Exploring the challenges of children with special needs in the learning process at an inclusive primary school in Surakarta

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Abstract

Inclusive primary schools are educational efforts that focus on integrating children with various special needs into the general education system. However, the learning process for children with special needs often faces challenges that affect the effectiveness of their learning. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by children with special needs in inclusive learning at Bromantakan Public Elementary School in Surakarta. This study used a qualitative approach with the subjects of children with special needs, core teachers and school principals. Data were collected through observation and interviews, then validated by triangulation. This research has implications for the fields of inclusive education and educational psychology, with the need to improve teacher training, adaptive learning strategies and peer involvement in supporting children with disabilities. The research highlights the importance of institutional support, improved training for shadow teachers and core teachers, and strengthened inclusive education policies. The implications of this research are relevant in the fields of inclusive education, educational psychology and curriculum development, with contributions to educational practice and related policies.

Keywords

Children with special needs, Inclusive education, Learning challenge, Learning strategies

Introduction

Education is a fundamental need for every human being in life. Through education, a person can survive and develop. All individuals, including children with special needs, have the right to education [1]. This right is regulated in Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System, which sets out the objectives and functions of education, including for children with special needs. Based on this law, various regulations related to education were born, one of which is Government Regulation No. 19 of 2005, which regulates the National Education Standards through eight main standards. This policy emphasizes the importance of the education system in general as a minimum benchmark to ensure the quality of education services. With the implementation of the

policy, it is expected that all education service providers can meet the minimum standards of excellence.

Inclusive education is a system that unifies special education services by ensuring that every child with special needs receives education in the nearest mainstream school and interacts with their peers [2]. This rule is stated in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education (Permendiknas) Number 70 of 2009, which emphasizes the importance of inclusive education for students who have abnormalities as well as the potential for special intelligence or talent. Through this approach, inclusive education seeks to create a learning environment that supports diversity and is able to meet the individual needs of each student, thus enabling all children to develop optimally in an equal education system [3].

The city of Surakarta in Central Java has shown its dedication in organizing inclusive education to provide equal opportunities for all children, including children with special needs. This commitment has been realized through the opening of inclusive primary schools in various parts of the city. To date, there are 14 inclusive primary schools that specifically serve education for children with disabilities. Although this number is quite large, there is an imbalance between the capacity of the schools and the number of registered children with disabilities, which is 233 students [4]. This imbalance creates various challenges, one of which is the difficulty experienced by children with special needs in the inclusive learning process at one of the inclusive primary schools, SD Negeri Bromantakan Surakarta. In addition, the quality of the implementation of inclusive education is also a concern because its success depends on good collaboration between schools, teachers, parents, and support from local governments.

One example of the implementation of inclusive education in Surakarta city can be found at Bromantakan primary school, which currently has eight students with special needs. With a significant number of children with disabilities, the implementation of inclusive learning methods presents its own challenges, both for the children with disabilities and the regular students in the same class. These challenges have the potential to affect the quality of education received by all students in the environment [5]. To overcome these obstacles, more adaptive and innovative teaching strategies are needed from schools. In addition, synergy between various related parties is key to ensuring the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Much research has been done on children with special needs in inclusive education, but there are still challenges that need to be overcome. One previous study by Chow examined the role of teachers in managing the learning process in inclusive schools [6]. The results showed that the main challenge teachers face is a lack of understanding and skills in designing a curriculum that suits the needs of children with disabilities. The lack of adequate training and support in developing adaptive learning approaches exacerbates this condition. Another study by Paulsrud dan Nilholm found that the obstacles faced by students with disabilities were more dominant in terms of accessibility and psychosocial support from the surrounding environment, which

contributed to their educational gap [7]. Some children with disabilities faced barriers in terms of physical infrastructure, access to learning resources, and emotional support from teachers and peers.

Previous studies have tended to focus on the teachers' perspectives and have not examined in depth the dynamics of the challenges faced by children with disabilities. This creates a research gap that needs to be addressed, namely the lack of understanding of how children with disabilities experience learning challenges directly in the context of inclusive schools. This gap requires more attention to the direct experiences of children with disabilities in the inclusive teaching and learning process, especially in primary schools. Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges faced by children with special needs in the learning process at Bromatakan Inclusive Primary School Surakarta, focusing on the internal and external factors that influence the process.

This research will make an important contribution to understanding the challenges of children with disabilities more holistically. It will also contribute to efforts to develop more effective strategies to support children's learning in inclusive education settings. The usefulness of this research involves innovating in identifying key factors that influence the success of children with disabilities and promoting inclusive practices that are more oriented to the needs and experiences of students. It is hoped that this research can provide new insights that are useful for the development of policy and practice in inclusive schools and improve the well-being of children with learning disabilities at SD N Bromatakan Surakarta.

