractiveness of the organisation to underrepresented groups but increases exclusion, fear and threat to overrepresented groups (Dover, Kaiser & Major 2020). Therefore, Dover, Kaiser and Major (2020) conclude that these responses need to be taken into account when designing policies aimed to increase inclusion.

2.2 Inclusion

Diversity management is aimed to focus on increasing both diversity and inclusion. Despite this, organisations tend to focus on diversity by recruiting a diverse workforce and forget to create an inclusive workplace that values different perspectives. When people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and identities are included and respected, they feel more comfortable

sharing their unique perspectives and ideas, which can lead to better decision-making, organisational results, and problem-solving possibilities (Herring, 2009). Thus, organisations and scholars need to understand how employees understand and experience inclusion to create an inclusive work environment that values diversity and inclusion.

Shore et al. (2011, p.1265) define inclusion as "...the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness." This definition places a strong emphasis on the necessity of developing a setting where employees feel that the organisation truly values and accepts people, regardless of their background, characteristics, or capabilities. Hence, inclusion encompasses more than just having access or resources; it also refers to the psychological and emotional experience of being respected and recognised.

Scholars have presented and discussed several different ways employees feel included in the workplace. Among these, three key factors have been identified as crucial for fostering a sense of inclusion: belonging and uniqueness, culture, and communication. In the following sections, we will provide a description of each of these components and summarise the existing literature surrounding them. Finally, the components will be integrated into our conceptual framework to enhance our understanding of inclusion.

2.2.1 Sense of Belonging and Uniqueness

Creating a sense of belonging and valuing each person's uniqueness has become essential in maintaining an inclusive work environment as more employees in global organisations come from diverse backgrounds and cultures, with differing values, norms, and opinions (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). A sense of belonging can be defined as to which degree an employee feels valued, needed, and accepted in the work environment, and to what extent they perceive to fit in with the environment (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema & Collier, 1992). Appreciation of uniqueness includes the recognition and honouring of every individual's unique characteristics and abilities (Leroy, Buengeler, Veestraeten, Shemla & Hoever, 2022). Shore et al. (2011) propose an inclusion framework where both belongingness and uniqueness are necessary for creating a sense of inclusion. By considering both dimensions, organisations can create a more inclusive environment that values and leverages individual differences. Organisations can unleash the full potential of their employees and ultimately generate better organisational performance by encouraging a sense of belonging and embracing diversity and individuals' uniqueness (Thomas & Ely, 1996).

One of the most important aspects of an employee's individual work experience is their sense of belonging, which is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Employees who feel a sense of belonging in their workplace typically have a more positive work experience, greater job satisfaction, and are more devoted to their jobs (Raza, Wisetsri, Chansongpol & Somtawinpongsai, 2020). Yet, workers who feel excluded or alienated and lack a sense of belonging at work have been shown to be less satisfied with their jobs, less motivated, and may even be more prone to leaving the organisation (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997). Accumulating research discusses how the concepts of sense of belonging and inclusion are intertwined but still remain distinct from each other (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Pless & Maak, 2004; Shore et al., 2011). Researchers emphasise the need for creating a workplace where employees feel a sense of belonging and as a result, can fully participate and contribute to the organisation's success (Nishii, 2013; Thomas & Ely, 1996).

Being noticed and respected for one's individuality and distinctions is referred to as uniqueness (Leroy et al., 2022). Employees who perceive themselves as unique in the workplace have a more pleasant work experience and are more satisfied with their jobs (Tsachouridi & Nikandrou, 2019). According to previous research, when employees feel valued and respected for their unique qualities, they are more likely to be engaged and committed to their work (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Stevens, Plaut & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Employees may, however, feel a sense of stereotyping or that their distinctive characteristics are not properly acknowledged if diversity programs are not individually tailored to their own personal experiences and background (Grant & Gino, 2010).

2.2.2 Fostering a Culture of Inclusion

An organisational culture represents the common values, assumptions, beliefs, and practices that influence how people behave within an organisation (Schein, 2010). A supportive culture can be developed by encouraging diversity and inclusion in the workplace, promoting equal and impartial practices and processes, as well as investing in employees' opportunities for growth and training (Cox, 2001). Through the establishment of a shared vision, values, and actions that promote inclusivity and diversity, organisations can foster an inviting workplace culture (Cox, 1994). In a study by Pless and Maak (2004, p.130), they argue that "... a culture of inclusion needs to be established", in order to fully realise the benefits of workforce diversity. Organisational culture represents the underlying norms and principles that create the

organisation's identity, vision, and purpose, and it frequently becomes deeply established in the organisation's history and traditions (Pless & Maak, 2004). For instance, a culture that values teamwork, collaboration, and respect can foster an atmosphere where employees feel at ease working together and exchanging thoughts and opinions (Pless & Maak, 2004).

Fostering an inclusive workplace culture is critical to provide workers with a sense of worth, respect and support. Organisations must promote diversity and inclusion in their policies, practices, and programs to accomplish this. This entails actively embracing variations in age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and cultural heritage (Cox & Blake, 1991; Thomas & Ely, 1996). The scholars also stress that this includes establishing a secure and encouraging work environment where everyone feels free to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions without fearing any potential criticism or discrimination. To create an inclusive work environment in an organisation, it is crucial to offer various training and education on diversity and inclusion, provide opportunities for professional development and growth, and promote collaborative communication and collaboration among employees (Cox & Blake 1991; Ely & Thomas 2001). Furthermore, Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006) found that diversity initiatives are more effective when they are integrated into the organisation's overall strategy and culture. Others have highlighted the importance of establishing an embracing culture that welcomes different points of view, perspectives, and experiences (Pless & Maak, 2004). This demonstrates the reality that diversity encompasses more than just observable distinctions such as race, gender, or age, but also variances in personality, work style, and background.

2.2.3 Communication for Inclusion

One of the most important elements of establishing and maintaining an inclusive workplace is effective communication (both horizontal and vertical) (Cox & Blake, 1991; Wolfgruber, Einwiller & Brockhaus, 2021). The sharing of information and messages among individuals at the same organisational level or job title is referred to as horizontal communication (Robbins, Judge, & Campbell, 2017). Vertical communication, on the other hand, refers to the exchange of information and messages between people who are at different levels of the organisational hierarchy, such as managers and employees and vice versa (Robbins, Judge, & Campbell, 2017). Cox and Blake (1991) note that dialogue can minimise misunderstandings and build a common understanding of diversity, both of which are essential for fostering inclusion and eliminating discrimination. Pless and Maak (2004) emphasise the need for

organisations to actively promote inclusive communication practices as these strategies have the power to both reinforce and contest biases and preconceptions. Furthermore, Mannix and Neale (2005) stress that good communication techniques can be beneficial and help facilitate the removal of cultural barriers and instead develop a shared understanding of the organisation's goals, which consequently can improve teamwork and problem-solving in teams. Organisations that cultivate open and transparent communication channels can better facilitate employee engagement and involvement, resulting in a more inclusive work environment (Shore et al., 2011). Furthermore, frequent interaction between leaders, managers, and employees can lead to a better common understanding of organisational objectives and core beliefs, which can enhance employee engagement (Schein, 2010). Through the fostering of trust, respect, and understanding between people with various experiences and histories, effective two-way communication techniques can improve teamwork, collaboration, and organisational outcomes (Chiocchio et al., 2011).

Communication can be divided into two areas, verbal and nonverbal communication, and both forms of communication can play crucial roles in creating an inclusive workplace environment. Both verbal and nonverbal communication can influence how employees perceive their workplace's diversity management policies and impact whether they feel included in the workplace or not (Daya, 2014). Furthermore, Shore, Cleveland, and Sanchez (2018) examine the role of communication in diversity management, suggesting that effective communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is essential to creating inclusive workplaces. Understanding the role of both forms of communication can help organisations develop, create, and implement more effective diversity management policies that are inclusive and reflective of employees' experiences.

Verbal communication is how people use spoken words to express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings. In organisations, language barriers, cultural differences, and power dynamics can affect the effectiveness of verbal communication in diverse workplaces (Luo & Shenkar, 2017). Clear speech and active listening are two key components of effective verbal communication (Melser, 2009; Pless & Maak, 2004). Speaking clearly entails employing a suitable tone, tempo, and volume to ensure that your message is accurately transmitted (Guttman et al., 2021), whereas active listening entails paying attention, evaluating, interpreting, asking questions, and responding appropriately to the speaker (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). Active listening could lead the speaker to significant cognitive and behavioural transformations, influencing individuals' core values, attitudes, and even personalities (Yip &

Fisher, 2022). According to research, effective communication may be enhanced by listening attentively and speaking clearly in a variety of settings, including in both personal relationships and the workplace (Weger, Castle Bell, Minei & Robinson, 2014). Pless and Maak (2004) also discuss how actively listening to others' viewpoints and beliefs can help to create trust and respect, as well as foster a sense of belonging among individuals from varied backgrounds. Also, studies have demonstrated that listening can foster a more inclusive and respectful work environment by reducing the adverse implications of bias and discrimination in the workplace (Gill, McNally & Berman, 2018).

Nonverbal communication is how people use their body language, body posture, facial expressions, eye contact, and tone of voice to convey messages. These non-spoken cues can provide more information about a speaker's attitudes and feelings, and can either support or contradict their spoken words. Nevertheless, Hargie, Dickson and Tourish (2004) suggest that cultural differences, gender, and personality traits can influence nonverbal communication in the workplace and that it is important to be aware of one's own nonverbal cues and to interpret others' cues correctly in order to create a more inclusive environment. Good nonverbal communication can help to build trust, strengthen relationships, and help make everyone feel like they belong (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014). Bonaccio, O'Reilly, O'Sullivan and Chiocchio (2016) explore the ways in which nonverbal communication and behaviour can impact workplace diversity and suggest that understanding the role of nonverbal cues can help organisations create more inclusive workplaces. Nonverbal communication can be clear and inclusive when people are conscious of their own nonverbal and visual cues and seek to interpret others' cues properly (Wood, 2006). This can help reduce the risk of misinterpretation and misunderstanding, as well as help boost effective communication.

2.3 Chapter Summary

The chapter lays the foundation for the conceptual framework of the research. The chapter begins with an introduction to diversity policies and provides a base for understanding what they are. The chapter then continues by presenting a general overview of inclusion and the components that contribute to a sense of inclusion. This includes belonging and uniqueness, inclusive culture, and communication. Inclusion and diversity policies are often intertwined because creating a more diverse workforce can require implementing inclusive practices and behaviours to ensure that all employees feel heard, valued, and included. The chapter argues

that inclusion and diversity policies combined can serve as the foundation for the conceptual framework that is introduced below.

