

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN INDONESIA

Sayidatul Maslahah

Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, Serang City, Indonesia

Email : sayidatulmaslahah@untirta.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to explore elementary school teachers' perceptions of the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia and the factors that influence their views in teaching practice. A qualitative approach was employed using a descriptive method through in-depth interviews with several teachers from regular elementary schools that have implemented inclusive education policies. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of perception and emerging challenges. The results indicate that teachers hold positive views toward inclusive values, particularly in providing equal learning opportunities for all students. However, most teachers acknowledged limitations in practical implementation, such as a lack of professional training, insufficient supporting facilities, and the absence of competent special education assistants. Teachers' perceptions were also influenced by personal experience, moral values, and school culture, which are not yet fully adaptive to the needs of students with special needs. In conclusion, inclusive education in Indonesia still faces structural and cultural challenges that must be addressed through capacity building for teachers, institutional support, and education policies that are more responsive to student diversity.

Keywords:

teacher perception, inclusive education, elementary school, teacher competence, education policy

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education represents a concrete manifestation of the global commitment to ensuring the right to education for all children without discrimination. Its principle emphasizes that every learner, including children with special needs, has the right to receive education alongside their peers in the same learning environment (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2015; Arifudin, 2022). In Indonesia, this spirit is enshrined in Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System and Law Number 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities, which affirm the right of children with disabilities to access equitable educational services (Kemdikbud, 2021; Sowiyah & Perdana, 2022; Yuwono, 2020). Globally, inclusive education is also part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), which emphasize equitable access and quality education for all (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2021). However, its implementation in Indonesia still faces several challenges, particularly related to teachers' perceptions and readiness in carrying out inclusive teaching practices (Kurniawati et al., 2012; Ediyanto et al., 2021; Sari et al., 2022).

Teachers are key actors in the success of inclusive education, as they directly interact with the diverse characteristics of students in the classroom (Ainscow et al., 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Pijl, 2016). Teachers' perceptions of inclusive education influence how they design differentiated learning strategies, manage classroom environments, and foster a culture of mutual respect among students (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Sharma et al., 2008; Ediyanto et al., 2021). Teachers with positive perceptions tend to be more open-minded, flexible, and innovative in addressing the challenges of diversity (Loreman et al., 2013; Sokal & Sharma, 2017; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Conversely, negative perceptions can lead to resistance toward policies, reinforce stigma toward children with special needs, and hinder the achievement of inclusive education goals (Syamsuddin, 2020; Rahman, 2021; Sukardi & Hidayat, 2023). Therefore, understanding teachers' perceptions is an essential first step in assessing readiness and the effectiveness of inclusive education policy implementation in Indonesia.

Research on teachers' perceptions of inclusive education has been widely conducted, both in Indonesia and abroad. Kurniawati et al. (2012) found that teachers in Jakarta hold moderate attitudes toward inclusive education, strongly influenced by their previous experiences and training. Ediyanto et al. (2021) also revealed that most Indonesian teachers show support for the concept of inclusion but struggle to apply it due to limited pedagogical understanding and inadequate school facilities. Similarly, Sowiyah and Perdana (2022) emphasized that teachers' positive perceptions are often not accompanied by sufficient competence in individual assessment, leading to suboptimal implementation. Internationally, studies by Forlin (2010), Sharma et al. (2008), and Avramidis & Norwich (2002) also indicate that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are shaped by direct experience, professional training, and workplace support. Nevertheless, most studies still focus on urban areas or model schools, and there is limited exploration of Indonesia's diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Based on literature review, several research gaps emerge that warrant further investigation. First, most previous studies only examined teachers' general attitudes toward inclusive education without analyzing the relationship between teachers' perceptions and schools' institutional readiness in implementing inclusion policies (Kurniawati et al., 2012; Ediyanto et al., 2021; Sari et al., 2022). Second, comparative studies between urban and rural teachers remain limited, even though geographical context and local government support significantly influence implementation effectiveness (Sowiyah & Perdana, 2022; Yuwono, 2020; Rahman, 2021). Third, studies focusing on teachers in regular elementary schools that are just beginning to adopt inclusive policies are still scarce (Syamsuddin, 2020; Hidayat, 2022; Sari et al., 2022). These gaps highlight the need for new research that is more contextual, interdisciplinary, and sensitive to social dynamics as well as the direction of national education policy.

