

## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY IN AN INDONESIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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### Abstract

Although inclusive education is increasingly recognized as a rights-based approach to educational equity, the presence of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms does not by itself guarantee social inclusion. Peer acceptance, everyday interaction, and the capacity of schools to cultivate supportive relationships are central to students' experiences of belonging. This study examines how an inclusive education program was implemented and how it shaped social acceptance of students with disabilities at SD Inpres Mallengkeri 2 Makassar, Indonesia. A qualitative case-study design was used. Data were generated through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis involving the principal, classroom teachers, special education support teachers, students without disabilities, students with disabilities, and parents. Data were analyzed iteratively through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, with source and method triangulation and member checking used to strengthen credibility. The findings indicate that inclusive practices were associated with more frequent peer interaction, cooperation, and expressions of empathy toward students with disabilities. Teachers and special education support teachers functioned not only as instructional actors but also as social mediators who modelled acceptance, managed interpersonal tensions, and facilitated collaborative participation. At the same time, social acceptance was uneven, particularly for students experiencing communication or behavioural difficulties. Limited specialist support, insufficient teacher preparation, adaptive-resource constraints, and disability-related stereotypes beyond the school remained important barriers. The study suggests that meaningful inclusion depends not only on placement and access but also on the quality of relational processes within the school. The findings contribute context-sensitive evidence on the social dimension of inclusive education in an Indonesian primary-school setting.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, social acceptance, students with disabilities, peer interaction, school inclusion, primary education, Indonesia

### Abstrak

*Meskipun pendidikan inklusif semakin diakui sebagai pendekatan berbasis hak dalam mewujudkan pemerataan pendidikan, keberadaan siswa penyandang disabilitas di kelas reguler tidak dengan sendirinya menjamin terwujudnya inklusi sosial. Penerimaan teman sebaya, interaksi sehari-hari, dan kapasitas sekolah dalam membangun hubungan yang suportif merupakan aspek penting dalam membentuk pengalaman rasa memiliki siswa.*

*Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana program pendidikan inklusif diimplementasikan dan bagaimana program tersebut membentuk penerimaan sosial terhadap siswa penyandang disabilitas di SD Inpres Mallengkeri 2 Makassar, Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen yang melibatkan kepala sekolah, guru kelas, guru pendamping khusus, siswa tanpa disabilitas, siswa penyandang disabilitas, dan orang tua. Data dianalisis secara iteratif melalui kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan, dengan triangulasi sumber dan metode serta member checking untuk memperkuat kredibilitas temuan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa praktik pendidikan inklusif berkaitan dengan meningkatnya frekuensi interaksi teman sebaya, kerja sama, dan ekspresi empati terhadap siswa penyandang disabilitas. Guru dan guru pendamping khusus tidak hanya berperan sebagai aktor pembelajaran, tetapi juga sebagai mediator sosial yang memodelkan penerimaan, mengelola ketegangan interpersonal, dan memfasilitasi partisipasi kolaboratif. Pada saat yang sama, penerimaan sosial belum berlangsung secara merata, khususnya pada siswa yang mengalami kesulitan komunikasi atau perilaku. Keterbatasan dukungan tenaga ahli, kesiapan guru yang belum memadai, keterbatasan sumber daya adaptif, serta stereotip terhadap disabilitas di luar lingkungan sekolah masih menjadi hambatan penting. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa inklusi yang bermakna tidak hanya bergantung pada penempatan dan akses pendidikan, tetapi juga pada kualitas proses relasional yang berlangsung di lingkungan sekolah. Temuan penelitian memberikan bukti kontekstual mengenai dimensi sosial pendidikan inklusif dalam konteks sekolah dasar di Indonesia.*

**Kata kunci:** pendidikan inklusif, penerimaan sosial, siswa penyandang disabilitas, interaksi teman sebaya, inklusi sekolah, pendidikan dasar, Indonesia

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has increasingly shifted from a question of where students with disabilities are educated to a broader question of whether schools enable all learners to participate, belong, and learn on equitable terms. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report frames inclusion as a system-wide commitment to removing barriers associated with ability, background, identity, and circumstance rather than treating learner diversity as a problem located within individual students. Ainscow (2020) similarly argues that inclusive education requires changes in school cultures, practices, and systems that expand the participation of increasingly diverse learners.

