

Exploration of shadow teacher and core teacher collaboration in the learning process at inclusive elementary schools in Surakarta

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Abstract

This study aims to explore and analyze the forms of collaboration between core teachers and shadow teachers in the learning process in inclusive primary schools at SD Al Firdaus Surakarta. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews with teachers and principals, as well as analysis of relevant documents that include lesson plans and school policies. The results show that effective collaboration between core and support teachers is essential to meet the learning needs of students with special needs and to create an inclusive and responsive learning environment. The research identified challenges faced in harmonizing teaching methods, such as differences in approaches and the need for open communication. The main conclusion of this study is that the application of good communication principles, understanding of each other's roles, and the use of team-based and differentiated learning approaches can significantly improve teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes in inclusive classrooms. The findings are expected to make a practical contribution to the development of inclusive education in Indonesia.

Keywords

Collaboration, Core teacher, Differentiated learning, Inclusive education, Shadow teacher

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Introduction

Education has an important role as a human right for every child. The education system in Indonesia has been designed to provide fair and equitable access to education, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or physical and mental conditions [1]. The Indonesian government is making full efforts to realize this, in accordance with Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System, as well as various other policies that support inclusiveness. One of the main programs in realizing equitable education for all children is inclusive education, which aims to ensure that children with special needs get equal opportunities to learn and develop in a supportive educational environment [2].

Inclusive education has become a major focus in Indonesia's education delivery system, which seeks to provide equal access to education for all children, including children with special needs [3]. The main principle of inclusive education is to ensure that all students, regardless of physical, intellectual or emotional differences, can learn together in the same school environment [4]. This concept requires adequate support from various aspects, including inclusive education policies, facilities that are friendly to all types of needs, and educators who are trained and sensitive to the diversity of student characteristics. In its implementation, inclusive education is not only about physical integration, but also creating an environment that supports social and emotional development, as well as providing equal opportunities for each student to actively participate in the learning process [5].

Inclusive education at the primary school level in Indonesia is growing, currently there are 3,000 inclusive primary schools spread across various provinces that provide access to education for children with special needs. Although this figure shows an increase from the previous year, the number of children with special needs who attend inclusive schools is still far from the ideal number, which is 700,000 children [6]. This shows that the gap between the number of schools available and the number of children with special needs attending inclusive schools is still quite large. The availability of inclusive schools, adequate facilities, and the role of educators are crucial to the success of this program. One of the key roles in supporting children with special needs in inclusive schools is the presence of special assistant teachers or accompanying teachers [7].

Permendiknas No. 70 of 2009 emphasizes that every inclusive school must have a special assistant teacher or shadow teacher in inclusive education. Shadow teachers have the responsibility to provide academic and emotional support to students with special needs and ensure they can actively participate in the learning process in the classroom [8]. In its implementation, the role of shadow teachers is crucial in supporting the learning process of students with special needs. However, reports from several studies show that the collaboration between shadow teachers and core teachers is not fully optimized. Several barriers, such as the lack of specialized training for shadow teachers and limited communication between shadow teachers and core teachers, are issues that are often encountered in the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools [9].

Previous research conducted by Liu & Sammons showed that the success of inclusive education is greatly influenced by effective coordination between shadow teachers and core teachers [10]. Another study by Yung et al. found that shadow teachers have an important role in supporting students with special needs to achieve academic and social development, but often face the challenge of lack of professional recognition [11]. The gap between these two studies is that there has been no in-depth exploration of the form of collaboration between shadow teachers and core teachers in inclusive primary schools, especially in one of the inclusive primary schools in the Surakarta City area,

namely SD Al Firdaus. This emphasizes the importance of further research to understand the dynamics of this collaboration.