The conceptual framework seeks to explain how employees experience and understand inclusion in their workplace. It addresses how the organisation's diversity policies can have a direct effect on the three key concepts of belonging and uniqueness, culture, and communication. The framework illustrates how these concepts act as intermediaries for the influence of diversity policies, ultimately shaping an individual's experience and understanding of their sense of inclusion within the organisation.
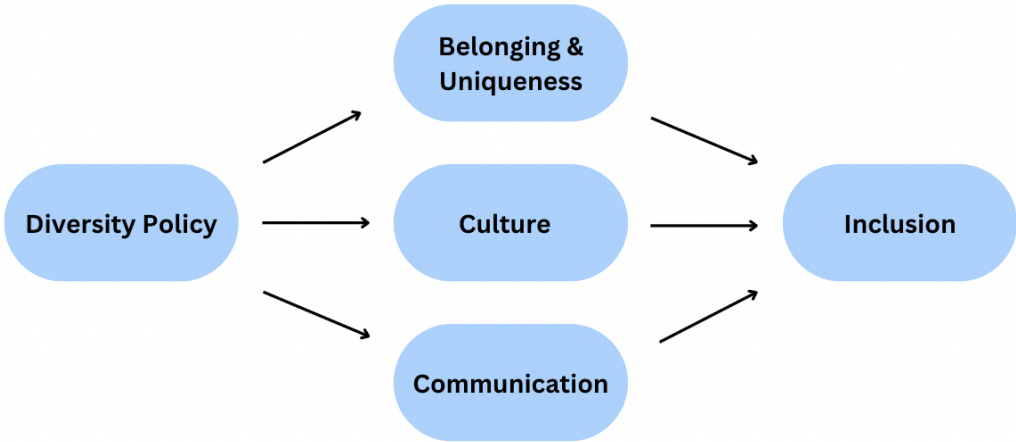
Framework 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

In the following section, the research methods used for the thesis are presented. First, we present how our philosophical groundings and research approach have influenced the research. Following the introduction of the case organisation SchoolAB, we present how we have collected and analysed the data. The chapter concludes by reflecting on limitations and ethical considerations.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

In pursuit of the aim, the interpretive tradition emerged as the most applicable approach for the study. The interpretative tradition believes that reality is constructed based on our interpretations of social reality (Prasad, 2018). Since inclusion is a social construction and very dynamic, the employees' experience of inclusion is highly subjective. Thus, the interpretive tradition helped us learn and comprehend employees' own experiences and understanding of inclusion. Furthermore, symbolic interactionism (SI) within the interpretive tradition has advanced our understanding of inclusion as SI is concerned with the meaning human beings assign objects, events and actions through social interactions (Prasad, 2018). SI allowed us to explore how individuals' subjective interpretations are constructed through interactions with objects, events, and actions. Through SI we gained insights into the understanding and experience of inclusion to foster a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Mead's writings on the mind and the self have had a significant influence on SI (Prasad, 2018). Mead's idea that humans' capacity to objectify themselves, to be able to observe themselves in social situations, is essential to understand the process of reality construction and sensemaking (Prasad, 2018). Thus, our self-image becomes the central point from where all our interpretations are realised and choose how we act and behave in them. This brings us to another central concept from Mead, role-taking and roles, that individuals consciously construct by an understanding of the roles we are expected to play (Prasad, 2018). Mead's theories provide an understanding of how individuals construct their sense of self, which influences how they interpret and respond to social situations, such as experiences of inclusion or exclusion in the workplace. Thus, we needed to be mindful of the individuals' perspectives and take their perspectives into consideration when interpreting the material and their feeling of inclusion. Additionally, Mead's emphasis on the importance of role-taking and understanding the roles we are expected to play suggests that researchers may need to be

sensitive to the social norms and expectations that influence individuals' experiences of inclusion in the workplace (Prasad, 2018).

3.2 Research Approach

Following the aim of the thesis, we wanted to better understand inclusion and how it can be effectively integrated into diversity management policies to promote a more inclusive workplace. The majority of research on diversity and inclusion is quantitative, using data to understand diversity and inclusion. Hence, the study is of qualitative nature to deeper understand employees' understanding and experience of inclusion through their subjective interpretations. Therefore, this qualitative research focuses on exploring individuals' subjective experiences to understand complex social realities which further aligns with the SI lens.

3.2.1 Abductive Approach

When conducting qualitative research, researchers have emphasised their preference for using inductive reasoning which refers to generating theory from empirical findings (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). On the contrary, quantitative research has conventionally used a deductive approach by setting the theoretical field and generating a hypothesis, before entering the empirical field (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). However, scholars have found several limitations in these two approaches and the abductive approach has grown in popularity. Abductive reasoning is an approach to respond to limitations in inductive and deductive reasoning and allows for a more flexible relationship between empirical and theoretical findings (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Mantere and Ketokivi (2013 cited in Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019) imply that abduction allows the researcher to choose the most appropriate explanation among various explanations or interpretations of the data that are in connection and acknowledges the importance of cognitive reasoning. Abductive reasoning can also resemble the philosophical idea of the 'hermeneutic circle' through researchers' understandings are seen as a continuous dialogue between data and pre-understandings of the research. Therefore, Alvesson and Sandberg (2011; 2013) argue in Rennstam and Wästerfors's (2018) book, that an overly structured and systematic interaction with empirical material, rather than being surprised by the data, could hinder us from developing research challenging existing assumptions and instead just confirming our pre-understandings. The abductive approach allowed us to have a

pre-understanding of the field before collecting data but with a sufficiently open mindset to be surprised by the data.

3.2.2 Single Case Study

To what extent one feels included in the workplace is highly subjective and depends on various factors. Research has shown that managers and leaders can have a significant impact on inclusion (Groeneveld & Verbeek, 2012; Jin, Lee & Lee, 2016; Kalev, Dobbin & Kalev, 2006; Mor Barak, Luria & Brimhall, 2022), but organisational wide factors could also affect employees experience of inclusion. Following the aim of the thesis, it was appropriate to conduct the study as a single case study to better understand what influences employees' understanding and experience of inclusion. The single case study is conducted at SchoolAB, a pseudonym for its actual name, to give the research a deeper and more nuanced understanding of inclusion at a specific organisation. SchoolAB was chosen as our case study due to their specific diversity, inclusion and belonging tab on their website, their diverse work staff, and since they were in the process of developing and refining their internal diversity policies. SchoolAB is an educational institution for both students and professionals. SchoolAB has a total of 130 employees from all across the world with their headquarters being located in Stockholm, Sweden. To protect everyone's privacy and identity, the company name and the identities of the interview subjects have been altered and fictitious are used throughout the paper.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Sampling

We decided to use a purposive sampling method to guarantee the sample was appropriate to respond to our study objectives (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To narrow down our sample we received help from our contact person on SchoolAB based on the following criteria: 1) The employee was employed at SchoolAB and 2) The final sample needed to be diverse so we aimed for interviewees with different backgrounds, gender, age and ethnicity. Since our contact person was in charge of the sample we did not know the selection criteria behind the sample, whether it was due to their diversities, interest in the topic, or due to relationship with the contact person. Therefore, our sampling also had an element of convenience since our interviews were optional.

After all the interviews had been conducted it revealed that our criteria had been fulfilled as we had a diverse sample of age, gender and country of origin. When we had conducted ten interviews we reached empirical saturation as the answers were repetitive and further data was unlikely to yield substantially new or different findings. The interviewees had an age span between 31 and 46, 40 percent male, and 60 percent female, originating from different countries around the world. To ensure anonymity and minimise harm to the participants, fictitious names have been given to the interviewees and reduce links to individual characteristics.

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

To fulfil our SI tradition of understanding how employees understand and experience inclusion, we chose to conduct semi-structured interviews due to the possibility to dig deeper into individual experiences and understandings. Semi-structured interviews are usually used in the SI tradition as they allow for open-ended answers with the possibility to ask follow-up questions (Prasad, 2018; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The purpose behind the decision to hold semi-structured interviews was to collect qualitative and open-ended data, while also listening to the interviewees' thoughts, feelings, and perceived issues. The conversation surrounding diversity and inclusion could be a sensitive topic and therefore needs to be approached cautiously.

Due to the geographical distance between researchers and interviewees, the interviews were held using Microsoft Teams. Technology has opened up the possibility of video interviewing, which allows researchers and interviewees to hold a geographical distance, while simultaneously gathering data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). At the same time, video interviewing has its disadvantages which we also encountered when a few interviewees had trouble setting up the meeting, or got kicked out of the meeting in the middle of the interview. However, we still felt that the interviewees were comfortable with digital interviews as SchoolAB has been a hybrid workplace since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since the interviews were of a semi-structured approach we had an interview guide with three themes, diversity, inclusion and diversity policy, that we followed to cover the same themes in all interviews. We wanted to ask questions about diversity to get started with the topic even though our main focus was not on diversity, as diversity and inclusion are interlinked concepts. The interview guide started with two general questions about who they are and what they do before asking more topic-specific questions, known as direct questions by Bell,

Bryman and Harley (2019). The topic-specific questions were asked in a way that encouraged the interviewees to answer with their own words and experiences. However, when we wanted to extract more information on certain answers, we were flexible enough to ask follow-up questions, dig deeper into certain topics if found necessary, and specify questions if needed (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Follow-up questions were usually asked for the interviewees to reflect further and elaborate more on the topic at hand. Asking both pre-determined and follow-up questions in an inviting manner allowed us to truly understand how the interviewees interpret reality, aligned with SI.

3.4 Data Analysis

After we had gathered all our material and reached empirical saturation it was time to get acquainted with the material. During each interview, we asked for consent to audio-record so that we could later transcribe using a transcription tool (Descript). Descript transcribed all the recordings into text but to ensure quality, a correct transcription and for us to get to know the material better, we listened to the recordings, read the transcriptions and edited it if anything was incorrect. We edited certain quotes for clarity purposes to get rid of filler words and any potential stuttering.

After all interviews were transcribed it was time to start coding. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) argue that sorting requires intimacy with the material and to do so you need to engage with it and read it over and over again to gain a full understanding. We conducted the interviews and edited the transcriptions, so we were familiar with the material. However, we engaged with the material more and took out quotes that stood out, surprised us and were repetitive with other interviews. The quotes were then labelled in a spreadsheet to get a better understanding and comprehensive overview of the data. This is called focused coding which means to label the most prominent initial codes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Even though we had many interesting codes we needed to reduce our material and exclude codes, since it is impossible to present all data. This process of reduction can be very sensitive as the researchers determine what goes and what stays (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). To reduce the material we had a closer look at the codes and grouped together the themes that related to each other. We compiled the codes that were recurring and repetitive by most interviewees, the codes that surprised us the most, and the codes that were most relevant to the study. Thereafter, we named the groups to create overarching themes with several sub-themes (See Table 1). In this process, we used a thematic analysis when grouping codes

based on their similarities and differences (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Finally, it was time to present our empirical findings by analysing deeper what they truly said and filling it with meaning in relation to what we already knew based on information from our conceptual framework.

Overarching Themes				
Sub-themes	Understanding	Intuitive	Conscious	Barriers
		- Natural Inclusion - Curiosity	- Small Acts - Communicating Appreciation - Stronger Together	- Homogenous Management - Diversity Blindness

Table 1: Themes

3.5 Reflexivity and Limitations

When conducting qualitative research, with an abductive approach and SI tradition, it is important to consider reflexivity. Reflexive research is according to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) how different kinds of social, political, linguistic and theoretical elements are woven together in the knowledge-creating process, during which empirical material is constructed, interpreted and written. Furthermore, reflexive research consists of two characteristics, careful interpretation and reflection (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Careful interpretation emphasised the significance of acknowledging how external factors, such as theoretical assumptions, preconceptions, and language, influence the interpretation of empirical data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). The second aspect, reflection, pertains to scrutinising how researchers interpret the empirical data, which can be accomplished by questioning the interpretation itself (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Both aspects were important for us to consider to ensure reliable, valid, and credible research. Due to the possibility of diversity and inclusion being a sensitive topic, due to prejudice, biases and assumptions, we needed to be careful both how the data was presented to us and how we interpreted the data. First of all, the understanding of diversity and inclusion depends on previous experiences and what the interviewees compared to. This was important to consider when interpreting the data and not

letting external factors interfere with the interpretation of data. Second, due to us as researchers being a part of the overrepresented group in Sweden, we needed to reconsider our own unconscious biases in the interviews and our analysis. It could have also been harder for us to understand the interviewees' points of view, but by questioning how we interpreted the data, the interviewees' points of view came across more clearly.