Within this perspective, physical placement in a mainstream classroom is necessary but insufficient. Students with disabilities may attend the same school as their peers while remaining socially peripheral, experiencing limited friendship opportunities, weak peer support, or exclusion from informal activities. A recent scoping review of 63 empirical studies found that social participation in inclusive settings involves joint activities, social behaviour, peer relationships, and students' perceptions of their own social participation, and that outcomes are shaped by individual, peer, teacher, and support factors. Research on student experiences of inclusive education likewise identifies supportive relationships, positive teacher beliefs, supportive teaching practices, school leadership, and accessibility

as important conditions for inclusion, while unsupportive school cultures and inappropriate learning support can function as barriers.

Social acceptance is therefore a particularly important dimension of inclusion. Acceptance is expressed through everyday opportunities to interact, cooperate, communicate, participate in shared activities, and experience oneself as a legitimate member of the peer group. Conversely, negative peer attitudes can constrain social participation even when formal access to mainstream education has been achieved. Experimental evidence demonstrates that curriculum-based interventions can improve students' explicit attitudes toward peers with disabilities, although changes in implicit attitudes may be more resistant to short-term intervention. This distinction underscores the importance of examining not only formal inclusion policies but also the interactional processes through which inclusion is enacted.

The Indonesian context is particularly important because inclusive education has expanded through national policy while implementation continues to vary across schools and regions. The source study situates SD Inpres Mallengkeri 2 Makassar as a school that has implemented inclusive education through teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and socialization of acceptance of students with disabilities. Yet the existence of these program components does not automatically reveal how they are experienced in everyday peer relationships. The school therefore provides a useful case for examining the social processes that accompany formal inclusive provision.

The present study addresses a gap in the source literature by focusing on the social dimension of inclusive education at the level of everyday school interaction. Rather than treating inclusion as an administrative status, the study examines how students with disabilities participate in classroom and non-classroom activities, how peers respond to them, how teachers mediate relationships, and what structural or cultural conditions support or constrain social acceptance.

The study was guided by three questions: (1) How is social acceptance of students with disabilities manifested in the everyday life of the school? (2) How do peer interaction and teacher mediation shape social participation? and (3) What factors support or constrain the development of an inclusive social climate? These questions are deliberately framed around processes and experiences because the qualitative design does not permit a statistical estimate of program effectiveness.

Inclusive education is conceptualized as more than access to a mainstream classroom. It involves participation, relationships, recognition, and opportunities to contribute to the social life of the school. This conceptualization is consistent with Ainscow's whole-system perspective, in which schools are expected to build their capacity to respond to learner diversity rather than simply incorporate particular groups into unchanged arrangements.

Social acceptance refers here to observable and experienced forms of peer inclusion, including willingness to interact, cooperate, assist, communicate, and include students

with disabilities in shared activities. Contemporary research indicates that social participation is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to physical presence or academic participation alone. The present study therefore examines both classroom and non-academic contexts, where peer relations may take different forms.

Teachers occupy a central position in shaping the social conditions under which inclusion occurs. Their expectations, modelling, classroom organization, and responses to conflict can communicate whether difference is valued or stigmatized. A systematic review of student experiences identified positive teacher beliefs and supportive teaching practices among the conditions that facilitate inclusive education. In this study, the role of teachers and special education support teachers is therefore examined as a relational and cultural function as well as an instructional one.

## **METHOD**

### **Research design**

This study employed a qualitative case-study design. A case-study approach was selected because the research sought to understand inclusive education as a socially situated process within a particular school rather than to estimate a population-level effect. The school was treated as a bounded social setting in which policy, classroom practice, peer relationships, teacher mediation, and family perspectives intersect.