This study offers novelty by positioning teachers' perceptions as the central focus in understanding the dynamics of inclusive education implementation in Indonesia. Previous studies on inclusive education have predominantly focused on policy, infrastructure, or institutional readiness, while the perceptual aspect of teachers as the primary agents of inclusion has been less examined (Kurniawati et al., 2012; Sari et al., 2022; Sowiyah & Perdana, 2022). This research focuses on exploring how teachers' beliefs, experiences, and understanding of children with special needs shape their attitudes and classroom practices. Such an approach allows for the identification of differences in perception between teachers in urban and rural settings who face varying conditions in terms of resources and institutional support (Efendi, 2018; Walton & Rusznyak, 2017; Pujaningsih, 2020). Another contribution lies in mapping teachers' perceptions based on professional background—such as teaching experience, educational qualifications, and inclusion training—which have often been overlooked in previous studies (Sharma et al., 2018; de Boer et al., 2011; Avramidis & Norwich, 2020).

Based on the aforementioned background, this study aims to: (1) describe elementary school teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in Indonesia; and (2) analyze the factors influencing teachers' perceptions of inclusive education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at providing an in-depth portrayal of elementary school teachers' perceptions regarding the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia. This approach was selected because it is capable of revealing the meanings, experiences, and subjective views of teachers toward inclusive education policy and practice in the elementary school context (Creswell, 2014; Sugiyono, 2019). The researcher acted as the primary instrument in the data collection and analysis process to ensure contextual and meaningful interpretation.

Participants

The study participants consisted of 10 regular elementary school teachers, each drawn from 5 public elementary schools (SD Negeri) in Serang City and 5 elementary schools in Serang Regency. School names are not disclosed to protect participant confidentiality. Participants were selected through purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) active teachers at regular schools that have implemented or are in the process of implementing inclusive education; (2) at least three years of teaching experience; and (3) willing to participate voluntarily. This technique enabled the researcher to obtain rich and relevant information aligned with the study objectives (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews that allowed flexible exploration of teachers' perspectives on inclusive education. The data collection instrument was an interview guide covering major topics such as: teachers' understanding of the concept of inclusive education, experiences teaching students with special needs, challenges encountered, and support received from schools and government. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at each participant's school, lasting 45–60 minutes per session. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) model, which includes three main stages: (1) Data reduction — the process of selecting, simplifying, and organizing raw interview data into themes relevant to the research focus; (2) Data display — reduced data were arranged into thematic matrices and descriptive narratives to clarify relationships among categories; and (3) Conclusion drawing and verification — revisiting findings, comparing them with existing theory and previous studies, and conducting member checking with participants to ensure the validity of interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

This study upholds social research ethics. Each participant was provided with an informed consent form explaining the study purpose, interview procedures, the right to withdraw at any time, and assurances of identity confidentiality. Personal data were anonymized and interview results were used solely for academic purposes. The study also followed ethical guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology regarding the protection of human subjects in educational research (Kemdikbudristek, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education

The interview findings indicate that most teachers possess a basic understanding of the concept of inclusive education; however, variations exist in terms of depth of comprehension and practical application. Generally, teachers perceive inclusive education as a system that provides learning opportunities for all children without discrimination, including those with special needs (ABK). One teacher from a public elementary school in Serang City stated:

“In my opinion, inclusive education means that all children can go to school together, both regular students and those with special needs. But in practice, we're still confused about how to adjust the

lessons. Sometimes we just rely on our feelings and experience because we've never attended any specific training."