Additionally, it is important to consider the limitations of the study. One significant limitation which could affect the findings of a truthful representation is our sample not being a complete reflection of the organisation. Those who participated in the interviews had an interest in the topic and the majority of the interviewees were also a part of the underrepresented group at the organisation. Perhaps that is why they were more keen to make their voice heard and share perspectives from a minority point of view. Nonetheless, it is also the underrepresented groups who need to be heard and seen, and the sample therefore might have the opportunity to contribute to a more fair workplace. Another limitation of the study could be that it is a case study. However, Flyvbjerg (2006) suggests that case studies could be useful to get a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. In this case, we could have studied inclusion in multiple organisations but this would have required more resources and time. Thus, the study's findings relate to a specific organisation but the theoretical contributions can be useful for other researchers and organisations.

However, something that needs to be taken into account is the individual's perception and how it may be clouded or overshadowed by a particular event or situation that stands out to them. When a major event clouds the individual's perception of the organisation's overall work and engagement with diversity and inclusion, they may only focus on that specific event. As a result, they may only mention or think of that particular event, disregarding the entirety of the organisation's work and engagement with diversity and inclusion efforts. Additionally, in line with a qualitative research paper, our interviews are subjective, meaning that our findings are based on individuals' personal feelings and opinions.

3.6 Ethical considerations

In order to minimise ethical risks during the research process, it is crucial to be aware and prepared to address the issue to ensure integrity (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In order to respect the anonymity of the case organisation, it was essential for us to adhere to the ethical principle of informed consent to ensure the comfort of the participants. Informed consent is achieved by enabling the interviewee to make a well-informed decision by providing them

with a sufficient amount of information about the study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). At our first meeting with the organisations, we received consent from our contact person to record the interviews. When our interviewees were contacted about potentially participating in this study, an email was sent out with a description and aim of the research for the potential interviewees to make an informed decision if they wanted to participate or not in the study. Furthermore, an additional description of the study was added where the interviewees signed up for time slots and when the interview was held we described the aim of the research and how we would store and use the material. It was also agreed with our contact person and the individual interviewees that we would delete the recordings and transcriptions when the research was finished. Combined we would like to believe this gave the participants enough information to make an informed decision.

Another ethical principle is to be aware of and minimise all possible ways that a participant could be harmed (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). This means eliminating factors that can lead to stress and harm to the participants' self-esteem and future career development (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We were therefore very thorough throughout the entire process to ensure anonymity for all participants. We did not want the participants' experiences to be able to be linked back to any individual afterwards, which could impact their relationship with the organisations, managers and coworkers. Therefore we ensured the participants that we would not discuss their experiences with others, gave all participants fictitious names and tried, to the best of our ability, to reduce links between roles, ethnicity and gender.

4. Empirical Findings

In pursuit of the aim of the thesis, there is a need to establish a comprehensive understanding of inclusion before developing and implementing policies reflective of employees' understanding and experience of inclusion. To accomplish this, our empirical findings are based on our ten interviewees: Emma, Hannah, Jake, Karen, Kate, Sam, Sophia, Tommy, Victor and Zack. In light of our empirical findings, three themes relate to how employees understood and experienced inclusion. These were how the employees understand inclusion, how inclusion was intuitive and how inclusion is a conscious act. The fourth and final theme refers to barriers to inclusion.

4.1 Understanding Inclusion

SchoolAB is a Swedish company that values a diverse workforce, although diversity was not a prerequisite or requirement for the interviewees to work there. Diversity was seen, rather than having different countries of origin or genders, as different perspectives individuals gather from different life experiences. Furthermore, it was important for the interviewees that these perspectives were respected, valued, empowered, appreciated and recognised. Jake (interviewee) differentiated between diversity and inclusion and described diversity as the composition of individuals, while inclusion is the actions organisations take to ensure that no one feels excluded. For Jake, to have a diverse workforce, inclusion is vital.

> *"Diversity is more like the "what". Inclusivity is more like the "how", how things are done. One can have a diverse group, but if there's no inclusivity, people may feel isolated. Even though it looks good on the pictures."* - Jake

The quote demonstrates that diversity is nothing without inclusion, even though it can look good externally. However, if the organisation focuses on how to work with inclusion, it could avoid exclusion and isolation. Inclusion, therefore, refers to 'how' the organisation embraces and leverages different perspectives through different practices. For the interviewees, it was about gaining an overarching sense of being seen and accepted as individuals. Emma elaborates on this:

> *"I mean, we are recognised. I'm not sure how to put it. We are seen. First of all, I think we are seen as human beings here, and not where we come from"* - Emma

Even though the interviewees were of different genders, ethnicities, religions and sexual orientations, it was rather the personal abilities and skills that the respondents possessed that were crucial for their experiences of inclusion. They were not seen as their nationality or other characteristics that might distinguish them from others, but they were seen as any other human being. This underscores the importance of seeing individuals beyond their identity markers and rather being appreciated for who they are as unique individuals and what they personally contribute to an organisation.

> *" I feel that I'm appreciated for who I am in that and I don't feel that I'm not seen or listened to or appreciated for being unique in the way I am".* - Jake

The quote emphasises the importance of feeling seen, listened to and appreciated, to create a sense of inclusion. By recognising the importance of valuing and embracing each individual's unique characteristics, individuals felt comfortable in being themselves and as a way to create inclusion. Both quotes highlight the importance of treating all individuals with respect and empathy, regardless of differences.

In addition to feeling included through their unique characteristics, the interviewees also found a deep sense of inclusion by feeling accepted, recognised, and safe.

> *"I mean, inclusion is a lot of the acceptance. I think goes with belonging, right? Like if feel included, I'm part of this, you know. I'm accepted, I can say things and it is fine. Without fear, you know. I think it makes you feel safe and relaxed in the working environment."* -Hannah

For Hannah, inclusion was the feeling of being accepted for who she is and that she can raise her voice in a safe environment where she is relaxed. When these were fulfilled, Hannah felt like a part of the organisation and gained a sense of belonging. The quote suggests that creating an environment where people can freely express their ideas and perspectives could help foster an inclusive culture. Another way to experience a sense of belonging was to surround oneself with a diverse group of people.

> *" I belong because my colleagues are a group of people that come from all kinds of places and walks of life. I'm wondering if it is, in some parts, connected to recognition as well."* - Karen

Karen suggests that she feels a sense of belonging in her workplace because of the diversity of her colleagues. She mentions that her colleagues come from different places and walks of life, which creates a sense of inclusivity through the diversity in the workplace. Karen previously mentioned in the interview that she has lived abroad, implying that she probably thrives in a diverse environment. Additionally, she also mentions that her belonging is connected to recognition because she recognises herself in this type of environment. Both Hannah and Karen highlight the importance of creating a safe and accepting environment that values the unique contributions of all individuals. This requires acknowledging and celebrating diversity, creating opportunities for all voices to be heard, and recognising the value that each individual brings to the workplace.

4.2 Intuitive Inclusion

Inclusion could on the one hand be something one actively tries to promote, or on the other hand, something intuitive that one does naturally in their everyday life. Intuitive inclusion, therefore, refers to the natural way of being inclusive and how our interviewees were curious towards each other which fostered inclusion.

4.2.1 Natural Inclusion

For the interviewees, being inclusive towards one's coworkers was something natural and not an extra effort they paid much attention to in their everyday lives. Therefore, there was a focus on how the colleagues made them feel included rather than how the organisation actively made efforts that made them feel included.

> *"I think in general I don't require many activities or policies from the company in order to accommodate my needs. As long as you don't talk negatively about any of my characteristics, like ethnicity or sexual orientation, I'm fine. Just like don't actively discriminate against me, then I won't require you to actively include me. I think I am a driven person that can claim space whenever I feel like I want to or need to. So I don't need somebody to kind of like include me very actively."* - Tommy

Tommy emphasises through the quote that inclusion was his own choice as long as the organisation did not discriminate. This way Tommy could also choose how included he wanted and needed to feel. However, this requires personal commitment and certain characteristics to actively seek and claim space whenever they feel like they want to fit in and

feel included. Tommy, Kate, Emma, Karen and Jake all mentioned that being inclusive was something that came from within.

> *"I mean, for me, it is just very natural to engage and interact with everyone. So it is not even an effort as such."* - Karen

> *"I think it is a bonus. This is why I think it is tricky because one cannot request someone to ask questions. It needs to come from within."* - Jake

The quotes suggest that engaging and interacting with your colleagues is natural and easy, rather than a requirement. Therefore, interactions with colleagues were rather seen as a way to feel included, but it was not the only contributing factor. However, the challenge arises when the organisation lacks individuals with such personalities who are willing to engage with others, or when an overrepresented group forms its own clique by speaking their native language. Even though SchoolAB is a diverse organisation compared to many other Swedish organisations, the majority of the people who participated in the interviews were part of minority groups. This is particularly interesting since the overrepresented group, Swedes, tended to remain isolated and were less naturally inclusive compared to individuals from other nationalities. Both Hannah and Sophia mentioned that this creates "silos" between Swedes and non-swedes and could affect the natural interactions in the organisation. Hannah thought that speaking one's native language in an organisation that has English as a working language was disrespectful to the organisation and her colleagues. These silos and non-existent interactions could hinder both diversity and inclusion in the organisation.