Methods

This research applies a qualitative approach with the main objective of describing the challenges faced by children with special needs in the learning process at Bromantakan Inclusive Primary School (SD), Surakarta. The focus of this research lies on identifying internal factors, such as children's individual characteristics, as well as external factors, including the role of teachers, parents and the school environment, which directly or indirectly affect the success of the learning process. To explore the problem in depth, this research uses the case study method, which allows a detailed analysis of the conditions in the field. This research was conducted at Bromantakan State Elementary School located in Banjarsari District, Surakarta City, Central Java, Indonesia, and took place in October 2024.

The research subjects included a class IV special needs child, a class IV teacher, and one of the child's parents. In collecting data, observation and interview techniques were used as the main tools to obtain rich and in-depth information. The collected data were then analyzed using the approach developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which involves three main steps: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data condensation is done by selecting, focusing, simplifying,

abstracting, and transforming relevant information, so as to produce more structured and meaningful data to support research findings.

Data Condensation

The initial step taken by the researchers is the data condensation process, which is the stage where the field data that has been collected is organized, simplified, and selected according to relevance to the research objectives. In this stage, the researchers carefully sorts and summarizes information to highlight aspects that are considered important. This process aims to identify the most relevant and useful data as a basis for decision-making in the next research step. To collect diverse information, the researchers applied various techniques, such as direct observation and in-depth interviews, resulting in rich and comprehensive data. Each piece of data processed was selected based on pre-designed criteria and grids, ensuring that the information collected truly supported the main objectives of the research being conducted.

Data Presentation

In the data presentation stage, researcherss organize and display the data that has been collected in the form of a structured and clear narrative. This narrative presentation of data aims to facilitate the process of drawing conclusions and taking action based on the information available. By presenting the data in detail, researcherss can reduce the potential for errors in interpretation and increase accuracy in understanding the results of the study. The approach of writing data that starts from the general to the specific, known as the inductive method, helps readers to understand the context gradually, form an organized framework, and focus more on the core problems revealed by the research. This structured presentation of data also allows the reader to follow the flow of analysis more easily and get a clearer picture of the relationship between the data presented and the conclusions drawn.

Conclusion Drawing

The process of drawing conclusions and verification is the final stage in qualitative data analysis, which aims to answer the research questions that have been formulated from the beginning. At this stage, field findings are organized and connected with relevant theories, as discussed in the previous theoretical study, thus forming a conceptual framework that supports research conclusions. Qualitative research often produces new discoveries that are unique and have never been revealed before, enriching the insights in the field under study. In this process, an inductive approach is used to draw conclusions, where various problems are analyzed in depth based on evidence and facts obtained from the field. The researcher identifies patterns, relationships, and specific findings, which are then formulated into general statements that reflect the essence of the entire study. This approach not only provides clarity to the issues raised, but also contributes to the development of relevant theories in the context of the study.

Result and Discussion

SD Negeri Bromantakan in Surakarta City is one of the inclusive schools that is committed to creating a learning environment that is friendly, fair and supports diversity. Inclusive education in this school aims to enable every student, including children with special needs, to reach their full potential without discrimination. However, in its implementation, there are significant challenges for children with special needs in the learning process. Based on the research results using the inclusion index, three main aspects of challenges were found, which can be detailed below.

Limitations of Physical Accessibility and Learning Environment

Children with special needs often face difficulties adapting to environments that do not fully support their needs [10]. Physical barriers such as less inclusive classrooms, lack of supporting facilities, and less flexible seating arrangements can worsen their learning process.

> *"Our classrooms are still less flexible for children with special needs, especially in terms of seating arrangements that cannot be adjusted to their needs. This is one of the biggest obstacles in their learning process."* (Interview Mrs. P, Grade 4 Teacher).

In the interview with the grade 4 teacher, it was found that the classroom arrangement is not friendly to the needs of children with disabilities. According to research conducted by Andrews et al. [8], inclusive schools should have supportive infrastructure, including well-organized classrooms, to facilitate more inclusive learning. Vygotsky [9] also emphasized the importance of a learning environment that supports the social and cognitive development of children with disabilities. If classrooms do not allow for effective interaction and flexible adjustments, children with disabilities will have difficulty absorbing learning. Therefore, it is important for schools to ensure that the physical environment is adapted to the special needs of children with disabilities to optimize the learning process.

The limitations in the classroom setting as described by the teachers had a significant impact on the children's ability to participate actively. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model [10] emphasizes that a responsive and welcoming physical environment for children with disabilities is essential to support their development. In this context, classrooms that are rigid and lack flexibility hinder children's participation in learning because they cannot adjust in the most effective way. Therefore, an inclusive classroom setting is essential to ensure that children with special needs can learn better and feel comfortable in the school environment.

