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Provision and Implementation of Inclusive Education in Early Childhood Centers: A Comparative Case Study of Two Semarang-Based Institutions

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Abstract

The present research aims to investigate and describe the provision of inclusive education services in early childhood education institutions, focusing on TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School UNNES in Semarang, Indonesia. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive case study approach, the study comprehensively examined various aspects, including curriculum, student demographics, educator training, infrastructure, and financing. Key findings indicate the utilization of a collaboratively developed "Merdeka Curriculum" aimed at holistic child development. Both schools have incorporated a specialized student selection process to identify and accommodate special needs students. Educators are rigorously trained in inclusive education methods and continuously monitored for program effectiveness. Infrastructure and funding support are pivotal for the actualization of inclusive practices. These findings have profound implications for practice and policy in inclusive education, reaffirming the necessity for inclusive school management and stakeholder involvement. However, the study is constrained by its localized focus and calls for further research to broaden its generalizability and investigate the long-term impacts of these programs.

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Introduction

Education is imperative for enhancing an individual's quality of life and advancing humanity's fate and civilization (Fauzi, 2018; Hizriyani, 2019). Consequently, every child has the right to education. This right is strengthened by the global Education for All (EFA) program (Furuta & A. K. A. C., 2017). EFA proposes a nondiscriminatory educational model that does not differentiate based on social strata, ethnicity, religion, culture, or physical abilities, among other factors (Suyahman, 2015).

Inclusive education has gained global focus for advancing equitable and quality education (Anderson, 2019). In Indonesia, inclusive education is a pivotal issue with significant implications for social and economic progress. This mandate aligns with the 1945 Indonesian Constitution and the National Education System Law, asserting every individual's right to quality education (Alhammedi, 2023). However, many children with special needs still lack adequate access to education, especially in rural areas (Maemunah, 2021).

Since 2009, the Indonesian government has focused on inclusive education (Ediyanto et al., 2021; Nandya Atika et al., 2017). Government Regulation No. 7 of 2009 specifies that inclusive education is a system that provides all students the opportunity to attend school in the same environment (Anggita Sakti, 2020; Zulkarnain, 2018). This aims to reduce social stigma and narrow educational disparities between children with special needs and their typical peers

(Dutchman et al., 2013; Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey, 2020). Despite these regulations, implementation barriers exist, including a need for more resources and commitment from relevant stakeholders (Darma & Rusyidi, 2015).

One primary obstacle is the low level of commitment and capability among educational practitioners and policymakers. Furthermore, inadequate governmental monitoring contributes to the subpar quality of inclusive education (Anggita Sakti, 2020). Previous studies have also shown that not all educational services are accessible to children with special needs (Muslimin & Muqowim, 2021). For instance, DeMatthews (2021) found that although inclusive education has been opened to children with special needs, its implementation still needs to be revised. Therefore, there is an urgent need to evaluate and revise existing approaches.

Another influential factor is the resources allocated by the government, the educational system, and the schools themselves (F. Ackah-Jnr, 2018). Moreover, the involvement of parents and the general community influences the effectiveness of inclusive education. While teachers are pivotal in implementing inclusive education, many schools still need to increase the number of teachers to handle children with special needs (Kefallinou et al., 2020). According to Alfina and Anwar (2020), preparation in three key aspects is necessary: teachers, curriculum development, and facilities. Challenges faced by teachers include non-linear qualifications and inadequate infrastructure (Tiara, 2022).

Observations at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School at Semarang State University indicate that implementing inclusive education at these institutions needs to be revised. Both schools need clear guidelines for administering inclusive education, consistent with Government Regulation No. 7 of 2009, which guides inclusive education in Indonesia. This research aims to fill this information gap and provide recommendations to improve the implementation of inclusive education.

Various studies have revealed urgent needs and important issues in the context of Early Childhood Education (PAUD). For example, Hardin et al. (2009) focused on challenges in screening and evaluating second-language English speakers in the United States, highlighting shortcomings in existing evaluation and screening systems. Poon-McBrayer Wong (2013) explored the role of schools and school leadership in implementing inclusive education in Hong Kong. Sementara itu, F. R. Ackah-Jnr (2020) examined the effectiveness of professional development programs for teachers involved in inclusive education. However, there is a knowledge gap concerning the implementation and success of inclusive education at the PAUD level in the Indonesian context, which needs to be sufficiently filled by previous research.