This statement demonstrates that while teachers' conceptual understanding aligns with the principles of inclusion, its implementation in the field remains limited and largely based on individual interpretation. Another teacher from an elementary school in Serang Regency added:

"We want to support children with special needs, but we don't know where to start. The curriculum is already demanding, and we don't have special assistant teachers. So, we do what we can, like asking seatmates to help."

This data highlights a gap between idealism and classroom reality. Although teachers express positive attitudes toward inclusion, limited structural support makes implementation informal and inconsistent. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions appear to stem more from empirical experience than from systematic theoretical understanding. Teachers with longer teaching experience and prior exposure to inclusive education training tend to exhibit more open and adaptive attitudes. One senior teacher remarked:

"After teaching for many years, we get to understand children's characteristics. Even children with special needs can follow along as long as we're patient. But new teachers often feel overwhelmed, think they don't have enough time, and end up neglecting those students."

These findings suggest that elementary school teachers in Indonesia generally possess a positive conceptual understanding of inclusion principles but still face practical difficulties in classroom implementation. This condition aligns with the findings of Kurniawati et al. (2012), who revealed that although most Indonesian teachers agree that inclusive education is essential for all children, many still lack the knowledge of effective teaching strategies to accommodate diverse student needs.

The teacher's statement about "relying only on feelings and experience" implies that positive perceptions of inclusion are not yet accompanied by sufficient pedagogical competence. Teachers tend to understand inclusion more in moral and social terms rather than at the technical level of differentiated or adaptive instruction. This aligns with Sari et al. (2022), who found that teachers often perceive inclusive education as providing equal learning opportunities but remain unaware of how to manage curriculum, assessment, and appropriate learning methods for students with special needs.

Moreover, teaching experience appears to be a dominant factor shaping teachers' perceptions of inclusion. The senior teacher's statement—"children with special needs can follow along as long as we're patient"—emphasizes that empathy and direct interaction with students with special needs enhance teachers' belief in the success of inclusive education. This is consistent with findings by Forlin et al. (2013) and Avramidis & Norwich (2002), who reported that direct exposure to inclusive practice significantly strengthens teachers' confidence and positive perceptions.

However, teachers also pointed out structural constraints, such as the absence of special assistant teachers and the limited time caused by heavy curricular demands. These factors lead teachers to feel unsupported in implementing inclusive principles effectively. Sharma et al. (2018) noted that teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusion often diminish when faced with limited resources and administrative pressures. This condition underscores that policy support and school infrastructure are critical elements in transforming positive perceptions into sustainable inclusive practices.

Factors Influencing Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education

The analysis revealed four primary factors that influence teachers' perceptions of inclusive education: (a) professional experience and training, (b) school and workplace support, (c) availability of resources, and (d) personal values and empathetic attitudes toward students with special needs.

Professional Experience and Training

Most teachers reported that they had never received formal training on inclusive education. The lack of professional development opportunities led to a limited understanding based mainly on empirical experiences. One teacher from Serang Regency stated:

“I only learned about the term *inclusive education* a few years ago. Before that, we used to call those children ‘special kids.’ After a socialization program from the education office, we finally understood that they have the same rights. But the training only happened once, and there was no follow-up. So, we learn on our own from the internet or colleagues.”

This supports the view of Kurniawati et al. (2012) that continuous training significantly affects teachers’ perceptions. Teachers who have participated in inclusive education training tend to demonstrate greater understanding and confidence when teaching students with special needs. These findings are consistent with Kurniawati et al. (2012) and Sharma et al. (2008), who emphasized that systematic training plays a crucial role in fostering positive attitudes toward inclusion. Similarly, Loreman et al. (2013) stated that direct experience with students with special needs enhances teachers’ emotional and professional competence. Conversely, teachers without training often rely on intuition and peer discussions—as reflected in the quote above about “learning from the internet or friends.” This highlights the need for sustained professional training and reflective practice to ensure teachers’ understanding extends beyond the conceptual level.