The research will explore the form of collaboration between shadow teachers and core teachers in the learning process in inclusive primary schools at SD Al Firdaus Surakarta. This study is expected to make a new contribution to the field of inclusive education, especially in describing effective collaboration strategies between the two parties. The results of this study are expected to not only provide theoretical insights, but also practical recommendations that can be used by stakeholders to improve the quality of inclusive education in Indonesia. Thus, this research is expected to be a small but significant step in creating a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach that emphasizes the interpretation of field data, using data in the form of words and documents. The focus of this research is to explore in depth the form of collaboration between accompanying teachers and core teachers in the learning process in inclusive elementary schools at SD Al Firdaus, Banjarsari District, Surakarta City.

Research Subjects

The research subjects consisted of the 4th grade shadow teacher and regular teachers in the same class, as well as the principal. The selection of research subjects was based on the following criteria:

1. Shadow teachers: shadow teachers who are directly involved in the learning of students with special needs in the specified class.
2. Regular teacher: Grade 4 teacher who works together with the shadow teacher.
3. School principal: The person responsible for inclusive education policy and implementation in the school.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through several techniques:

1. Field Observation: The researcher visited the research site to directly observe the collaboration between special assistant teachers and core teachers in the learning process. Observations were made using an observation guide that covered aspects such as teaching methods, interactions between teachers, and support provided to students with special needs.
2. In-depth Interview: Structured questions were asked to special assistant teachers, core teachers, and school principals. The interview guide was adapted from the book *Essential Guide to Understanding Special Education Needs: Practical Skills for Teachers* [12]. The guide included questions about each teacher's role, challenges faced and collaboration strategies implemented.

3. Documentation: Collection of relevant documents such as learning records, lesson plans and school policies that support the implementation of inclusive education.

Data validity

To ensure data validity, this study applied the following steps:

1. Data Triangulation: Comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation to find consistency of information.
2. Peer Debriefing: Discussion with peers to test data interpretation.
3. Member Checking: Confirming the interview results to the interviewees to ensure the validity of the information.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive analysis method, which involved the following steps:

1. Data Reduction: Selection, focusing, and simplification of relevant data. The data focused on the shadow teacher's actions and strategies in the learning process.
2. Data Presentation: Presentation of data in the form of description and theoretical analysis, especially regarding the challenges faced by shadow teachers.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Initial conclusions were drawn and verified through a cycle back to data reduction and presentation if deficiencies were found.

This process takes place interactively from data collection to final conclusion drawing, with the aim of producing valid and comprehensive findings.

Result and Discussion

Based on the results of observations and interviews, several aspects or stages of collaboration between special assistant teachers (shadow teachers) and core teachers in the learning process at SD Al Firdaus inclusive primary school were found. The implementation of the learning process with special assistant teachers refers to the instrument proposed by Thompson (2010), which includes several main aspects, namely Planning, Classroom Management and Assistance, and Evaluation and Reflection. Each of these aspects has an important role in the collaboration of special assistance teachers and core teachers in supporting inclusive teaching and learning activities, which can be explained as follows.

Planning

At the joint planning stage, special assistant teachers and core teachers collaborate to develop inclusive learning. Observations show that this collaboration is done with the aim of creating relevant learning experiences for all students, including students with special needs. Planning activities involve discussions about learning objectives, material adjustments and appropriate teaching methods. Mrs F, a special assistant teacher in grade 4 at SD Al Firdaus, stated that:

“...We usually start planning by discussing the children's special needs. For example, there are students who need additional visual aids, so I provide input to adjust the material to make it easier to understand...” (Interview excerpt with special assistant teacher F in grade 4).

The co-planning process begins with an in-depth discussion of the students' specific needs. One example is the provision of additional visual aids to facilitate understanding of the material. This statement reflects the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) [13], which emphasizes the importance of providing multiple representations of information to meet the needs of diverse students. UDL allows students with special needs to gain equal access to learning through the customization of teaching materials and methods.