Despite the existing body of work on inclusive education in Indonesia, several limitations and controversies exist. Firstly, most studies focus on higher levels of education and neglect PAUD. Secondly, research tends to be more theoretical than practical. Thirdly, there needs to be more studies involving opinions from various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and children with special needs. Therefore, this study addresses these limitations by focusing on implementing inclusive educational services at PAUD in Semarang.

In conclusion, this study aims to analyze and describe the provision of inclusive educational services in PAUD in Semarang, specifically at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School UNNES. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study model, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of the state of inclusive education in PAUD. By offering in-depth information and analysis, this study hopes to fill existing gaps in previous literature. Additionally, it aims to provide comprehensive and applicable recommendations to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of inclusive educational services in Indonesia.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach and a case study model, focusing on inclusive education services at Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 Kindergarten and the Lab School at the State University of Semarang (UNNES) in Semarang City. Data collection involved three primary techniques: observations to identify the research focus, interviews with the school principals and classroom teachers to understand the implementation and policies, and document analysis comprising various official documents and learning materials from both institutions. All data were collected in January 2023 using recording devices, writing tools for documentation, and information technology for data processing (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Data analysis was carried out qualitatively, referring to the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The reliability and validity of the data were ensured through a triangulation process, utilizing both primary and secondary data sources, along with accurate and consistent documentation. This study aligns with international scientific standards, aiming to provide comprehensive and reliable insights into inclusive education services in the examined Early Childhood Education (ECE) institutions (Sugiono, 2013).

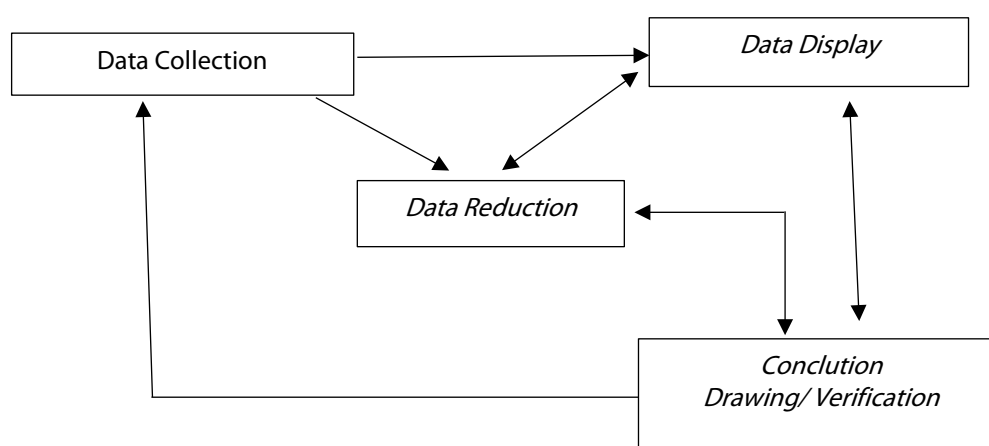


Figure 1. Milles and Huberman Interactive Model Data Analysis (Sugiono, 2013)

Result

This study is focused on inclusive education services in early childhood education institutions based on religion and nationality, specifically in TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School of the State University of Semarang (UNNES). Both TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School UNNES are formal educational institutions that have implemented inclusive education, integrating students with special needs with typically developing students without waiting for complete facilities. The inclusive educational services in these schools can be observed from various aspects such as curriculum, students, educators, facilities and infrastructure, finance/funding, partnerships, learning services, and special services.

3.1. Curriculum at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School UNNES

The curriculum serves as a guideline for teachers in executing the educational process in both institutions. The 'Merdeka' (Freedom) curriculum is used as a reference for measuring the success of educational objectives and all learning activities and quality improvement. Implementing the 'Merdeka' curriculum is formulated by an educational unit development team comprising the school principal, foundation members, a teacher team, a parents' committee, and educational authorities such as coordinators and supervisors. The curriculum is designed to manage the overall program and implement free play and learning for early childhood. It also serves as a benchmark for gradual and sustainable quality improvement in educational units.

