



## Challenges and Opportunities for Special-Needs Children in Elementary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

**Abstract:** This research explores the challenges and opportunities for inclusive education for special-needs children in elementary schools in Indonesia. It examines the impact of government policies, the actual conditions in the field, and the availability of supporting facilities and resources. The study utilizes a qualitative method with a case study approach, involving various stakeholders such as special-needs children, teachers, parents, and school principals as informants. Findings indicate that while government policies have improved access to education for special-needs children, there are disparities in implementation and resource allocation among schools. Teachers face obstacles due to a lack of specialized training and high workloads, while limited facilities and stigma also hinder inclusive education. The research emphasizes the need for continuous support, changes in community attitudes, and improvements in teacher training and facilities to ensure effective inclusive education for special-needs children in elementary schools.

**Keywords:** Challenges; elementary school; opportunities; special-needs students.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi tantangan dan peluang pendidikan inklusif bagi anak berkebutuhan khusus di sekolah dasar di Indonesia. Kajian ini mengkaji dampak kebijakan pemerintah, kondisi aktual di lapangan, serta ketersediaan fasilitas dan sumber daya pendukung. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus, dengan melibatkan berbagai pemangku kepentingan seperti anak berkebutuhan khusus, guru, orang tua, dan kepala sekolah sebagai informan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kebijakan pemerintah telah meningkatkan akses terhadap pendidikan bagi anak-anak berkebutuhan khusus, terdapat kesenjangan dalam implementasi dan alokasi sumber daya antar sekolah. Guru menghadapi kendala karena kurangnya pelatihan khusus dan beban kerja yang tinggi, sementara keterbatasan fasilitas dan stigma juga menghambat pendidikan inklusif. Penelitian ini menekankan perlunya dukungan berkelanjutan, perubahan sikap masyarakat, dan peningkatan pelatihan guru serta fasilitas untuk memastikan pendidikan inklusif yang efektif bagi anak berkebutuhan khusus di sekolah dasar.

**Kata Kunci:** Tantangan; sekolah dasar; peluang; siswa berkebutuhan khusus.

### INTRODUCTION

Special-needs children in Indonesia are an important concern for the government, especially in the context of inclusive education. The Indonesian government has issued various policies and regulations to support special-needs children education, one of which is Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System which emphasizes the importance of inclusive education (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020; Setiawan et al., 2022). Apart from that, the government also implements Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 70 of 2009 concerning Inclusive Education for Students who Have Disabilities and Have Potential Intelligence and/or Special Talents (Efendi et al., 2022; Setiawan et al., 2023). This policy shows the government's commitment to providing equal access to education for special-needs children, including at the elementary school level. Government programs such as the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP) and School Operational Assistance (BOS) also include

components to support special-needs children so that they receive adequate educational facilities and services (Gunawan et al., 2022). However, implementing this policy in the field often faces various challenges, ranging from a lack of understanding and readiness of teaching staff to limited adequate facilities and resources in elementary schools (Bridgeforth et al., 2021).

Even though there are various policies that support inclusive education, special-needs children in elementary schools still face various problems. One of the main problems is the lack of awareness and understanding from teaching staff (Francisco et al., 2020) and the wider community regarding the specific needs of special-needs children (Roman et al., 2020). Many teachers in elementary schools have not received adequate training to handle special-needs children, so they often feel unprepared to accommodate the special needs of these students (Allam & Martin, 2021). In addition, facilities and resources in many primary schools are still very limited. Most schools are not yet equipped with the special learning aids needed by special-needs children, such as hearing aids for deaf children or braille for blind children (Jandra et al., 2020). Another problem is stigma and discrimination which still often occur, both from fellow students and from the school environment in general (Kwok & Kwok Lai Yuk Ching, 2022). This makes crew members often feel isolated and lack self-confidence.

Various studies have been conducted to explore the challenges and opportunities for special-needs children in elementary schools. One relevant research is a study conducted by Ediyanto et al (2021), which examined teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education in elementary schools. The results of this research show that the majority of teachers still feel less confident and lack knowledge in managing inclusive classes. Another study by Istiarsyah et al. (2019), highlights the importance of support and training for teachers in dealing with special-needs children. This study found that training and professional development for teachers is very necessary to improve their skills and knowledge in dealing with special-needs children. Apart from that, research by Rahmawati et al (2021), examined the impact of learning models on the development of special-needs children in elementary schools. The results of this research show that the Special-Needs Children learning model that suits the specific needs of students with special needs in inclusive elementary schools can guarantee equal educational opportunities for all students.