This is also reinforced by the zone of proximal development theory, which states that students can reach their maximum potential with appropriate help and support from more expert individuals [14]. This approach provides opportunities for students to learn according to their abilities and needs through assistance provided individually. The same was confirmed by N, the core teacher of grade 4, who stated:

“...We design learning objectives together so that all students, including those with special needs, can follow the learning well. I am greatly helped by the input from the special assistant teacher in understanding their needs...” (Interview excerpt with core teacher N in grade 4).

Collaboration between core teachers and special assistant teachers in the lesson planning process has a significant impact on the quality of learning, especially for students with special needs. Core teachers stated that inputs from special assistant teachers help them understand students' specific needs better, so that learning can be designed inclusively. This is in line with Friend and Cook's theory that effective collaboration in inclusive education involves in-depth information exchange between educators to create a supportive learning environment [15].

Collaboration in lesson planning reflects the application of the collaborative teaching concept, which asserts that cooperation between educators is essential to create an integrated and inclusive learning environment [16]. Special assistant teachers provide insight into students' special needs, while core teachers direct learning for the whole class. In practice, special assistance teachers often provide input regarding the customization of visual aids or interactive learning strategies to increase the engagement of students with special needs. The core teacher then integrates this input into the lesson design, so that the learning objectives can be achieved by all students.

In this process, the existence of an appropriate curriculum for students with special needs is also an important factor. Hallahan and Kauffman reveal that a well-designed curriculum for children with special needs plays a significant role in supporting their learning success [17]. However, this often forces special assistant teachers and core teachers to make flexible adjustments to materials and methods to make them more relevant to students' needs.

This process can also be analyzed through situational learning theory which states that effective learning occurs when it is done in the context of real practice and involves a learning community [18]. In lesson planning, special assistant teachers and core teachers form a community that shares experiences and insights to create adaptive teaching strategies. For example, special assistant teachers can suggest interactive methods that can increase the participation of students with special needs, such as the use of games or technology-based activities. In many cases, a curriculum that is not specific enough or too generic for children with special needs is a challenge. This encourages special assistant teachers and core teachers to actively seek alternative approaches that allow students to have meaningful learning experiences.

This collaborative approach also reinforces the principle of scaffolding as temporary support provided by more expert individuals to help students achieve higher learning goals than they can achieve independently [19]. Special assistant teachers provide specific support, such as material adjustments and direct guidance during learning, while core teachers ensure that all students, whether they have special needs or not, benefit from classroom activities. The existence of an appropriate inclusive curriculum also helps to create a structure that guides this joint planning [20]. However, the curriculum often requires reinterpretation to suit the specific classroom context, forcing both parties to work more closely to find the most effective solutions. The combination of a flexible curriculum and solid collaboration ensures that inclusive learning is responsive, adaptive and centered on students' needs.

Classroom Management and Mentoring

Effective classroom management is a major factor in the success of the collaboration between support teachers and core teachers at SD Al Firdaus. In the learning process, these two teachers have complementary roles to create an environment that supports diverse learning needs, especially for students with special needs. Good collaboration will allow the support teacher to give special attention to students who need additional support, while the core teacher continues to manage learning for all students in the class. An inclusive classroom setting with a clear division of tasks will increase the active participation of students with special needs in the teaching and learning process.

“...I make sure to always give more attention to students with special needs, by helping them understand the material, but still ensuring that other students also get maximum learning...” (Excerpt from an interview with F's accompanying teacher in grade 4).

The accompanying teacher pays more attention to students with special needs, but still does not neglect other students. This is in line with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, which states that effective learning occurs when a student is given assistance according to the limits of his ability that can develop with support, both from the accompanying teacher and classmates [21]. The accompanying teacher plays a role in providing such support, so that students with special needs can access better learning, while still being under the supervision of the core teacher who

maintains the continuity of the overall learning process. The collaboration between these two teachers in creating an inclusive learning environment allows all students, including those with special needs, to engage in learning in a way that suits their needs.