Regarding services for children with special needs (CWSN) at both schools, they offer a general curriculum with modifications as a form of service to these children. Based on interviews with respective school principals, it was mentioned that the curriculum is still common, albeit differentiated in learning outcomes. Classroom teachers mentioned in interviews that the curriculum is tailored to student's needs, but its outcomes differ for typical students and those with special needs. From interviews with principals and classroom teachers at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School UNNES, it can be concluded that neither school has a specialized or individualized curriculum for children with special needs. However, they modify the general curriculum in terms of learning outcomes, wherein the outcomes for children with special needs are differentiated from those for typical students

3.2. Students at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES

Students are an essential component of learning. The success of an educational system relies on the presence of learners during instructional processes. Based on observations and interviews conducted at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 has 185 students divided into Groups A and B. Group A is further segmented into eight classes, each comprising 15-16 students, whereas Group B consists of 8 classes with 8-10 students each. Out of 185 students at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2, 9 are classified as children with special needs (CSN). PAUD LAB School UNNES has 72 students, consisting of 34 females and 38 males, and they are divided into two groups: KB and Group A, each containing 12-13 students. Among these 72 students, 2-3 in each class have special needs.

All students, including those with special needs or diverse learning abilities, are included in inclusive schools. Students with special needs in inclusive schools require specific support tailored to their requirements. TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2, which practices inclusive education, conducts a special selection process based on interviews with the school principal and further assessments by psychologists. This selection aims to identify the unique needs of each student to provide adequate support.

Interviews and observations at PAUD LAB School UNNES indicate that admissions are carried out directly by teachers to initially assess prospective students' developmental needs. The school can only admit students with special needs based on the teachers' capabilities.

3.3. Educators at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES

Educators are crucial in the educational process, particularly in inclusive schools. They are responsible for providing instruction and facilitating the development of all students, including those with diverse learning abilities and special needs. Inclusive educators undergo monitoring and supervision by the school principal regarding the execution of inclusive programs. They also receive specific training in inclusive education practices from city officials and psychologists.

The role of educators at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES extend to initial identification through observation to determine what each student needs for effective learning. They are responsible for adapting instructional approaches to meet the diverse needs of all students. The school curriculum for children with special needs is the same as for other students but is modified to meet individual needs.

Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that educators at TK Hj. In the inclusive education service, Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES tailor their instructional methods to the specific needs and diversity of the students. The school provides differentiated assessments for children with special needs aligned with each student's unique requirements, although classroom instruction remains consistent for all students.

3.4. Facilities and Infrastructure at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES

Facilities and infrastructure are essential components of education. They support implementing learning activities, ensuring that educational goals are met effectively. Based on interviews and observations at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2, various supporting facilities exist, such as student desks and chairs, teacher desks and chairs, student lockers, cupboards, blackboards, indoor and outdoor play materials, and IT resources. The school's infrastructure includes classrooms, a principal's office, an administrative office, a staff room, restrooms, a hall, a workshop, and a swimming pool. These facilities and infrastructure at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 serves to support educational activities, thereby meeting educational objectives.

From interviews with the principal and classroom teachers, education services for children with special needs (ABK) at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES are equitable, based on consultations with psychologists. The facilities and infrastructure at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 does not discriminate between students with special needs and those without.

3.5. Financing at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES

Financing is a critical aspect of running an inclusive education service. Adequate and sustainable resources are essential for the success and continuity of inclusive programs. Funding needs to be considered so that schools have sufficient budget allocation to facilitate the various needs of all students.

Financing at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES are used to provide programs for all students. While TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 does not differentiate costs for any student; PAUD LAB School UNNES requires additional fees for a shadow teacher if a student needs one.

3.6. Partnership at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES

Educational partnerships in inclusive schools refer to the collaboration between various stakeholders in inclusive education to support and advance it. According to classroom teachers, the educational partnership at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 includes the roles of the school, parents, government, and related organizations. In contrast, PAUD LAB School UNNES partners with several universities and psychology institutions. Such partnerships lay the foundation for an inclusive learning environment that does not discriminate between students and supports the development of all students.