4.2.2 Curiosity

An overall impression from the interviewees was that inclusion stemmed from interactions between coworkers. Engaging in everyday conversations, asking questions about each other's heritage and being curious was a way for the interviewees to both give and receive inclusion. As discussed in the previous sub-theme, these types of interactions were something natural the interviewees did and not anything extraordinary. Even though curiosity is a conscious act to engage in conversation with coworkers, it could be regarded as an intuitive act to get to know and build relationships with your coworkers. Informal communication was therefore important in cultivating a sense of belonging among employees. Curiosity was, according to Sophia, an integrated part of the culture:

"I think that we have a really nice culture when it comes to inclusion and I think a key for that is that SchoolAB people are very curious. So they like to ask questions about you but they are also very happy about talking about themselves. I think we are extremely open at SchoolAB." - Sophia

Furthermore, this suggests that the organisation recruits individuals who are outgoing and extroverted, to contribute to the curiosity. This could then also dismiss those who are not as outgoing and the organisation could miss a valuable competence. However, curiosity was a consistent theme for all interviewees and something vital for their feelings of inclusion. An example of curiosity was when Emma talked about how her coworkers approached her about her heritage and sought her travel advice over a lunch talk. This illustration demonstrates how non-work related interactions may foster a sense of community and shared experience at work:

"For example, when we are having lunch and some topics are covered around food, destinations or travel. The question always comes up, oh, I ate the best food in (Emma's country), or I had the best summer holidays in (Emma's country) etc. Then it becomes a conversation around the table. People will then come and ask me, oh, my friend is going to (Emma's country). Do you have any suggestions or tips on what to do there? Or they'll just be curious in general." - Emma

According to Emma's statement, informal communication is crucial for fostering a sense of inclusion at work. Employees' sense of belonging and shared experiences with their coworkers can be influenced by how they interact with one another in everyday situations. In this case, Emma's coworkers showed an interest in her travel experiences and asked her for guidance, fostering a feeling of community around a specific place to which Emma has strong ties. This kind of informal communication among coworkers can help foster a sense of belonging and shared identity, which can help foster a more inclusive workplace culture. This finding emphasises the importance of encouraging informal communication and providing opportunities for employees to connect with one another outside of a work context. Additionally, Jake recounts feeling seen, happy and acknowledged as a result of a cultural conversation he had with a colleague, also during a lunch:

"I felt seen, happy, and that it is an exchange that goes both ways. Because I was like, okay, now this person wants to try this specific lunch that I brought which they didn't see or tried before. I admire that curiosity and think it is nice. I think

that the alternative is that no one says anything and does not act interested. Basically going on with your day, working, eating lunch, without any meaningful interactions. But I think that this interaction or extra curiosity makes it a more fun work environment" - Jake

This quote reinforces Emma's earlier observation about how communication can encourage inclusiveness at work. Jake talks about how a coworker who expressed interest in his cultural meal made him feel acknowledged and appreciated. The exchange of curiosity and cultural insights made Jake's workplace more enjoyable. Jake adds that work may become routine and unfulfilling without this kind of contact. This emphasises the need of fostering and promoting communication that celebrates diversity and makes the workplace feel inclusive.

Similar to Jake, Karen highlights the role of curiosity, listening, and creating a space for conversations in promoting inclusion in the workplace.

"I think it starts with curiosity about where people come from, traditions, and how we celebrate things, for example. Yeah, I think it is just a lot about curiosity and listening and creating a space for conversations that are not only about the everyday tasks and work at hand." - Karen

Karen also adds to her perspective on the value of hearing other people's stories and experiences in fostering learning, growth, and critical thinking. The statement highlights the role that stories, listening and perspective-taking can have in promoting inclusion and diversity.

"I just love to hear other people's stories. I learned so much from hearing other people's experiences and perspectives. Be it in a critical business meeting or at lunch, it tickles my curiosity and can challenge me. It definitely helps me learn and grow, but sometimes it can also challenge me. Maybe not my personal values, but it makes you think sometimes, which is always helpful of course" - Karen

Karen's comments emphasise the importance of cultivating a workplace culture that facilitates open communication and encourages people to discuss their cultural backgrounds, traditions, and experiences. By actively engaging with other people's stories and experiences, individuals can also expand their own understanding of different viewpoints, cultures, and ideas, which can, in turn, help to challenge their assumptions, biases, and limitations. Karen also stresses the value of active listening and curiosity, which allow individuals to learn about others'

perspectives and personal experiences and create a space for dialogues that transcend beyond work-related duties. Karen also highlights the potential challenges that can arise from engaging with diverse perspectives, as they can challenge one's existing beliefs and assumptions. However, she views this as a positive outcome since it can stimulate critical thinking and personal development. Our findings suggest that organisations can benefit from promoting an inclusive culture that encourages open communication, active listening, and perspective-taking. This can help to facilitate the sharing of diverse stories and experiences, which can enrich individuals and the organisation as a whole.

4.3 Conscious Inclusion

In contrast to intuitive inclusion, conscious inclusion refers to actions and efforts the organisations, managers and coworkers actively did to increase inclusion. These were small acts of kindness, recognising others' skills and competencies and hosting informal social activities aimed to increase cohesion.

4.3.1 Small Acts Go a Long Way

The following comments from Sam and Zack highlight the importance of how small conscious everyday gestures, from coworkers, the immediate team and the organisation, go a long way when creating a sense of inclusion in the workplace.

> *"Empowerment, recognition and appreciation through small everyday gestures. Simple things like saying hello when I enter the room and everyone says hello, people looking me in the eyes."* - Sam

Saying hello when someone enters the room and having eye contact were essential for Sam when creating a feeling of inclusion. Both these acts are conscious since it requires effort from the sender, but the response by the receiver outweighs the initial effort from the sender. Zack also related his experience of feeling recognised when his coworkers acknowledged his birthday, a small gesture that had a big influence on his sense of inclusion.

> *"This is gonna sound very simplistic, but my birthday was in June last year. My coworkers then took time out our their workday to celebrate my birthday. They had taken time out of their days to plan this, order a cake, and pause their day to take time to celebrate me. This is not something a company, usually does. But the thought behind it meant a lot to me."* - Zack

These quotes underline the importance of simple everyday acts in establishing a sense of inclusion in the workplace. Jake and Zack both value the impact that small gestures of praise and acknowledgement can have on their workdays in general. The significance of seemingly insignificant acts of kindness underscores why it is essential for organisations to make it a top priority to develop a welcoming work environment that recognises and respects every employee, regardless of their background or identity.

Emma adds to this point, further elaborating on how small details in one's verbal and nonverbal communication play a crucial role in feeling recognised and creating a sense of inclusion at SchoolAB.

> *"I would say being recognised is important for me personally. However, of course, it is also an active and busy workplace. You can't expect everybody to talk to you all the time in a workplace. But I think that active and engaging conversation, just by approaching me and asking any kind of question goes a long way. Then when talking or communicating with someone, I think having eye contact is important for me. If you just ask a question and look somewhere else, I wouldn't feel very included or respected. So, I think those social cues make you feel that the person is genuinely interested in getting to know you or hearing what you have to say."* -
> Emma

Emma values active and engaging conversations that include not only talking but also actively listening and expressing interest in what others are saying. However, Emma also acknowledges that everyone is busy but approaching her and asking questions makes her feel seen and acknowledged which contributes to her sense of inclusion. She also highlights the importance of small gestures such as eye contact, which can communicate respect, interest, and engagement in the conversation. She implies that employees, including herself, may feel excluded or neglected if they fail to make eye contact. For individuals who might feel excluded or ignored at work, these social cues are especially crucial. In order to establish a more inclusive work environment, colleagues and managers should be aware of their verbal and nonverbal communication habits. Ultimately, it is the small details that make a big difference.

Zack gives an example of when a coworker invited him out for fika, which was a nice gesture. However, he discusses how cultural differences can impact one's experience of inclusion in

the workplace since acts of kindness unfortunately also can be misinterpreted and cause confusion and misunderstandings.

"I have a colleague who's from (country in Asia), and when she was hired we constantly had these very small nuanced cultural differences. Like she invited me out for coffee and because of that, from my point of view, I assumed she was gonna pay, but she's like, no, you can pay for yourself. I said, oh, okay. I just needed to know that ahead of time. You know, when someone invites you out to do something in some cultural concepts, the person who hosts the event is paying, but in some other ways it is not like that." - Zack

This quote highlights how small gestures can have a significant impact on how employees understand and experience inclusion. While the invitation for coffee seemed like a simple interaction, it highlighted the different cultural expectations and norms in the workplace. This quote also illustrates how navigating cultural differences can be difficult and require an open-minded approach to communication and understanding. While small gestures can be a nice way to build relationships and foster inclusion, it is important to recognise and navigate cultural differences to ensure that everyone feels included and valued, even though it may be complicated and difficult at times.

4.3.2 Communicating Appreciation

The interviewees' feeling of inclusion came from both colleagues and managers. The interviewees did not point to specific things the organisation did, but rather what certain people contributed to through daily interactions and conversations. It was understood by most interviewees that the experience of inclusion came from within themselves, and not from outside forces.

"I feel recognised and appreciated, and this is actively communicated as well. Whenever something happens, they recognise you, they show appreciation to you and it is openly communicated in other channels as well." -Emma

For Emma, inclusion was about being seen and heard. She expresses that she feels valued and respected because her contributions are acknowledged and appreciated by her colleagues and management. Especially when this was communicated openly, to her specifically but also where others could see through various channels, for example, "Slack" that the organisation uses. The quote stresses the importance of not just recognising each other but also actively

conveying it. Jake also explains how he appreciates when others actively communicate and acknowledge his work:

> *"I think for me it makes me feel included if I am appreciated for what I do. So if I do something that, where I put an effort, maybe someone else can say, also can acknowledge that. (...) From what I understood, is that we now need to hype ourselves up to say, look at me, look what I did! An example is to put it on Slack and then others come with "fireworks" if someone does something good, it feels a bit different if someone else says it. Like I feel like I'm not so comfortable with bragging about myself and saying, look at me! (...) But I think it can feel different when it comes from someone else, and of course, that feels more hierarchical. That being one's manager or someone else. But I think it is a way to empower also."* - Jake

For Jake inclusion was when others acknowledged his work, and when this would be actively communicated and recognised by his peers. Feeling appreciated through his contributions at work is important to him, especially when it comes from his manager or someone in a position of power. Using emojis as a means of acknowledgement is both an easy and quick way to show appreciation. Creating a space where achievements are celebrated, was for Jake a way to empower and encourage employees' talents, competencies, and achievements. Both quotes highlight not only recognising each other one on one but also so the entire organisation and your colleagues could see. Creating a culture of positive recognition and communication helped to promote inclusion.

Jake mentioned that "the talents" he and his colleagues possess and how these talents are appreciated are crucial for his understanding of inclusion. It is simply not to only acknowledge the different talents but also to utilise them to both create a more innovative work environment but also an inclusive one. Therefore, when employees felt recognised and appreciated for their unique characteristics, it was more likely for them to feel included and valued and for the organisation to leverage the benefits of its diversity. Kate pointed to when her manager consciously noticed a skill in her and how that made her feel included. Kate elaborates on this:

> *"So, she (her manager) saw a skill in me and asked me then if I would like to offer it more to students. I thought that was great because it didn't come from me, it*

came from her, and she had noticed that. I think that created a feeling of inclusion, which was like being seen in both how you do your work, but also what's outside of your work that would also be an asset for the team. (...) So I think I felt quite included when I was asked to step more into work." - Kate

Kate's manager recognised her strengths and abilities and provided her with an opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way. This underscores the importance of managers actively seeking out and recognising the unique skills and strengths of their team members for the employees to feel valued and needed. Hence, Kate felt included, not only at work but also outside her primary job responsibilities.

Another way an interviewee experienced inclusion was when they felt useful. Jake's interaction with a colleague left him feeling appreciated, seen, and more connected to his colleague.

"Yesterday we had a short mingle, and we were only five people there and then I talked to someone I have never talked to, until now. Then we said like, oh, let's try this exercise where you write on a post-it what you want to, what you can teach someone else right now and what you'd like to learn more about and do it for five minutes. And then we gave it a try with the people who were at the office and with this person. It was really nice because then she said that she had some technical questions that she was ashamed to ask. And that she taught about it for a year but then I could just do it in five minutes. I felt seen and it was at the end of the day. Then I also felt like I had developed a better relationship with this colleague." - Jake

First of all, Jake could with his competencies help a colleague he usually does not interact with. Using his skills made him feel meaningful and accomplished. Secondly, interacting with this colleague, increased the overall inclusion in the workplace as bonds are tied across departments. Additionally, creating an environment where it feels safe to ask for help and exchange skills can lead to increased innovation and creativity within the organisation. Overall, the quote emphasises the benefits of creating a workplace where people consciously feel valued and encouraged to work together toward common goals.