In addition, according to Tomlinson, the implementation of differentiated learning is essential in an inclusive classroom [22]. The division of tasks between the assistant teacher and the core teacher allows the implementation of different learning strategies for each student. This allows teachers to customize approaches according to students' individual needs, including giving more attention to students who need special assistance. With this approach, students with special needs can more easily follow the subject matter and actively participate in class. Differentiated learning creates an environment that supports student diversity, and provides opportunities for them to develop according to their own potential.

“...The collaboration between me and the support teacher is very helpful in keeping all students, especially those with special needs, engaged in class activities...” (Excerpt of interview with core teacher N in grade 4).

The importance of effective collaboration between core teachers and support teachers in maintaining students' participation in learning. Pozas and team in their research stated that effective collaboration between teachers can improve student learning outcomes [23]. Through a clear division of tasks, core teachers can focus on overall learning management, while support teacher pay more attention to students with special needs, ensuring that they remain actively involved in classroom activities. This also shows the importance of synergy between the two teachers in creating a more inclusive and meaningful learning experience for all students. In addition, Guskey emphasizes that effective collaboration between teachers can create an environment that supports diverse learning, where each student gets the attention that suits their needs [24]. This allows each student to thrive without feeling left behind, creating a more equitable and inclusive learning experience for all students.

“...I always try to organize the classroom atmosphere to be more conducive for students with special needs, especially by providing more space for them to interact and discuss with their peers...” (Excerpt from an interview with F's accompanying teacher in grade 4).

The accompanying teacher does not only focus on students with special needs individually, but also tries to create a conducive classroom atmosphere for them to interact with their classmates. This approach is in line with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the learning process [25]. By providing space for students to interact, both with teachers and classmates, students with special needs can develop their social and emotional skills, which in turn will support their learning. Collaboration between core and support teachers in creating an inclusive classroom atmosphere will be instrumental in improving student learning outcomes. In addition, with more social interaction, students with special needs can develop their social and emotional skills.

In addition, the importance of a supportive learning environment, which can motivate students to be more actively involved in learning [26]. By supporting students in interacting with classmates, accompanying teachers help them develop self-confidence and increase their motivation to learn. This inclusive environment will have a positive impact not only for students with special needs, but also for all students in the classroom. These social interactions, which can develop in a supportive classroom atmosphere, allow students to learn from each other, motivate each other, and help create a more harmonious atmosphere in the learning process.

“...Together with the accompanying teacher, I always make sure that all students get the attention that suits their needs, without anyone being left behind...” (Excerpt from an interview with core teacher N in grade 4).

The above statement reflects the importance of individual attention to students in an inclusive classroom. Effective learning in an inclusive classroom must consider the unique needs of each student. Collaboration between the core and support teachers allows the different learning needs of students to be met. By dividing attention between students with special needs and other students, both teachers can create a more inclusive and equitable learning experience for all students in the classroom. This approach allows each student to develop according to their individual abilities and needs. In line with Marlina who emphasizes the importance of different learning strategies for each student, collaboration between the core teacher and the accompanying teacher provides an opportunity for each student to learn in a way that suits their learning style and ability [27]. It also enriches the learning experience for all students, creating a more inclusive classroom that pays attention to diversity.

Teacher Evaluation and Reflection

Evaluation and reflection are an important stage in the collaboration between support teachers and core teachers in inclusive schools. At this stage, both parties review students' progress, identify barriers that arise during the learning process, and formulate better strategies for the next learning session. This collaboration allows for more targeted learning adjustments, which will ultimately improve teaching effectiveness in the inclusion classroom.

“...During learning, I feel the need to give a more personalized approach to some students who need special attention, so that they can better understand the material...” (Excerpt from an interview with F's accompanying teacher in grade 4).

The mentor teacher above confirms the importance of a personalized approach in student learning, especially in the context of an inclusive classroom. According to Vygotsky, in his socio-cultural development theory, each individual has a different level of ability, and through deep social interaction, they can reach their zone of proximal development [28]. A more personalized approach allows students with special needs to be in the zone, which facilitates more optimal learning. This is also in line with Oliveira's theory of multiple intelligences, where each student has a unique learning style and requires an approach tailored to their needs [29].