3.7. Special Services at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES

Special services in inclusive education refer to the additional support and learning approaches provided for students with special needs or those requiring special education. These special services aim to ensure that all students with varying learning abilities have an equal opportunity to learn and develop according to their potential. TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES offer educational services for children with special needs.

Based on an interview with the Principal of TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2, the school provides special services for students with special needs by involving psychologists to help identify physical obstacles or needs required by students to implement learning. Subsequently, the special services offered by TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 includes adjusting the school curriculum, which is modified in the form of tailored learning outcomes for these students. It can be concluded that the form of special inclusive education services at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 consists of initial observations of students by psychologists and curriculum modifications tailored to learning outcomes for students with special needs. Special services in inclusive education ensure that all students receive support and learning approaches tailored to their needs. With an inclusive approach, inclusive schools are committed to providing a fair and supportive learning environment for the optimal development of all students.

The interview with the Principal of PAUD LAB School UNNES stated that special services for students with special needs include providing a shadow teacher to assist students in the classroom. Shadow teachers are responsible for providing individual guidance or support to

students with special needs in inclusive schools. Shadow teachers are vital in helping students with diverse learning abilities and special needs to participate fully in a regular school environment. They assist students in understanding instructions, completing assignments, and participating in learning activities. Shadow teachers collaborate with teachers and school staff to convey information about students' needs and progress. This collaboration helps ensure consistency in the educational support provided. Shadow teachers also communicate regularly with parents to provide updates on learning progress and discuss the best ways to support students at home. The role of shadow teachers helps ensure that students with special needs receive appropriate support and guidance to meet learning challenges and achieve academic and social success in an inclusive school environment.

3.8. Learning Services at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES

Learning services in inclusive education refer to various support, strategies, and learning approaches to ensure all students can learn and develop according to their potential. These learning services aim to create an inclusive, fair, and supportive learning environment for the success of all students. Learning services in inclusive schools at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES have curriculum modifications that tailor learning outcomes to students with special needs. The implementation of learning at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES do not discriminate between students with and without special needs.

Based on interviews at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES, the learning approach is loose with various activities. Meanwhile, TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD LAB School UNNES do not have special learning services for students with special needs, where the learning between students with and without special needs is undifferentiated. However, learning outcomes are tailored according to the needs of students who require special education.

Discussion

The present study aims to analyze and describe the provision of inclusive education in Semarang's early childhood settings, specifically at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School UNNES. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study model, the research questions and relevant literature demonstrate that inclusive education is a system striving to allow all students, including those with special needs, to participate in an inclusive educational environment. The management and commitment of educators and policymakers are crucial for implementing inclusive education (Lestari et al., 2019; Mogonea & Popescu, 2019).

The primary findings of this study focus on five critical aspects of inclusive education: curriculum, students, educators, infrastructure, and financing. A notable discovery is the adoption of the "Freedom Curriculum," a pedagogical initiative developed through the collaborative efforts of school principals, educational foundations, teaching teams, parent committees, and local educational authorities. This collaborative approach allows for adaptability and flexibility in the curriculum, making it more responsive to each student's unique needs and characteristics. Furthermore, the curriculum's development considers other aspects like supportive infrastructure and adequate financing, fostering an inclusive and stimulating learning environment. These findings underscore the importance of a comprehensive and collaborative approach in designing and implementing effective inclusive education.

These findings are consistent with, but also extend, previous literature. For instance, the research by Lestari et al. (2019) highlights the importance of school management changes and educators' commitment. These results support and expand upon those findings by illustrating how such commitment is manifested through collaborative curriculum development. The study aligns with the argument that curricula should be developed based on the developmental stages and needs of the students while considering advancements in science and technology (Prasasti & Mulyadi, 2022). Educators must identify each child's most appropriate learning models (Winanti et al., 2021). Curriculum evaluation should encompass not only learning outcomes but also curriculum design and implementation, as well as utilized learning resources.

The primary aim is cultivating independence, critical thinking, and communal values in the school environment (Wirantho, 2017).