4.3.3 Stronger Together

Informal socialising plays an important role when fostering inclusion and creating stronger bonds within the organisation. Informal socialising is vital because it helps people to get to know each other on a personal level. This can help break down boundaries and build trust, making it simpler for people to consciously communicate their thoughts, opinions, and ideas with each other. The interviewee, Tommy, shares his perspective regarding the important role that informal socialising has when attempting to create an inclusive workplace culture.

> *"It was a different team in 2019 before the pandemic. The team was very close to each other before I joined the company. Then when I joined, I felt included from the start. We had a lot of breakfasts together at the office, bowling, laser tag, and some other activities. Then there was Covid and everything kind of stopped for two years. Then when we came back, we never really resumed social activities to the same extent as we had before. Now we don't really do anything spontaneous outside of work. But I have also noticed that the interest has kind of died out, which is unfortunate."* - Tommy

The effect of informal socialising on employee inclusion is made apparent through Tommy's statement. Prior to the pandemic, his team had a great sense of camaraderie, and he felt involved from the very beginning of his time at SchoolAB, much due to the informal socialising activities they engaged in together. However, after the pandemic struck, these activities ceased, and upon the team's return to the office, Tommy noticed a decrease in coworkers' interest in informal socialising. This implies that informal socialising is vital, especially during the onboarding process, for fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging at work. Consequently, the absence of these social activities might have a detrimental effect on employees' morale and sense of connection to their peers in the office. Furthermore, SchoolAB offers weekly breakfasts at the office which might be an organisational initiative, however, it opens up the possibility for informal socialising opportunities and conversations. Tommy continued by adding the following to his earlier statement:

> *"Then we socialise, get to know each other, we talk more about personal topics, our families and other things like that, I think those informal conversations are very important. People to get to know each other, understand each other, our backgrounds, where we come from, and I believe that helps us build stronger teams in the end."* - Tommy

Tommy's statement illustrates the advantages that informal interactions can have in strengthening teams and personal relationships. Employees can get to know each other beyond their positions at work and understand one other's history through casual conversations about their private lives. This can help break down boundaries and nurture a better sense of inclusion. This statement demonstrates how informal interactions among employees can generate feelings of trust and support, as well as encourage the flow of ideas and knowledge. Therefore, organisations should recognise the importance of informal socialising as a tool for promoting inclusion and encourage opportunities for employees to engage in more informal conversations and activities outside of a formal work setting. These findings have implications for organisations working with diversity and inclusion, as they should consider the need for informal socialising and continuously take steps to further support and encourage these forms of non-work related activities.

Furthermore, Zack emphasises the crucial effect of being physically near people to gain a feeling of inclusion. After the Covid-19 pandemic, SchoolAB among others, now have a hybrid workplace where the employees can choose if they work from home or at the office. Zack did not mention if he felt excluded during the pandemic but his quote highlights that nonverbal communication, specifically body language, and interpersonal interactions affect his impression of inclusion at work.

> *"I prefer being physically near people because you have to read body language when communicating with coworkers. There is more to communication than just the actual words that are spoken."* - Zack

Zack's statement emphasises the importance of nonverbal communication, especially body language, in fostering an inclusive workplace. He believes this can only be noticed when working at the office together. His comments highlight how the capacity to perceive and interpret nonverbal cues plays a significant part in creating strong relationships amongst employees, and effective communication is essential to promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace. This finding also has implications for diversity policies in the workplace, as it can suggest that policies should encourage face-to-face interactions and physical proximity among coworkers, which can assist in better facilitating the interpretations of conscious nonverbal social cues and promote inclusivity. It can also help teams grow stronger and tighter, increasing that feeling of inclusion.

4.4 Barriers to Inclusion

Despite the fact that all of the interviewees felt included most of the time and in a variety of contexts, there were two distinct barriers that restricted and negatively impacted their sense of inclusion. Firstly, the homogeneous composition of upper management limited inclusion. Secondly, we identified "diversity blindness," which refers to individuals' inability to understand minorities.

4.4.1 Homogeneous Upper Management

SchoolAB is commonly known to be a diverse organisation in terms of gender, ethnicity and age. It was approximated by one interviewee that 60 percent were Swedish and 40 percent were non-Swedish. He understood this distribution since he after all works in Sweden and, according to him, a majority of Swedes are necessary for governmental reasons. Even though all interviewees thought SchoolAB was a diverse organisation, a few pointed to their homogenous upper management in terms of ethnicity and nationality.

> *"Right now I think our management is very Swedish. The people that are diverse, can only be found on the bottom two layers of the organisation, like program managers and maybe a little bit more. But team leads and department directors, vice director, CEO are Swedish and Swedish speaking."* - Tommy

> *"I think maybe the diversity of SchoolAB gets worse the closer you get to upper management. The higher levels and the board are more homogenous, and I can see that most of the people come from Stockholm or Sweden. And when I'm thinking about ethnicities, then it looks a bit more homogenous. But in the team where I work and at the programs level and in the students it is very diverse. (...) I think that would create a feeling that, okay, you can get another position by working here. And I think that that helps maybe everyone to feel more inspired as well too."* - Jake

As one takes a closer look at the board and upper management, diversity decreased and did not reflect lower levels of the organisation and its students. This suggests that the organisation may not be inclusive in terms of providing equal opportunities for diverse individuals to advance into leadership roles, as indicated by the last part of Jake's quote. The lack of ethnic and national diversity could therefore create a barrier for inclusion for individuals from diverse backgrounds to contribute their perspectives and ideas at higher levels of

decision-making within the company. Additionally, the organisation misses the opportunity of diverse perspectives which is known to increase productivity. The presence of more diverse management could foster a sense of inclusion among employees, as seeing "someone like you" in a position of power may be inspiring. This is why Jake believed it would be motivating to have individuals of various nationalities, different from Swedish, in the upper management.

Homogeneous management can have a negative effect since they might not consider or be aware of other perspectives than their own. This was pointed out by several interviewees and indicated a need to change.

> *"Upper leadership or management is zero diverse and I don't think people are aware of the situation. "* - Hannah

> *"I think it would be useful for SchoolAB's upper management to actually have more training in diversity, equity and inclusion."* - Kate

Both quotes suggest that upper management is homogenous due to their lack of training in diversity and inclusion and they, therefore, lack awareness of the issue. Despite management's efforts to create a more diverse and inclusive workplace, they are not adhering to the recommended practices themselves. By enhancing training in diversity, equity, and inclusion, everyone can acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to establish a more inclusive and equitable work environment.

In addition to the employees of SchoolAB being aware of the management being homogeneous, our interviewee Hannah had a noteworthy experience where this affected her negatively.

> *"I tried to be the team leader of the school, and I applied for that and I didn't get a job. And I don't know why. I was the most experienced and you know, capable."*
> - Hannah

Hannah was in a situation where she had applied for a position in the management team but did not get the promotion. Furthermore, she never understood why she did not get promoted despite her being the most qualified. Hannah had two theories as to why she did not get promoted. First of all, she thought that the recruiter had given the promotion to a friend. Her second guess was that her ethnicity, not fitting the ideal "manager/leader", and not being

fluent in English, was what hindered her from getting a promotion. This gave the impression that certain individuals are promoted and rewarded due to their demographics rather than their actual skills and abilities. This situation indicates a strong will from an employee perspective to create more inclusive policies with more intentional promotion practices that give everyone a fair chance to get promoted.

> *"So, yeah, I want to make sure that we have the policies in place. Now we only have internal policies that address the minimum legal requirements."* - Hannah

Hannah makes it clear in her statements how she wants more clarity on promotion qualifications for positions within the organisation, and not just settle with instituting the minimum requirement of anti-discrimination laws. If SchoolAB can create and implement more thorough policies, these types of situations can hopefully be avoided in the future, which could increase inclusivity.

With a lack of diversity in upper management, many interviewees felt their chances of career development were being compromised and restricted. As mentioned in Jake's quote earlier in this section, he suggested how empowering it would be to have a role model in the management team and someone to look up to. This was also confirmed by Tommy:

> *"Then if there was something that I would wish to see differently since I have worked here for a long time and I also want to work here for many more years. I obviously would like to see my career develop and I think, if I'm not mistaken, all the people that I have seen in the management have been, if not ethnically Swedish, at least, Swedish speaking. (...) So I think what would be interesting for me to see is if I could have a role model".* - Tommy

Tommy noticed the lack of diversity in upper management, which made him concerned about his career advancement prospects since he is not of Swedish ethnicity. With this perspective, it could be perceived by the rest of the organisation that you have to be of Swedish origin to be promoted to upper management. By having a diverse representation among those in leadership positions, Tommy and his colleagues see an opportunity for their own growth within the organisation. Therefore, Tommy and other interviewees suggested the importance of having a role model in a position of power, to both know you have the possibility to be promoted but also see and strive for it. Furthermore, the interviewees suggested how clearer

guidelines and policies could make it more attainable and easier to know if they work hard enough and possess the skills necessary, they will get promoted.

> *"Just to know that like if I'm gonna work hard and if I'm going to do a good job, there is a possibility for me to one day get there."* - Tommy

> *"We wanted to understand how to get a promotion in this organisation, right? Because if you tell me the way, I will make sure to deliver that so then I can get a promotion. But they don't want to specify that there is no, it is not specific. It is very fluff and broad."* - Hannah

Tommy recognises that he needs to work hard to be promoted, but due to homogenous upper management and biases, he acknowledges that there is a possibility he may not be able to advance in his career despite his efforts. Hannah's quote reveals her frustration with the lack of clear guidance on how to get a promotion. Both quotes highlight the importance of having clear and achievable steps, and to not discriminate or exclude individuals with diverse backgrounds. It also suggests the importance of clear communication and accountability in career advancement opportunities, particularly for individuals who are underrepresented in the organisation and upper management positions.

4.4.2 Diversity Blindness

Based on insights gained from interviewing several employees at SchoolAB, we identified diversity blindness as a barrier to inclusion. These employees highlighted the existence of coworkers and managers that at times fail to appreciate the value, acknowledge the existence, and need for diversity. Through these interviews, it became clear that diversity blindness can lead to a range of negative outcomes. Ultimately, the definition of diversity blindness seeks to highlight the importance of recognising and valuing diversity as a means of promoting inclusion and belonging for marginalised groups in modern-day organisations**.** Our definition is as follows:

> *"Diversity blindness refers to when individuals or organisations fail to recognise, acknowledge, and value differences in individuals' various personal backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. This can lead to a failure to understand the unique challenges and barriers that marginalised diverse groups may face. Diversity blindness is most commonly caused by unconscious bias and manifests itself in a variety of ways, such as overlooking qualified candidates from underrepresented*

groups, failing to consider diverse perspectives in decision-making processes, and failing to address systemic barriers that prevent marginalised individuals from truly thriving."