### **Research setting and participants**

The study was conducted at SD Inpres Mallengkeri 2 Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The source manuscript identifies the school as an inclusive-education reference school designated by the Makassar City Education Office and reports that inclusive practices had been implemented through teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and socialization activities. Participants were selected purposively because of their direct knowledge or experience of inclusive education. The participant groups comprised the principal, classroom teachers, special education support teachers (Guru Pendamping Khusus/GPK), students without disabilities, students with disabilities, and parents. The source manuscript does not report the exact number of participants in each group, their demographic characteristics, or the duration and frequency of fieldwork. These details should be added from the research records before submission to an international journal. The omission does not justify inventing a sample size.

### **Data collection**

Three complementary techniques were used. First, in-depth interviews explored participants' experiences and perceptions of social acceptance, peer relationships, teacher roles, and the implementation of inclusive education. Second, participatory observation was used to examine interactions between students with and without disabilities during classroom learning and non-academic activities. Third, document analysis examined school-level materials, including inclusive-education programs, activity reports, and

internal policies. The use of multiple data sources allowed the researchers to examine convergence and divergence between reported experiences and observed practices.

### **Research instruments**

The researchers used interview guides, observation sheets, and documentation formats developed around indicators of social acceptance, including acceptance attitudes, patterns of social interaction, participation in group activities, and forms of peer support. The source manuscript states that the instruments were reviewed through expert judgment for alignment with the study objectives and the inclusive-education context.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model attributed to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. Analysis proceeded through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, with movement between these stages throughout the fieldwork and interpretation process.

### **Trustworthiness**

Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing accounts across school leaders, teachers, GPKs, students, and parents. Method triangulation involved comparing interview findings with observations and documents. Member checking was also used to assess whether the researchers' interpretations were consistent with participants' experiences. The final manuscript should additionally report who conducted the member checking, when it occurred, and whether any interpretive disagreements resulted in changes to the analysis.

### **Ethical considerations**

The source manuscript does not report an ethics approval number, institutional review procedure, parental consent/child assent procedures, or data-protection procedures. These details are required before submission to most international journals, particularly because the study involved children and students with disabilities. The authors should insert the verified ethics and consent information rather than infer or fabricate it.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Social acceptance was visible through everyday participation**

The findings indicate that students with disabilities participated in regular classroom learning, group activities, school ceremonies, community-service activities, and religious activities. Observations suggested that most students without disabilities interacted with students with disabilities without overt rejection. The source study describes this pattern as an improvement in social acceptance, but because the evidence is qualitative, the more defensible interpretation is that acceptance was manifested through increasingly normalized everyday interaction rather than through a measurable increase in a quantitative score.

A classroom teacher described a gradual change in peer behaviour: “Initially, the children tended to keep their distance, but after frequently working in groups and playing together, they became accustomed to each other and no longer differentiated between friends with special needs.” This account illustrates the importance of repeated contact and shared activity in reducing social distance.

Acceptance was nevertheless uneven. Students with communication or behavioural difficulties experienced greater challenges in sustaining peer relationships. Thus, the social meaning of inclusion varied according to the interactional demands of particular situations and the support needs of individual students.

### **Peer interaction differed between academic and non-academic contexts**

Peer interaction during classroom learning was often instrumental, centred on group work and completion of academic tasks. In contrast, interaction during play and extracurricular activities appeared more spontaneous and relational. Students who frequently interacted with peers with disabilities were observed to offer assistance, share learning materials, explain instructions, and invite peers to participate in games.

One student without disabilities explained, “When he has difficulty understanding, I usually help him. The teacher also tells us that we should help one another.” The statement indicates that peer support was partly shaped by classroom norms communicated by teachers. At the same time, some students reported uncertainty when communication became complex because they feared making mistakes. The finding suggests that positive attitudes do not necessarily imply high interactional competence; students may accept peers with disabilities while still needing practical guidance on how to communicate and collaborate effectively.

### **Teachers and GPKs acted as social mediators**

Teachers and GPKs emerged as central actors in establishing an inclusive social climate. Their roles extended beyond academic instruction to modelling tolerance, explaining diversity, facilitating interaction, and mediating interpersonal tensions. Teachers reportedly used thematic learning and everyday modelling to communicate that students have different strengths and needs while remaining members of the same school community.