The explanation for these findings can be directed towards multi-stakeholder involvement in curriculum development. This suggests that the responsibility for inclusive education extends beyond schools and requires participation from various stakeholders. Awareness about inclusive education also needs to be built, especially concerning the development of education tailored to each child's needs. This consideration is based on the fact that each child has different characteristics and needs but has an equal right to quality education according to their potential and requirements (Maemunah, 2021). Hal ini sejalan dengan Kebijakan mengenai Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus (ABK) bukan hanya menjadi tanggungjawab dari Wirantho (2017) kementerian pendidikan, pemerintah provinsi maupun pemerintah kab/kota, namun melibatkan kerjasama lintas kementerian dan sektoral. Beberapa kementerian juga mengembangkan kebijakan mengenai layanan termasuk pendidikan untuk Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus (ABK) di PAUD agar mendapatkan pendidikan dengan layak dan baik.

Inclusive education at TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School UNNES adopt a pedagogical approach designed to meet the needs of all students, including those with special needs. Adiarti (2014) argues that planning activities in inclusive classrooms is similar to regular education. Focusing on developing motor skills and social-communicative competencies in the learning process refers to preparing an inclusive curriculum, infrastructure, and learning system (Mulaudzi & Dube, 2016; Nel et al., 2016). Additional research, such as that conducted by Sulistyadi (2014), posits that inclusivity is based on every student's right to develop their individual, social, and intellectual potential. Inclusive education demands attention at every stage of the instructional process, from initiation to evaluation, as an imperative (Nurjanah & Muntaqo, 2018).

Moreover, the sustainability of funding emerges as a crucial factor in the successful implementation of inclusive education. According to available data, funds are allocated for various educational programs, including services for students with special needs (Shutaleva et al., 2023). However, the actualization of these services remains suboptimal for children with special needs, largely due to the need for comprehensive guidelines (Aktan, 2020; Isah Mfr, 2022). This inadequacy extends to various facets, from curriculum management to facilities and infrastructure, in compliance with the Ministry of National Education's Regulation No. 7 of 2009. A transformation in management and a renewed commitment from educators and policymakers are essential for optimizing educational services (Damayanti & Nasrul, 2020). Therefore, providers of inclusive education must focus their efforts on improving learning services and infrastructure. Optimizing these services is expected to aid the development of children from diverse backgrounds (Yaum, 2019).

Nevertheless, caution is advised in interpreting these findings. Although there is support from multiple parties involved—from policymakers to educators and parents—and adequate financial allocation, this does not necessarily guarantee the overall success of inclusive education. According to some studies, despite the inclusive approach accommodating the needs of diverse students, not all elements within the educational ecosystem have been fully adapted to support this model. Therefore, the effectiveness of this inclusive education needs further evaluation to ensure that every student, without exception, benefits optimally from the system, including but not limited to learning material accessibility, the quality of social interactions within the school environment, and academic outcomes.

Overall, this study provides essential insights into implementing inclusive education in early childhood education settings in Semarang. The analysis centers on five main aspects—curriculum, students, educators, infrastructure, and financing. One of the key findings is the implementation of the "Freedom Curriculum," created through multi-stakeholder collaboration and effective in meeting the diverse needs of students. Although there has been progress, shortcomings, such as weaknesses in implementation guidelines and resource management,

exist. These findings both support and extend previous literature, emphasizing that the success of inclusive education requires a comprehensive, collaborative, and ongoing approach from all stakeholders. These findings have significant implications for the practice and policy of inclusive education. They support the need for inclusive school management and multi-stakeholder involvement, consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of commitment from educators and policymakers.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore and delineate the provision of inclusive educational services in early childhood education centers, specifically TK Hj. Isriati Baiturrahman 2 and PAUD Lab School UNNES, in Semarang. The study, employing a qualitative descriptive case study approach, revealed that the institutions use a collaboratively developed "Merdeka Curriculum" targeting holistic child development. Both schools host many special needs students, facilitated by specialized student selection processes. Trained educators adopt adaptive teaching strategies, are monitored by continuous administrative oversight, and are supported by infrastructure tailored for inclusivity. Additionally, sustained and adequate financing has been identified as crucial for effectively realizing these programs. These findings hold significant implications for inclusive educational practice and policy, corroborating prior research highlighting stakeholder commitment's importance. However, the study needs to expand its scope, focusing on two specific settings. It calls for additional research for broader generalizability and to assess the long-term impacts of these programs.

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