In addition, the collaboration between the core and support teachers allows for a better understanding of each student's specific needs. According to Gousia, collaboration in inclusive education provides an opportunity for teachers to share knowledge and strategies, which in turn can result in more effective learning adjustments [30]. In this case, the accompanying teacher plays an important role in providing additional support for students who need more attention.

“...Collaboration with the mentor teacher really helps me to identify the needs of students who are less visible, so that we can work together to adjust teaching methods...” (Interview excerpt with core teacher N in grade 4).

Collaboration between teachers can enrich the teaching process and improve student learning outcomes, especially in the context of inclusive classrooms. In this collaboration, both core and co-teachers can exchange information and strategies, enabling them to design lessons that better suit students' needs. This is in line with the concept of collaborative learning popularized by Yoshida, which emphasizes the importance of cooperation in creating a more inclusive learning environment that is responsive to students' needs [31].

“...I often experience challenges in aligning the strategies I use with the teaching methods already implemented by the core teachers...” (Excerpt from an interview with F's mentor teacher in grade 4).

The results of the interview above reflect the obstacles that are often faced by mentor teachers in the collaboration process with core teachers. According to Bassett & Barnett (2014), one of the biggest challenges in collaboration is the difference in teaching approaches between the core teacher and the mentor teacher. To overcome this challenge, effective communication is needed. For example, according to Hargreaves (2001), open and honest communication between teachers can help harmonize the teaching methods used, ensuring that both teachers can work synergistically and achieve the same learning goals. This is also in line with the theory of collaboration in education proposed by Yang, who suggests that the development of effective teamwork requires time and effort to understand and integrate each other's methods [32].

“...Sometimes I feel helped by the input from the co-teachers, but there are times when I feel I need to be more assertive in some situations so that the learning process runs smoothly...” (Excerpt from an interview with core teacher N in grade 4).

The classroom teacher above demonstrates the importance of balancing flexibility and assertiveness in managing an inclusive classroom. According to Emmer & Sabornie (2015), effective classroom management requires a clear structure, while still considering the needs of diverse students. In this case, the core teacher and accompanying teacher must be able to adapt to the situation and work together to create a safe and conducive learning environment. This is also supported by Abidin's theory, which states that good classroom management can increase students'

motivation and engagement in learning, which is particularly important in inclusive classrooms [33].

To improve collaboration between support teachers and core teachers, a team-based learning approach can be used which has been proven effective in improving interactions between educators. Huijbregts suggests that team-based learning can strengthen a sense of shared responsibility in achieving learning goals [34]. In the context of teacher collaboration, this approach can be adapted to create a more cohesive working environment between core and co-teachers. With team-based learning, each team member, including the mentor teacher, can contribute to the planning, implementation and evaluation of learning. This will clarify the role of each teacher and improve the effectiveness and smoothness of the learning process.

In addition, to overcome the obstacles that arise in aligning teaching methods, teachers can adopt the principles of the differentiated learning approach proposed by Eikeland & Ohna [35]. Differentiated learning emphasizes the importance of tailoring teaching to students' individual needs, interests and abilities. In this case, core and co-teachers can work together to design flexible learning materials and methods that allow students with different learning needs to develop optimally. Eikeland & Ohna also state that by providing variety in the way materials are delivered, whether through visual, kinesthetic or auditory approaches, this collaboration can be more effective in ensuring that each student gets the attention they need.

Conclusion

This research shows that collaboration between core teachers and special assistant teachers at SD Al Firdaus Surakarta is important to create an inclusive learning environment. Effective communication and understanding the needs of students with special needs are key to success. Challenges in harmonizing teaching methods and the importance of team-based learning approaches and differentiation are the main focus. This research provides practical recommendations to improve the quality of collaboration between teachers, which can improve student learning outcomes. Recommendations for the future include further training in effective communication and differentiation approaches as well as further research into factors supporting collaboration.

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