A GPK explained, “Children need to be continually educated that every friend has strengths and weaknesses. If teachers are consistent, the children gradually learn to accept one another.” This account highlights consistency as a mechanism through which inclusive norms become part of everyday interaction.

The findings also indicate that teachers intervened when teasing or misunderstandings occurred. The source study characterizes educational and non-punitive correction as more effective, but the qualitative evidence more cautiously supports the conclusion that participants perceived such responses as constructive for developing social awareness. A

comparative claim of effectiveness would require systematic evidence beyond the case-study data.

**Organizational and contextual conditions shaped inclusion**

Several factors supported inclusive practice: school leadership commitment, the presence of GPKs, a school culture emphasizing togetherness and mutual assistance, and support from parents of students with disabilities. These conditions created organizational and relational resources for sustaining inclusive participation.

Important constraints were also identified. These included limited numbers of GPKs, insufficient professional development for regular teachers, and limited adaptive learning resources. Participants also described disability-related stereotypes outside the school as a continuing influence on students’ attitudes. A parent of a student with a disability stated, “At school my child has begun to feel more confident, but outside school they are still often treated as different.” The statement illustrates that school-level inclusion operates within a wider social environment and cannot fully neutralize community-level stigma.

**Cross-case thematic synthesis**

| THEME                         | EMPIRICAL<br>MANIFESTATION                                                   | MECHANIS<br>M<br>SUGGESTE<br>D BY<br>PARTICIPA<br>NTS                   | KEY<br>IMPLICATI<br>ON                                            |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| EVERYDAY SOCIAL<br>ACCEPTANCE | Participation in classroom, group, religious, and extracurricular activities | Repeated contact and shared activities reduce social distance           | Inclusion requires meaningful interaction, not only co-presence   |
| PEER SUPPORT                  | Helping with instructions, sharing materials, inviting peers into play       | Classroom norms and repeated interaction encourage supportive behaviour | Students need guidance in inclusive communication and cooperation |
| TEACHER/GPK<br>MEDIATION      | Modelling tolerance, explaining diversity, resolving misunderstandings       | Adults shape norms and mediate social situations                        | Teacher competence is a social-inclusion resource                 |

|                                          |                                                                      |                                                           |                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>UNEVEN INCLUSION</b>                  | Greater difficulty for students with communication/behavioural needs | Interactional demands and individual support needs differ | Inclusion should be differentiated without becoming segregating        |
| <b>STRUCTURAL/CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS</b> | Limited training, resources, stigma                                  | GPKs, adaptive external                                   | School capacity is affected by organizational and community conditions |
|                                          |                                                                      |                                                           | Inclusive policy requires sustained structural support                 |

## DISCUSSION

The findings support a process-oriented understanding of inclusive education in which social acceptance is produced through repeated participation rather than guaranteed by placement. Students with disabilities were not simply present in mainstream classes; they participated in shared learning, school routines, play, and other activities. The qualitative evidence suggests that these repeated encounters created opportunities for peers to become familiar with one another and for differences to be normalized. This interpretation is consistent with international evidence emphasizing peer relationships and social participation as central dimensions of inclusion.

The distinction between formal access and social participation is especially important. A scoping review of research on students with special educational needs identifies peer relationships, social behaviour, joint activities, and social self-perception as interrelated dimensions of participation. The present case adds a contextual account of how these dimensions can develop within an Indonesian primary school. The contribution is therefore not a claim that one school represents Indonesia, but an illustration of mechanisms through which inclusive practices can become socially meaningful in a local setting.

Teacher mediation emerged as a second major mechanism. Teachers and GPKs shaped the social environment by modelling respectful behaviour, communicating norms of mutual assistance, and responding to conflict. This finding is consistent with systematic-review evidence identifying positive teacher beliefs and supportive teaching practices as important conditions for students' experiences of inclusion. Ainscow's whole-system perspective similarly emphasizes that sustainable inclusion requires schools to develop their capacity to respond to learner diversity rather than merely place diverse learners in unchanged structures.