From the information above, it can be seen that there are challenges and opportunities for inclusive children in elementary schools. Therefore, this research aims to explore more deeply the various aspects that influence the education of special-needs children at the elementary school level. This research will explore the extent to which government policies have been implemented effectively and how they impact the learning experience of special-needs children. Apart from that, this research will also identify the obstacles that teachers and schools still face in providing quality inclusive education. The main focus of this research is to examine actual conditions in the field, including teachers' understanding and skills in handling special-needs children, as well as the availability of supporting facilities and resources in elementary schools. Thus, it is hoped that the results of this research can provide concrete recommendations for improving the quality of inclusive education in Indonesia.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand in depth the context and dynamics of

inclusive education in elementary schools. Case studies provide an opportunity to explore phenomena in their natural environment, so as to gain richer and deeper insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by special-needs children in elementary schools. This approach also allows researchers to see how inclusive education policies are implemented and accepted by various stakeholders, as well as identifying factors that support or hinder their implementation.

The data in this study was collected through various techniques to ensure accuracy and richness of information. Participant observation was carried out with the aim of seeing directly the interactions between special-needs children and teachers, fellow students, and the school environment as a whole. This observation helps researchers to understand how the teaching and learning process takes place and how special-needs children adapt in an inclusive school setting. In addition, this observation also provides an opportunity to identify problems that may not be revealed through interviews or document analysis.

In-depth interviews were conducted with various relevant informants, including special-needs children, teachers, parents and school principals. This interview was designed to explore the experiences, perceptions and views of each informant regarding inclusive education. By talking directly with crew members, researchers can understand from their own perspective the challenges they face and the support they need. Interviews with teachers and principals help identify the difficulties faced in managing inclusive classes and the efforts that have been made to overcome them. Meanwhile, interviews with parents provide an overview of their hopes and concerns regarding their child's education.

Document analysis was also carried out to complement the data obtained from observations and interviews. The documents analyzed include school policies, learning plans, student progress records, and other documents relevant to inclusive education. This analysis helps to understand how policies are implemented in practice and how effective they are in supporting the education of special-needs children. Apart from that, these documents can also provide additional information regarding the context and background of the implementation of inclusive education in the schools studied.

The informants for this research consist of various parties who are directly involved in implementing inclusive education in elementary schools. special-needs children were chosen as the main informants because they are the direct subjects of inclusive policies and practices. Teachers, as the main implementers of education in the classroom, provide insight into practical challenges and needs in supporting special-needs children. Parents were also selected as informants to understand the support provided at home and their expectations for school. School principals as leaders of educational institutions provide perspectives on school policies and efforts to create an inclusive environment. It is hoped that the combination of various informants can provide a comprehensive and in-depth picture of the implementation of inclusive education in elementary school

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Impact of Government Policy on the Learning Experience of Special-Needs Children**

The impact of government policies on the learning experiences of special-needs children in elementary schools is profound and multifaceted. Through an examination of policies such as Law Number 20 of 2003 and Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 70 of 2009, this research highlights the significant role of governmental directives in

shaping inclusive education practices. These policies, which underscore the importance of inclusivity in education, have spurred schools to embrace special-needs children and provide essential support (Amnesti et al., 2023). Consequently, many special-needs children now have access to education that was previously inaccessible, fostering a sense of acceptance and facilitating their integration with peers without special needs.

However, despite the overarching policy framework advocating inclusivity, the implementation of these directives remains uneven across schools (Kenny et al., 2020). While some institutions have successfully embraced and implemented inclusive practices, creating a supportive learning environment for special-needs children, others have struggled to fully integrate inclusive policies into their educational ethos. The disparity in implementation efficacy often stems from discrepancies in commitment levels and resource allocation among individual schools (Setiawan & Sunaryati, 2024).

These findings underscore the importance of not only formulating inclusive policies but also ensuring their effective implementation at the grassroots level. By addressing the underlying factors contributing to inconsistencies in policy execution, such as varying levels of commitment and resource availability, policymakers can promote more equitable educational opportunities for special-needs children across all elementary schools. Additionally, fostering collaboration and knowledge-sharing among schools that have successfully implemented inclusive practices can help disseminate best practices and mitigate implementation challenges in other institutions.