One of the main drivers for diversity blindness is unconscious biases. Biases refer to the tendency to favour or discriminate against people or groups based on preconceived assumptions or stereotypes. The section examines how biases can create barriers to inclusion in the workplace and lead to diversity blindness, particularly in hiring processes and day-to-day interactions.

"I think it is just a lot easier to go with what you already know. To take the simple route, so to say, because it is more comfortable. I think the barrier is that it is perceived as easier and quicker to go with what's closest, what you are most acquainted with (in relation to hiring processes). Also, in more of a "day-to-day" setting, I think the biggest barrier is a lack of understanding, a lack of understanding of individuals' different perspectives." - Karen

Karen identified a lack of understanding of different perspectives as the main barrier to achieving diversity and inclusion. She pointed out that it is often easier to stick with what one already knows. For instance, when it comes to recruitment, there is a tendency to prefer familiar candidates because "you know what you get" based on prior knowledge and experience.

Zack adds to this perspective of lack of understanding. He talks about how diversity is not just a "fact" or "number" that is set in stone. Individuals are unique in more ways than just in what country they were born in or what religion they practice. He mentions how people cannot be categorised or labelled that easily. Instead, it should stem from the uniqueness of each individual's subjective experiences. Zack acknowledges that there is visible and invisible diversity, and how many people often just acknowledge the visible diversity and become biased in that way, making assumptions and presumptions without knowing their whole story. Being capable of recognising and accepting all types of diversity, especially invisible diversity such as personality, cultural background, and personal beliefs, is highlighted by Zack's emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual's subjective experiences. This underscores the importance of employers valuing and respecting individual diversity, as well as implementing policies and practices that address biases in recruiting, training, and performance evaluations. The comments from Karen and Zack illustrate how biases can be a serious threat to workplace

inclusion. Biases can make it easier for people to take shortcuts and avoid the discomfort of engaging with others' differences. Biases can also lead to assumptions and presumptions based on visible diversity in everyday interactions, potentially resulting in misunderstandings and disputes.

Zack's statements continue the discussion of biases, more specifically how biases affect employees' personal understanding and experience of inclusion at SchoolAB.

> *"There's always gonna be some bias, obviously, you know, whether someone can speak English or Swedish natively, there's gonna be biases. If you are a very homogeneous team, then the homogeneous team would probably hire the person who's most similar to themselves."* - Zack

According to Zack's claim, biases can exist even in seemingly innocent circumstances, such as language proficiency. Thus, biases could be the cause behind SchoolABs homogenous management and an incentive for them to work actively against it. This showcases how important it is for organisations to be mindful of their biases and actively strive to construct inclusive and diverse teams. Hannah then reinforces Zack's comments by mentioning how there might be some partial bias existing within the organisation:

> *"There is a lot of gossip around, that some immigrants or non-Swedish people earn way less in salary compared to the Swedish employees."* - Hannah

Hannah's statement sheds light on her experience of potential racial bias within the organisation, notably in terms of compensation disparities. This underlines the importance of organisations addressing systematic biases that might have harmful implications for underrepresented groups and employees. Later on, Hannah suggests that SchoolAB should be more clear and transparent regarding salaries within the organisation. Victor's comments also highlight the need to remove any pre-existing biases. Accordingly, he preaches about the importance of fully believing in and pursuing diversity actions, practices, and policies in the workplace.

> *"It is important that we genuinely believe in something that we preach and fully pursue it, as opposed to just check-marking a box."* - Victor

When it comes to diversity policies, Victor's remark indicates that there is a need for the organisation to go beyond simple empty claims and surface-level actions, and to have clear

good intentions. Victor also wants to see SchoolAB make a stand, and have a clear purpose and genuine drive behind all of the organisation's diversity and inclusion initiatives, as opposed to just complying with legal requirements and "check-marking" a box. Jointly, they think that the organisation has to sincerely believe in and apply the values of inclusion and diversity in all parts of its operations. This demands an in-depth awareness and understanding of the difficulties and challenges associated with biases, as well as a commitment to addressing them in a genuine and purposeful way.

4.4.2.1 Being Blind to Diversity

Hannah addresses diversity blindness, which refers to the inability to see or acknowledge the presence of diversity and its influence in the workplace.

> *"Well, when you are not one of the underrepresented, how would you know what the opposite is? You're not aware. However, we are doing good things and in a good place. But we are kind of settling, almost being like "This is good enough". I think, if you don't know problems in this area exist, you either don't want to see it, or you actually can't see it. Perhaps there is a bit of shame associated, not being able to admit making a mistake, or not taking action to change something that's gone wrong in the past."* - Hannah

Hannah's remarks bring to light a prevalent issue in the workplace: those who do not belong to underrepresented groups may not be aware of the existence or consequences of diversity issues. She speculates that this might be because people are unaware of the issue or refuse to accept it. Hannah also makes the suggestion that organisations can become complacent and accept "good enough" without realising that more needs to be done to achieve a truly inclusive workplace. Hannah concludes by pointing out that there can be some shame attached to not owning up to past mistakes or failing to own up to them and take the right actions to correct the mistakes.

Hannah continues by adding that she and some other colleagues with diverse backgrounds have had some opinions and complaints on various occasions, while the overrepresented employees could not comprehend or struggled to understand their struggles and feelings surrounding some topics. She mentions a specific situation in a meeting where she was the only participant who was not a man:

"For example, the guys and I had a meeting. They were talking about leadership in relation to working with AI. Immediately when I mentioned that I wanted to do something about getting some more women in leadership roles, it was immediately met with a bit of resistance. They responded with: "But why?" Because we need it! But they don't know, you know, because they can't see it. They don't understand! But I do (as a woman). I think it is missing a bit of curiosity as well from the entitled groups. They don't want to have that conversation because it is unknown, or perhaps because it is a bit scary? I don't know." - Hannah

The phenomenon of diversity blindness, of the failure of individuals and organisations to fully recognise and appreciate diversity in the workplace, is reflected in Hannah's comments. The entitled group's opposition to having courses on women in leadership roles is an example of diversity blindness. According to Hannah, another element that contributes to diversity blindness is the entitled group's lack of curiosity in relation to the presence of women in leadership. She assumes that the entitled group may avoid discussions around diversity and inclusion simply because it is unknown or scary to them. This example emphasises the necessity of cultivating a culture of curiosity and open-mindedness to diversity and inclusion at SchoolAB.

Another example of how some colleagues at SchoolAB failed to acknowledge diversity is because they are not participating and are instead in their "silos". Therefore they do not see and acknowledge different perspectives.

"There are certain people who don't participate in the breakfasts or monthly meetings, which, I think, makes it very obvious. (...) A couple of departments are more focused on their own thing, so they are in their silos. Therefore, I think it would be good with something mandatory." - Sophia

Sophia acknowledges that there are certain people who always choose not to participate in the diversity and inclusion initiatives, for example, monthly workshops which are aimed to discuss topics regarding diversity. This makes it very obvious to Sophia that these individuals are not interested and therefore become "blind to diversity". Making these activities mandatory, is for Sophia, a solution to the problem, as this would force them to discuss the topics and hear other perspectives.

Victor then discusses the significance of leadership values and vision and their impact on diversity and inclusion in the organisation.

"I suppose the most significant key to achieving diversity and inclusion emerges from the kind of leadership you have. What are their values? What is important to them? Having or not having a diversity of opinions and perspectives stems from their own values that the organisation or leadership has. Is it something they want the organisation to value, and do they not even see what is needed?" - Victor

Victor believes that an organisation's culture in regards to diversity and inclusion is significantly shaped by the values and attitudes of its leadership. Additionally, he claims that if leadership does not actively promote diversity and inclusion, the organisation is likely to suffer from a lack of diversity of opinions and perspectives, ultimately hindering progress towards diversity and inclusion. Victor's remarks demonstrate how leaders' inability to recognise the value of diversity might prevent diversity and inclusion from being successfully achieved. Kate elaborates on the importance of having someone the employees can turn to if they were to experience inequality, diversity blindness or bias:

"I think we see a lot of words and promises, but then what happens if this is not followed through? I don't think we should be like the "police" or anything forceful like that. But it is more that you should have someone from HR or a manager that you can go to for assistance. Someone who has the capabilities and authority to properly guide or support you." - Kate

Kate's statement emphasises the discrepancy which commonly exists between organisations' claims of inclusivity and actual interactions with employees. She believes that having someone from HR or a manager who can provide guidance and assistance can be beneficial in dealing with workplace biases. This emphasises the need of having extensive diversity policies that go beyond making assertions of commitment to diversity and inclusion. Organisations must implement tangible procedures to successfully address diversity blindness, as well as give proper support to affected employees. A punishing approach may not always be the most effective method to address issues of bias and discrimination, as seen by Kate's emphasis on the need for support and guidance rather than simply relying on regulations. Instead, having a supportive environment where employees can report instances of bias and receive advice and guidance on how to address them can drastically enhance the inclusiveness of the workplace. To avoid diversity blindness, it is essential to increase the

understanding of diversity and its impacts on organisations. To accurately sum it up, at the end of the day:

> *"You have to be able to put yourself in other people's shoes. This is a must"* - Victor

5. Discussion

The aim of this thesis is to better understand inclusion and how it can contribute to the development and creation of diversity policies that are reflective of these experiences. The conceptual framework of the thesis seeks to visualise how employees experience and understand inclusion, in light of diversity policies. It includes the three key concepts of inclusion: belonging and uniqueness, organisational culture, and communication. Ultimately, our empirical findings show, contradictory to our conceptual framework, that belonging is the same thing as inclusion but uniqueness, communication and culture are crucial for the employees feeling of inclusion. Finally, we discuss diversity and inclusion policies and introduce the inclusion loop.
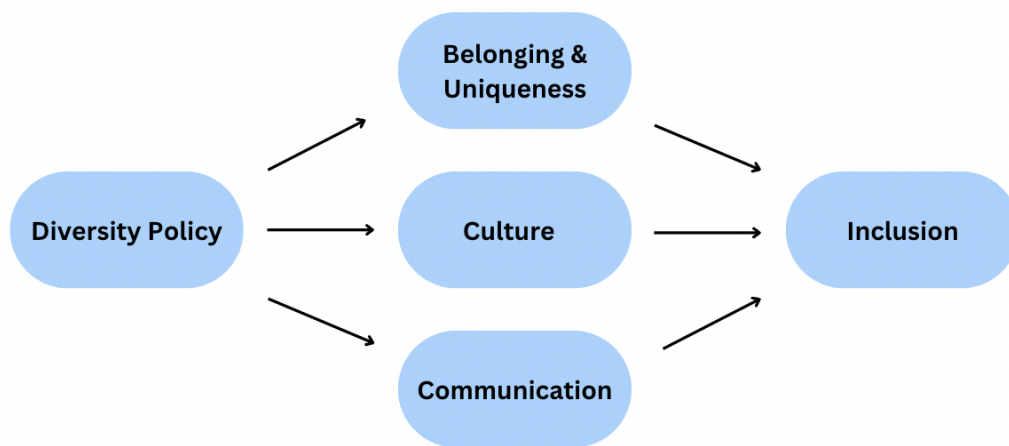
Framework 1: Conceptual Framework

5.1 Belonging = Inclusion

To reach a comprehensive understanding of how employees understand and experience inclusion, there is a need to grasp what inclusion is. Scholars have presented numerous definitions of the phenomenon and all suggest that it is a contextual, individual, momentary, and transient concept (O'Donovan, 2018). Our empirical findings also suggest that inclusion is subjective as the interviewees understood and experienced inclusion differently. Furthermore, the interviewees could experience an overall feeling of inclusion, yet still had experiences where they did not feel included. For example when Hannah did not get her promotion, or when employees experienced barriers that triggered their sense of inclusion but did not affect them immediately. This highlights why van Ewijk (2011) and Begeç (2013)

suggest that continuous assessment and evaluation of employees' sense of inclusion is needed since it shifts depending on various factors.