The findings also indicate that contact alone is not sufficient. Some students without disabilities were willing to help their peers but remained uncertain about how to

communicate in complex situations. This distinction between willingness and competence is theoretically and practically important. Research on interventions targeting peer attitudes shows that explicit attitudes can improve while deeper or more implicit negative associations may remain resistant to short-term change. Inclusive schooling should therefore combine opportunities for contact with structured cooperative learning, disability awareness, communication support, and reflection.

The unevenness of acceptance across disability-related needs is another important finding. Students with communication or behavioural difficulties appeared to encounter more interactional barriers. This suggests that inclusion should not be conceptualized as a uniform process. The supports required to enable participation depend on the interaction between individual characteristics and the social environment.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of organizational capacity and the wider social context. Limited specialist staffing, insufficient teacher preparation, and inadequate adaptive resources can constrain what schools are able to accomplish. The parent account further suggests that school-based acceptance may coexist with stigma in the broader community. This reinforces the argument that inclusive education requires system-level and community-level change, rather than relying solely on the goodwill of individual teachers.

### **Theoretical Contribution**

The study contributes to inclusive-education scholarship in three ways. First, it reinforces a relational conception of inclusion in which social acceptance is treated as an outcome of everyday participation rather than as a secondary consequence of school placement. Second, it identifies teacher and GPK mediation as a mechanism linking institutional inclusion practices with peer interaction. Third, it illustrates how structural constraints and community attitudes can shape the limits of school-level inclusion. Together, these findings support a multilevel interpretation of inclusion connecting individual interaction, classroom practice, school culture, and the wider social environment.

### **Practical Implications**

Schools should create repeated, meaningful opportunities for students with and without disabilities to cooperate in structured academic and non-academic activities.

Teacher professional development should address not only instructional adaptation but also peer mediation, disability awareness, inclusive communication, and conflict resolution.

GPK provision should be strengthened so that specialist support is available without transferring responsibility for inclusion away from regular teachers.

School leaders should monitor social participation and peer relationships alongside academic access and achievement.

Family and community engagement should be incorporated into inclusive-education programs because attitudes outside school may continue to shape students' social experiences.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, it is a single-site qualitative case study, so its findings should not be generalized statistically to other Indonesian schools. Second, the source manuscript does not report the exact number and demographic profile of participants, the duration of fieldwork, or the number of interviews and observation sessions. Third, social acceptance was investigated qualitatively rather than through a validated sociometric or psychometric measure. Fourth, the study does not include a comparison school or longitudinal design; consequently, it cannot establish that the inclusive-education program caused an increase in social acceptance. Fifth, participant accounts may be influenced by social desirability, particularly when discussing inclusive attitudes.

### **Future Research**

Future research should combine qualitative case studies with validated measures of peer acceptance, social participation, friendship, and attitudes toward disability. Sociometric methods could complement interviews and observations by identifying friendship reciprocity and peer nominations. Longitudinal or quasi-experimental studies could then examine whether structured cooperative learning, disability-awareness interventions, or teacher professional development produce sustained changes in peer attitudes and social participation. Multi-site research across Indonesian schools would also help determine which mechanisms are context-specific and which are transferable across different school and community settings.

### **CONCLUSION**

This case study indicates that inclusive education at SD Inpres Mallengkeri 2 Makassar is experienced not only as a policy or placement arrangement but as an ongoing social process. Students with disabilities participated in shared school activities, and repeated interaction was associated with expressions of cooperation, empathy, and peer support. Teachers and GPKs played a central role in mediating these interactions and modelling inclusive norms. Nevertheless, social acceptance remained uneven, particularly where communication and behavioural differences created interactional difficulties, and structural limitations and external stigma continued to constrain inclusion. Sustainable inclusive education therefore requires schools to attend simultaneously to access, relationships, teacher capacity, specialist support, and the broader social culture surrounding disability.

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