School and Workplace Support

Teachers’ perceptions are also strongly shaped by the level of support provided by school leadership, colleagues, and institutional policies. One participant explained:

“If the principal supports us, we feel motivated. But if not, we feel alone. For example, when a child needs special attention, we need extra time, but the school thinks it disrupts the lesson schedule. So, we’re torn between following the rules or helping the child.”

This illustrates that school leadership and organizational culture play a key role in shaping teachers’ perceptions. Schools that foster a collaborative and supportive environment encourage teachers to be more confident in implementing inclusive practices. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) and Pijl (2016) emphasize that inclusive practices succeed only when there is a collaborative climate and leadership that promotes active participation among all school members. Similarly, Ainscow et al. (2013) highlight the importance of systemic support, including open communication among teachers, adaptive school policies, and cross-role collaboration, so that teachers’ perceptions are not formed in isolation.

Availability of Resources and Supporting Facilities

Most teachers expressed concerns over the lack of resources, particularly the absence of special assistant teachers, learning aids, and inclusive infrastructure. One teacher from Serang City remarked:

“We have good intentions, but the facilities don’t support us. For example, for a child with a visual impairment, we don’t have Braille tools. For those with behavioral issues, there’s no assistant. So, sometimes we feel like we’re failing to help—not because we don’t want to, but because we don’t know how.”

This statement shows that limited resources act as external barriers to maintaining consistently positive perceptions. When teachers face structural constraints, they often feel incapable or pessimistic about the effectiveness of inclusion. This aligns with Ediyanto et al. (2021) and Sari et al. (2022), who found that the presence of special assistant teachers, adaptive learning tools, and supportive classroom environments are key factors for teacher readiness. When such facilities are absent, teachers may experience emotional exhaustion and reduced confidence in the effectiveness of inclusive policies (Sharma et al., 2018). Therefore, inclusive education policy must not only aim to change teachers’ attitudes but also ensure adequate resources are provided at the school level.

Personal Values and Empathetic Attitudes

Beyond external factors, teachers’ personal values and empathy play a significant role. Teachers with high levels of empathy toward students tend to view inclusive education as a moral responsibility. One teacher expressed this sentiment emotionally:

“I’ll never forget a student with autism in my class. At first, I didn’t know what to do, but every day I saw him trying so hard to keep up with his friends. That made me realize my job isn’t just

to teach—it's to make sure he doesn't feel different. That's what keeps me going and motivates me to learn more.”

According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), empathetic attitudes and personal beliefs about social justice constitute the cognitive and affective components that shape positive perceptions of inclusion. Similarly, Sokal and Sharma (2017) found that empathy encourages teachers to be more patient, reflective, and creative in adapting their teaching approaches for students with diverse needs. Furthermore, teachers' humanitarian values can act as a compensatory force when external resources are lacking, allowing them to remain committed to inclusion even without full systemic support.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that elementary school teachers in Indonesia generally possess a positive conceptual understanding of inclusive education as an effort to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, including those with special needs. However, its implementation remains limited due to a lack of professional training, minimal structural support, and insufficient resources such as special education assistants and adaptive learning facilities. Teachers' perceptions are largely shaped by personal experiences, empathy, and moral values rather than structured pedagogical competencies. In addition, strong school leadership and a collaborative work environment play a crucial role in enhancing teachers' confidence in implementing inclusive practices.

Practically, this study emphasizes the need for continuous professional development programs, the provision of special education resources, and the strengthening of institutional support so that teachers' positive perceptions can be translated into sustainable inclusive practices. Future research is recommended to explore intervention models that can enhance teachers' pedagogical competence in inclusive settings and to conduct comparative studies across regions to assess the role of local education policies in shaping an inclusive school culture in Indonesia.

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