Shore et al.'s (2011) definition of inclusion emphasises belonging and uniqueness for the employees' perception of inclusion. Furthermore, several scholars intertwine but distinguish the concepts of inclusion and belonging (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Pless & Maak, 2004). Our empirical findings showed that the appreciation of uniqueness was essential for inclusion but a sense of belonging was, rather than a contributing factor for inclusion, the same as inclusion. The degree to which an employee felt valued, needed, and accepted in the workplace (Hagerty et al. 1992) is synonymous with their understanding of what inclusion is. Hannah herself even stated that inclusion goes with belonging. Therefore, if belonging and inclusion are synonyms, inclusion is, just like belonging, a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Additionally, a sense of belonging contributes to greater job satisfaction and engagement (Raza et al., 2020), just like inclusion does (Jerónimo, Henriques & Carvalho, 2021).

5.2 The Foundation of Inclusion

Inclusion is the recognition and acceptance of diversity, where individuals of different backgrounds, abilities, perspectives, and identities are valued and actively involved in a collaborative and shared environment. Furthermore, uniqueness, communication and culture drove the interviewees' feelings of inclusion.

5.2.1 Uniqueness

Feeling noticed and respected for one's individual contribution, referred to as uniqueness (Leroy et al., 2022), was very important for the interviewees. This was because they wanted to contribute to something and feel useful, rather than just perceiving their own uniqueness, which Tsachouridi and Nikandrou (2019) argue is important for a more pleasant work experience. The employees' sense of uniqueness positively influenced their job satisfaction and engagement when their skills were utilised in meaningful ways, rather than solely relying on their sense of uniqueness (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Stevens, Plaut & Sanchez-Burks, 2008).

Furthermore, for the employees to feel appreciated for their skills, this was communicated verbally by coworkers and managers. Effectively communicating it, both individually and externally on Slack, could decrease the feeling of stereotyping which happens when

individuals' own experiences and backgrounds are not properly acknowledged in diversity programs (Grant & Gino, 2010). Therefore, acknowledging skills and competencies needs to not only derive from diversity policies but also from the employees themselves. Effective verbal communication was therefore crucial for the employees' sense of uniqueness and ultimately inclusion (Pless & Maak, 2004).

5.2.2 Communication

It has been known that effective communication is one of the most important elements of establishing and maintaining an inclusive workplace (Cox & Blake, 1991; Wolfgruber, Einwiller & Brockhaus, 2021). This is aligned with our findings that curiosity, informal activities, small acts and gestures, and body language were significant for the employees' sense of inclusion. All these findings include both verbal and nonverbal communication, clear speech and active listening. Furthermore, in accordance with Schein (2012), interactions in the organisation can lead to a better understanding of the organisational objectives, which enhances the feeling of inclusion and ultimately creates an organisational culture where everyone shares the same organisational beliefs and vision. This was proven by our findings as the interactions and relationships created by the employees affected their sense of inclusion which resulted in an inclusive culture.

Being curious toward each other and asking questions, assisted in fostering the interviewees' sense of inclusion. According to Chiocchio et al. (2011) this type of two-way communication fosters trust, respect, and understanding between coworkers, but also improves cross-collaboration which eventually can increase organisational outcomes. Several interviewees mentioned how they intuitively are curious about their coworkers and wanted to learn about them and their heritage as this also increases their knowledge. This also highlights the importance of active listening, not just speech, in curiosity as active listening could influence the speaker's own values and beliefs, fostering an inclusive environment (Yip & Fisher, 2022). Furthermore, these interactions foster an inclusive culture as the employees are more comfortable with reaching out to each other for help. This is an incentive for organisations to create environments and facilitate opportunities where these interactions can be promoted and created. However, since the findings suggested that these interactions between coworkers were intuitive and natural for the individuals, the employees were capable of creating a social environment themselves.

Pless and Maak (2004) emphasise the need for organisations to actively promote inclusive communication practices as these strategies have the power to both reinforce and contest biases and preconceptions. This refers to both horizontal and vertical communication and how information should flow both between coworkers, but also from management down. Promoting inclusive communication practices, primarily vertically, can be essential when addressing the barriers to inclusion.

Furthermore, as supported by Daya (2014), our findings suggest that nonverbal communication was important for the employees' understanding and experience of inclusion. In a diverse organisation, particularly where English was not the native language for many employees, the effective use of nonverbal communication became even more crucial. In such cases, nonverbal cues, such as body language, carried even greater significance when complete verbal understanding was impossible. This is why Hargie, Dickson, and Tourish (2004) and Wood (2006) suggest that it is important to be aware of one's own nonverbal cues and to interpret others' cues correctly in order to create a more inclusive environment. This is important as it reduces the risk of misinterpretations and misunderstandings, which boosts inclusivity. Thus, effective nonverbal communication could have helped Zack and his Asian coworker when they had a misunderstanding about who was going to pay for fika. Furthermore, good nonverbal communication builds trust, strengthens relationships, and inclusion (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014), which was supported by Emma, Zack, and Sam who stressed the importance of eye contact and body language. Additionally, simple gestures and acts of kindness were emphasised by the interviewees to create a feeling of inclusion. Even though simple gestures are not nonverbal communication, the coworkers expressed their gratitude in other ways than pure speech.

5.2.3 An Inclusive Culture

The third cornerstone of the conceptual framework on how employees understood and experienced inclusion is the organisational culture. The organisational culture represents the common values, assumptions, beliefs, and practices that influence how people behave within an organisation (Schein, 2010). Thus, the organisation shapes the culture, which shapes how people act and behave in the organisation. The interviewees' intuitive and natural inclusion could therefore be partially shaped by the culture, consequently fostering inclusion. Hence, since natural acts and curiosity fostered inclusion organisations should promote intuitive

inclusion for an inclusive culture. Thus, the culture was shaped by the organisation but driven by the employees.

A diverse workforce entails having individuals with different backgrounds, beliefs and opinions, which makes it even more important to create a culture that acknowledges these differences but also creates a culture where everyone feels welcome, respected and accepted. However, this also suggests that diverse workplaces could have a more difficult time developing a good, strong company culture compared to non-diverse organisations. Although, the findings suggest, despite having the odds against them, that the organisation had an inclusive and welcoming culture. This aligns with Cox's (2001) argument that an organisation encouraging diversity and inclusion, promoting equal practices and investing in employees' growth, can create a supportive culture. The case organisation demonstrated a commitment to employees' growth and promoted diversity and inclusion. However, it was observed that equal practices were not promoted, as there were identified disparities in promotional opportunities. This finding had a significant impact on the overall feeling of inclusion, as interviewees who experienced this disparity expressed a loss of trust and belief and belief in the organisation.

Cox and Blake (1991) and Ely and Thomas (2001) both suggest that to create an inclusive work environment the organisation needs to offer training and education on diversity and inclusion, provide opportunities for professional development, and promote collaborative communication. Firstly, SchoolAB does provide training in diversity and inclusion through their monthly workshops, even though the lessons and takeaways learned from these workshops were not always clearly reflected in employees' words and actions, due to the existence of diversity blindness among some of SchoolAB's employees. However, Dover, Kaiser, and Major (2020) and Scarborough, Lambouths, and Holbrook (2019) argue that mandatory diversity training is not as effective as voluntary, even though Sophia argues that it could be crucial to have mandatory training in order to address diversity blindness. In addition, Dobbin and Kalev (2016) argue that leaders must exhibit a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion by leading by example and participating in training opportunities. However, it could be argued that managers did not fully engage or commit to these workshops since, a) the management was very homogeneous, not truly understanding the benefits of diversity, b) diversity blindness.

Additionally, the organisation did promote collaborative communication to some extent by hosting informal social activities. However, these activities experienced a decline during the

pandemic, but have not directly impacted the organisational culture. Nevertheless, if these activities were reintroduced, they could potentially enhance the inclusive culture. Furthermore, it was clear that the organisation did not offer professional development in terms of promotions. This raises the question of how the interviewees could see the culture as a contributing factor of inclusion when two out of the three propositions of an inclusive culture identified by Cox and Blake (1991) and Ely and Thomas (2001) were not fulfilled. So even though the organisation perhaps has more work to do in relation to contributing to the organisational culture, employees still believed the overarching culture was good due to individuals' own personal efforts and engagement with it. This demonstrates that the organisational culture today was more employee-driven, even though it could be more organisation-driven to fulfil Cox and Blake's (1991) and Ely and Thomas's (2001) propositions of an inclusive environment.

5.3 Diversity and Inclusion Policy

Diversity policies, as a part of diversity management, are aimed at addressing both diversity and inclusion (Köllen, 2019). After gaining an understanding of how employees understand and experience inclusion, we suggest that diversity policies should be interwoven and therefore be called diversity and inclusion policies, in order to address both diversity and inclusion, aligned with Köllen (2019). Due to the discrepancy between policies and practice, an enhanced focus on inclusion in policies can help mitigate the implementation gap identified by several scholars (Mor Barak, Luria & Brimhall, 2022; Riccò & Guerci, 2014). The implementation gap refers to not "walking the talk", resulting in an inconsistency between stated intentions and actual outcomes, which can affect employees' perception of an inclusive workplace (Mor Barak, Luria & Brimhall, 2022). The added focus on inclusion within diversity and inclusion policies returns to Mor Barak, Luria and Brimhall's (2022) differentiation of policies aimed to promote inclusion and those that promote diversity. Therefore, diversity and inclusion policies would primarily promote inclusion since diversity is already a prerequisite. Thus, diversity and inclusion can be combined to create an inclusive and diverse environment, since diversity is nothing without inclusion. A combined diversity and inclusion policy contradicts Mor Barak, Luria, and Brimhall's (2022) suggestion of having two, but interrelated policies focusing on either concept. A diversity and inclusion policy can help alleviate resistance from overrepresented groups since the policy focuses on diversity and inclusion, decreasing the likelihood of them treating themselves as victims (Dover, Kaiser & Major, 2020), since everyone benefits from a focus on inclusion.