### **Barriers to Providing Inclusive Education in Schools**

The provision of inclusive education in schools is fraught with various challenges, as illuminated by this research. Foremost among these challenges is the dearth of adequate training and knowledge among teachers on how to effectively cater to the special-needs children (Pasha et al., 2021). Many educators express feelings of unpreparedness and lack of confidence in managing inclusive classrooms due to this deficiency in specialized training (Agu & Hart, 2023). Consequently, they often find themselves without effective strategies to address the diverse special needs of special-needs children students. Additionally, the demanding workload and crowded curriculum further exacerbate the predicament for teachers, making it arduous to allocate extra attention to special-needs children amidst competing priorities (Ji, 2024).

Compounding the challenges, schools frequently grapple with limited resources, amplifying the hurdles in providing quality inclusive education. Budget constraints frequently render many schools incapable of furnishing the requisite facilities and learning aids necessary for the optimal education of special-needs children students (Morel, 2021). This shortage impedes the provision of an inclusive learning environment that caters adequately to the diverse needs of all students. Moreover, pervasive stigma and a pervasive lack of understanding within the community, including among students' parents, pose significant barriers to the realization of truly inclusive educational environments (Clarke et al., 2024). Misconceptions and societal biases surrounding inclusive education perpetuate reluctance and resistance, hampering schools' efforts to foster an environment of acceptance and inclusivity (Abduxamitovich et al., 2021).

In essence, the multifaceted barriers encountered by teachers and schools in delivering inclusive education underscore the complexity and urgency of addressing systemic

shortcomings. Mitigating these barriers necessitates comprehensive interventions that encompass targeted teacher training initiatives, enhanced resource allocation, and concerted efforts to combat stigma and misinformation within communities. Only through collective action and unwavering commitment can schools endeavor towards creating truly inclusive environments where every student, irrespective of their abilities, can thrive and reach their full potential.

### **Actual Conditions in the Field**

Actual conditions in the field highlight the ongoing challenges despite advancements in implementing inclusive education. One particularly notable aspect is the proficiency of teachers in addressing the needs of special-needs children (Reyes et al., 2024). Research indicates that while most teachers exhibit enthusiasm and goodwill towards assisting special-needs children, they often express inadequacy in possessing the requisite knowledge and skills. Many educators lack formal training in inclusive education or handling special-needs children, leading to difficulties in formulating and executing effective teaching methodologies tailored to special-needs children (Kuyini et al., 2020). Some educators resort to learning on-the-go through daily experiences and experimentation, albeit with varying degrees of success. Moreover, constraints in time and resources further impede their capacity to provide personalized attention to special-needs children.

Nevertheless, amidst these challenges, there are encouraging instances where teachers have innovatively crafted inclusive approaches. These success stories underscore the pivotal role of adequate support and training in enabling teachers to effectively champion inclusive education. By providing educators with the necessary tools and guidance, they can significantly contribute to fostering inclusive learning environments.

### **Availability of Supporting Facilities and Resources in Elementary Schools**

The availability of supporting facilities and resources in elementary schools is a crucial aspect for the success of inclusive education, as emphasized by this research. A significant finding reveals that numerous schools still lack the essential facilities necessary to adequately support special-needs children (Chairunnisa & Rismita, 2022). For instance, crucial learning aids like braille for blind children (Hoskin et al., 2024) or hearing aids for deaf children (Jizzakh, 2020) are frequently unavailable. Additionally, essential school infrastructure such as ramps for wheelchairs or accessible toilets remains minimal in many educational institutions.

This scarcity of resources not only impedes special-needs children's physical access to school but also significantly impacts the quality of their learning experience. Schools equipped with comprehensive facilities tend to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for special-needs children. Conversely, those lacking in resources often struggle to meet the unique needs of special-needs children, consequently affecting their academic and social development.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research highlights the impact of government policies on the learning experiences of special-needs children in elementary schools, the obstacles they face, actual conditions in the field, and the availability of supporting facilities. Inclusive policies, such as Law Number 20 of 2003 and Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 70 of 2009, have

provided better access to education for special-needs children. However, uneven implementation indicates differences in commitment and resources between schools. Teachers face major obstacles, including a lack of specialized training and high workloads, which prevent them from providing effective inclusive education. Limited resources and facilities in schools are also a significant obstacle, affecting the quality of learning for special-needs children. Actual conditions show that many teachers have good intentions but feel they are not equipped with adequate skills. However, some teachers have succeeded in developing creative and inclusive approaches with the right support. The availability of supporting facilities such as learning aids and accessible infrastructure is still minimal, which limits access and quality of learning for special-needs children. Therefore, improving facilities and teacher training are the main recommendations to support effective inclusive education. Continuous support and changes in community attitudes are needed to ensure special-needs children receive quality education.

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