> *"My son struggles with overly rigid seating and limited learning facilities. This makes him feel uncomfortable and less enthusiastic about learning."* (Interview with Parent L of a student with special needs).

Parents of students with special needs show how limited physical facilities affect children's comfort and motivation in learning. Poor physical accessibility can hinder children with disabilities' participation in learning. This is in line with Aaron's theory [11]

that a supportive physical environment is a key component of inclusive education, where facilities such as flexible seating and learning aids must be available to ensure children with disabilities can participate fully. If these facilities are limited or unavailable, it will affect children's motivation and learning ability. Therefore, it is important for schools to develop a learning environment that is friendly to children with disabilities by integrating their special needs into the physical structure of the school.

Limitations in physical accessibility as expressed by parents are also in line with the concept of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological theory. According to the theory, factors in the microenvironment, such as classrooms and supporting facilities, contribute to children's development [12]. If this environment is not supportive, then children will experience barriers to learning. Children with disabilities will have difficulty adapting and be less involved in the learning process. Therefore, schools need to take concrete steps to improve physical accessibility to create an inclusive environment that supports the active participation of children with disabilities.

Observations made in class 4 showed that children with special needs had difficulty adapting to the less flexible classroom arrangements. These children seemed to struggle with seating that could not be adjusted to their needs and the lack of learning aids needed to support the learning process. According to ecological theory, a supportive environment can facilitate children's development, while a less responsive environment can magnify barriers. If the physical environment is not supportive [13], children with disabilities will experience limitations in accessibility and potentially feel isolated from the learning process. Therefore, efforts to improve physical accessibility in inclusive schools need to be made to create a more inclusive environment that supports children's development.

It is important to recognize that physical limitations such as rigid seating and lack of support facilities have a significant impact on children with disabilities' participation in learning. A supportive environment plays an important role in facilitating learning and social development. Social interactions and environmental support have a significant impact on how children with disabilities learn and adapt [14]. If the physical environment does not allow for effective interactions and flexible arrangements, then children with disabilities will have difficulty adapting well. Therefore, schools should take steps to improve classroom arrangements and provide inclusive facilities so that children with disabilities can learn optimally and feel more involved in the learning process. This supportive environment will also help children with disabilities build essential social and academic skills in the long term.

Difficulties in Adjusting Curriculum and Learning Methods

In inclusive education, adjusting the curriculum and learning methods is a major challenge for teachers in meeting the needs of students with special needs [15]. The curriculum implemented in inclusive primary schools is often inflexible and does not fully accommodate the individual needs of students. Teachers face a dilemma between

complying with the curriculum standards and designing learning that is adaptive to students' diverse abilities.

> *"Sometimes I find it difficult to create learning methods that are suitable for all students, because each child has different needs and ways of learning."* (Interview Mrs. P, Grade 4 Teacher).

The statement shows that teachers face challenges in creating inclusive learning strategies. According to Tomlinson [16], differentiated learning is one approach that can help teachers customize learning based on students' individual needs. In differentiation, teachers can organize learning content, processes and products according to students' ability levels. However, implementing this approach requires a deep understanding of each student's learning profile, which teachers often lack due to limited time and resources.

In addition, Vygotsky emphasized the importance of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in the learning process. ZPD refers to the distance between what students can do independently and what can be achieved with assistance [17]. Teachers need to design learning methods that match students' ZPD to ensure that learning is effective. Unfortunately, in the context of inclusive education, teachers often struggle to find the balance between providing sufficient assistance and encouraging independence.

> *"I have to modify the teaching materials a lot, but sometimes there are still students with disabilities who find it difficult to understand."* (Interview Mrs. P, Grade 4 Teacher).

The above statement underlines the need for significant modification of teaching materials to meet the needs of children with disabilities. According to Hall, Strangman and Meyer (2003), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a framework that can help teachers design inclusive learning. UDL advocates variations in the way information is delivered, methods of engagement and evaluation to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, can access learning.

Furthermore, Piaget stated that students' cognitive development takes place in certain stages [18]. Teachers need to understand the stages of cognitive development of children with disabilities to develop appropriate materials. If the teaching material is too complex, students with disabilities will find it difficult to digest, while if it is too simple, other students may feel less challenged. Therefore, this gap is a real challenge in inclusive education.

During an observation of a student with special needs in grade 4 at SDN Bromantakan, it was found that the student often had difficulty following the teacher's verbal explanations without visual support. This can be seen when the teacher conveys material using verbal methods only, students appear confused and do not understand the concepts presented. However, when the material was presented in the form of pictures or diagrams, students showed better understanding. This student's ability to understand concepts through visual media shows that the student's visual-spatial

intelligence is more dominant than verbal-linguistic intelligence. Therefore, the use of visual media in learning is an important and useful step. Teachers can use pictures, diagrams and other visual aids to convey material so that children with disabilities can understand concepts more effectively. This strategy will not only support children with disabilities but can also improve the understanding of other students who may have similar visual-spatial learning styles.