5.3.1 The Inclusion Loop

In the conceptual framework, diversity policies aimed to influence inclusion through belonging and uniqueness, culture, and communication. Consequently, we have chosen to refer to these policies as diversity and inclusion policies. Our empirical findings suggest that employees understood and experienced inclusion through intuitive inclusion, conscious inclusion and previously identified barriers to inclusion. This highlights employees' crucial role in establishing inclusion through uniqueness, communication, and organisational culture. Simultaneously, the organisation retains the capacity to influence and shape the culture. This dynamic results in a continuous cycle, where diversity and inclusion policies shape organisational practices, which subsequently impact employees' experience of inclusion in terms of uniqueness, communication, and culture. This cycle forms the Inclusion Loop (see Model 1), which represents the ongoing and interconnected nature of the process. It emphasises the importance of continuously evaluating and refining diversity policies to cultivate an inclusive culture within the organisation. By examining the effects of diversity policies on the organisation and its employees, the loop illustrates how policies can influence and shape the overall environment of inclusion. By placing a stronger emphasis on inclusion within diversity and inclusion policies, the unintended effects can be minimised, resulting in an inclusive workplace that genuinely values diversity (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006).
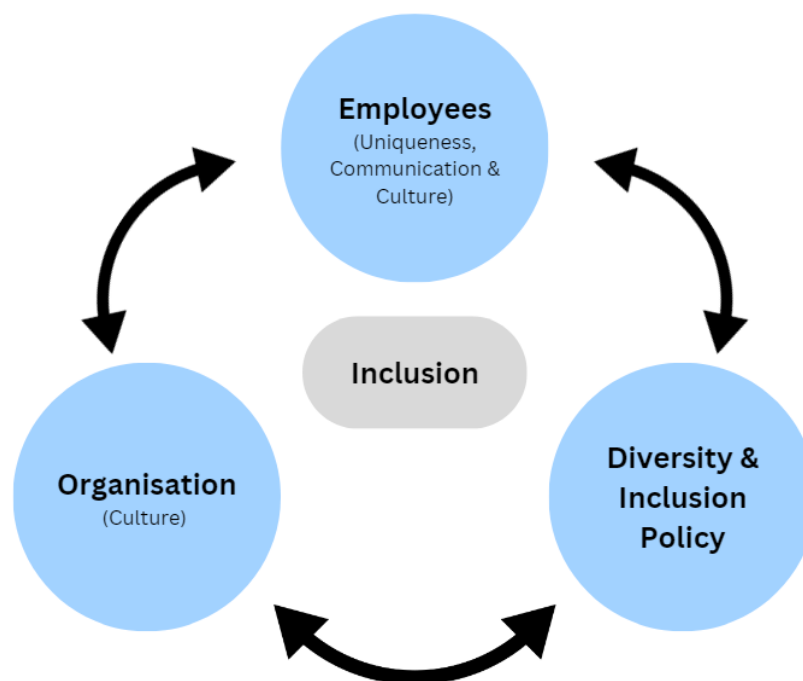
Model 1: The Inclusion Loop

The Inclusion Loop describes the dynamic interplay between the three components: diversity and inclusion policy, employees, and organisation. The model displays their interconnectedness and each element's ability to affect and influence each other. The inclusion loop can be 'the how' of van Ewijk's (2011) analytical framework of the diversity policy as an organisational strategy. Thus, diversity and inclusion policies set the tone for how the organisation operates, including what it values and priorities, and what they stand for as an organisation. The diversity and inclusion policies then influence the organisation's culture and environment, which in turn has an effect on the behaviour and attitudes of its employees, and therefore also the organisation's performance and outcomes. This is contradicting Jin, Lee and Lee's (2016) finding that policies require the organisational culture as a supporting factor, rather than an outcome of the diversity and inclusion policy. However, considering the vast scope of organisational culture, encompassing language, traditions and norms, among others, diversity and inclusion policies can only influence specific aspects of the culture that pertain to diversity and inclusion. Nonetheless, this implies that the organisational culture can still serve as a supportive element for fostering diversity and inclusion.

Furthermore, the Inclusion Loop can also work the other way around, in a reverse loop. The employees in the organisation can contribute to the Inclusion Loop by consistently assessing and evaluating the diversity and inclusion policy. Furthermore, this is supported by van Ewijk (2011) and Begeç (2013) in order to determine the effectiveness and improvement potentials of policies. Based on the employees' demands and opinions, the organisation may then take the appropriate steps to alter and adjust its policy so it is reflective of the organisation and its employees. Additionally, when implemented correctly within the organisation, the model can assist in reducing individuals' diversity blindness by intentionally seeking out and valuing diverse perspectives, experiences and identities within an organisation, which can lead to greater understanding, empathy, and collaboration among individuals from different backgrounds and origins. Thus, the model can be used to understand what and how employees feel included and how this can inform the development and implementation of policies that are reflective of these experiences.

6. Conclusion

In this qualitative research, with an SI lens, our main aim was to explore employees understanding and experience of inclusion. Furthermore, by grasping inclusion we could better comprehend how employees' understanding and experiences can contribute to the development and creation of diversity and inclusion policies. Based on our findings and previous discussion, the following chapter answers our research question by summarising our key findings, contributions to literature, practical implications, and opportunities for future research.

6.1 Answering Our Research Question

Drawing upon our aim, the forthcoming section will provide an answer to our research question.

- How do employees understand and experience inclusion?

Overall, employees understanding and experience of inclusion is synonymous with a sense of belonging, thus inclusion is just like belonging, a basic human need. Therefore, inclusion must be prioritised to reach the desired outcomes of diversity and diversity management. Furthermore, the employees understood and experienced inclusion intuitively, consciously and through the barriers of inclusion. Thus, the employees experienced inclusion through the three concepts in the conceptual framework. They acknowledged uniqueness through the appreciation of skills, competencies and diverse perspectives. Furthermore, communication drove curiosity, small gestures, informal activities and interactions which fostered a sense of inclusion. Finally, the organisational culture had an effect on the employees' experience of inclusion, but it also negatively affected their sense of inclusion due to homogenous management and diversity blindness. The findings lead us to believe that the employees' sense of inclusion was either driven by employees, the organisation, or both. Our findings demonstrate that employees' understanding and experience of inclusion is a subjective and multifaceted phenomenon as individuals assign different meanings through social interactions.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This single case study, using an abductive approach, uncovered how employees understood and experienced inclusion. Furthermore, by interpreting how employees understood and experienced inclusion through their interactions with objects, events and actions, the study

can assist organisations and scholars in how to develop and create diversity and inclusion policies reflective of these experiences. The existing literature on diversity policies has predominantly centred around diversity itself. However, this study introduces a valuable perspective by emphasising the significance of inclusion within diversity and inclusion policies.

First of all, the conceptual framework sought to understand how employees understood and experienced inclusion through belonging and uniqueness, communication and culture. However, the findings indicated that belonging was essentially interchangeable with inclusion. Consequently, Shore et al.'s (2011) definition of inclusion is deemed inaccurate, as it underscores the necessity of both belonging and uniqueness for inclusion. This discovery extends the existing knowledge and theoretical domain of inclusion, as the literature on belonging can now be integrated into the realm of inclusion. Nevertheless, related to the contextual, individual, momentary, and transient nature of inclusion, it is likely that not all literature on belonging, and vice versa, can be equated.

The conceptual framework draws upon prior literature on inclusion and has been enriched by the empirical findings which reveal that the driving forces behind inclusion stem from either employees, the organisation, or both. The basis of inclusion rests upon the pillars of uniqueness, communication, and culture. This study reveals that employees perceive and encounter inclusion in an intuitive and conscious manner, while also navigating various barriers that hinder inclusion. The need for uniqueness expands on Tsachouridi and Nikandrou's (2019) argument that individuals perceive their own uniqueness and adds that employees want to be recognised for their uniqueness and contribute to something useful through the adequate utilisation of their skills. In addition to that, communication was essential for recognising individuals through curious interactions and informal activities, which reinforces Cox and Blake (1991) and Wolfgruber, Einwiller, and Brockhaus's (2021) assertion that effective communication is one of the most important elements of establishing and maintaining an inclusive workplace. Subsequently, the organisational culture was shaped by the organisation but driven by the employees which fostered an inclusive culture of natural inclusion and curiosity. The suggestions by Cox and Blake (1991) and Ely and Thomas (2001) on how to establish an inclusive culture are partially dismissed as the employees experienced inclusion, even though the organisation did not fulfil two of the three identified propositions. However, there is an opportunity to further enhance the employees' inclusivity

as the organisation can address these two missing propositions to foster a greater inclusive environment and overcome the barriers to inclusion.

Furthermore, expanding diversity policies to include both diversity and inclusion can help close Mor Barak, Luria and Brimhall (2022) and Riccò and Guerci (2014) previously identified implementation gap between stated goals and actual results. Policies with an emphasis on inclusion can help reduce resistance and foster a more diverse and inclusive workplace. Mor Barak, Luria and Brimhall (2022) divide policies into either being diversity or inclusion focused, while we argue that they should be fully merged and integrated. That is because diversity is nothing without inclusion. Additionally, with the policies being combined and maintaining an equal focus on both diversity and inclusion, any potential resistance would be reduced since inclusion benefits everyone, while diversity policies mainly tend to focus on and aid minorities and marginalised groups.

Lastly, the study proposes an inclusion loop which underlines the cyclical process' dynamic and interrelated nature. Organisational practices are influenced by the diversity and inclusion policy, which in turn affects how included employees feel. Organisations can foster an inclusive environment by emphasising inclusion within policies and continuously evaluating and refining them. By conducting consistent assessments and valuations, organisations can ensure that their diversity and inclusion policies are aligned with the evolving needs and expectations of their employees. This continuous cycle will reinforce the importance of inclusion and drive positive change within the organisation. Ultimately, this contribution expands the capabilities of current diversity policies that now instead will involve inclusion to a greater extent.

6.3 Practical Implications

Our findings show that organisations need to rename their diversity policies to diversity and inclusion policies to fulfil the expectations of diversity management. Thus, we propose that diversity and inclusion policies do more than just achieve minimum legal requirements and look good externally, which diversity policies used to do. By now knowing how employees understand and experience inclusion, organisations ought to implement practices in diversity and inclusion policies relating to uniqueness, communication and culture. These include:

> ➤ Facilitate suitable communication channels where coworkers and managers can show appreciation for others' uniqueness.

- ➤ Offer more frequent and mandatory training on diversity and inclusion to overcome diversity blindness and reduce "silos".
- ➤ Provide equal opportunities for recruitment and promotions which are transparent and accessible for all employees at all levels.
- ➤ Organise social activities both in and outside of the workplace to create cohesion and a more inclusive culture.
- ➤ Conduct sessions for assessing and evaluating diversity and inclusion policies.

6.4 Opportunities for Future Research

Based on our findings, we suggest that future research is necessary in order to reinforce the generalisability of our findings, perhaps with a bigger sample size in a larger international organisation. Additionally, since inclusion is subjective and difficult to measure, further research could focus on how to develop inclusion measurements and metrics for a more comprehensive and meaningful understanding of inclusion. Given the significant impact of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, it would be interesting to have research conducted with a comparable aim, but within a fully remote work context. If such a scenario were to be considered, where physical interactions and body language, deemed significant by our interviewees, are absent, an intriguing question arises: How can a remote work environment promote and cultivate inclusivity to a similar degree as a traditional physical work setting?

Furthermore, our conceptual framework was comprised of three concepts that we recognised as crucial for cultivating a sense of inclusion. However, scholars have identified additional concepts, such as leadership and identification, that contribute to fostering inclusion. Consequently, future research can explore inclusion through these alternative concepts that hold significance for promoting inclusive environments.

To conclude, the proposed layout of diversity and inclusion policies needs to be tested to assess its implementation potential. It is important to investigate whether organisations still are prioritising diversity over inclusion or actually implementing inclusive practices aligned with the new policy.

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