These observations are in line with Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which states that each individual has a dominant type of intelligence [19]. In this context, the dominance of visual-spatial intelligence in children with disabilities can be the basis for teachers to use more visual media in learning. According to Gardner, individuals with visual-spatial intelligence tend to be better able to understand information conveyed through pictures, maps, diagrams and other visual representations. Therefore, using a variety of visual media in the learning process can help children with disabilities improve their understanding. This strategy is not only beneficial for children with disabilities but also has the potential to enrich the learning experience for other students with similar preferences.

Bruner's theory of learning representations is also relevant in this context. According to Bruner, there are three important types of learning representations - enactive, iconic and symbolic - each of which relates to a student's learning style [20]. Enactive representation involves physical activity and direct manipulation, while iconic representation involves the use of pictures or diagrams, and symbolic representation is related to the use of symbols and words. In the case of visual-spatial dominant children with disabilities, visual media such as pictures or diagrams act as iconic representations that can help students understand abstract concepts. Therefore, teachers need to combine visual media with enactive approaches, such as live demonstrations or the use of manipulative tools, so that students can better understand and internalize concepts in a way that suits their learning style.

Furthermore, social learning theory emphasizes the importance of models and interactions in the learning process [21]. Social interaction and observation from others can strengthen students' understanding and skills. In the context of children with disabilities, teachers can facilitate small group work or collaboration with classmates to encourage social interaction. By working in groups, children with disabilities can learn from interactions with their peers and models around them. This strategy can also help reduce the sense of isolation that children with disabilities may feel in an inclusive classroom environment. The social interactions that occur during collaboration can provide opportunities for children with disabilities to strengthen their understanding through discussion and shared learning experiences, so they feel more integrated in the learning process.

Lack of Understanding and Social Support from Peers

Social interactions between children with special needs and regular students in inclusive schools still face significant challenges. One of the main factors is regular students' lack of understanding of diversity and inclusion, which results in limitations in the social and emotional support received by children with disabilities [22]. This directly affects their motivation and confidence in the learning process.

> *"Many regular students do not understand how to interact with friends who have special needs. They tend to keep their distance or even ignore the presence of children with disabilities."* (Interview Mrs. P, Grade 4 Teacher).

The above opinions reflect the barriers to social interaction faced by children with disabilities in an inclusive school environment. Social interaction is a key element in children's cognitive and emotional development [23]. Lack of positive interactions can inhibit the development of the zone of proximal development in children with disabilities. This is also in line with Bronfenbrenner's view in the ecological theory of human development, which emphasizes that the social environment, including support from peers, plays an important role in supporting children's development [24].

Piaget explained that interactions with peers contribute to moral development and the ability to understand others' perspectives [25]. When regular students do not understand or accept diversity, children with disabilities lose the opportunity to participate in constructive social learning. Therefore, educational interventions that strengthen understanding of inclusion and empathy are urgently needed to overcome this challenge.

Observations found that one of the children with disabilities often sat alone during breaks and showed interest in joining the group but did not get a positive response from his friends. The teacher also found it difficult to involve regular students in collaborative activities involving children with disabilities. These observations reinforce the importance of creating an inclusive social environment. Bandura in his social learning theory emphasizes that children learn through observation and interaction with their environment [26]. If regular students see that their peers do not interact with children with disabilities, they tend to imitate this behavior. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be positive models by demonstrating inclusive attitudes and encouraging regular students to follow this example.

Furthermore, Goleman's [27] theory of emotional intelligence underlines that the ability to understand and manage one's own and others' emotions is key in building healthy relationships. An emotional intelligence-based curriculum can help regular students to develop the empathy and social skills needed to support their peers with special needs. Implementing strategies such as structured group activities can help facilitate more positive interactions between children with disabilities and regular students.

Conclusion

This study reveals the significant challenges faced by children with special needs in the learning process at SD Negeri Bromantakan, Surakarta. The findings show that children with disabilities often experience difficulties in understanding material that is delivered verbally without visual support. Observations also showed that social interaction between children with disabilities and regular students was limited, which impacted on the social and emotional support received by children with disabilities. Discussion points included the importance of using visual media in learning to improve the understanding of children with disabilities, in line with Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. The need to create an inclusive social environment so that regular students can interact better with children with disabilities is supported by Bandura's social learning theory. The need for differentiated learning strategies and an understanding of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to meet students' individual needs. Overall, this study makes an important contribution to the field of inclusive education by highlighting the need for a more adaptive and inclusive approach to teaching and the importance of social support from peers to enhance the learning experience of students with disabilities.

Acknowledgments

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