

Implementation of inclusive education policy in supporting students with disabilities in high schools in Palu City, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the implementation of inclusive education policy at senior high schools in Palu city, Indonesia. This study used a qualitative multiple-case study involving three government senior high schools. Data were gathered through field observation, focus group discussion, in-depth interviews, and written document analysis. Focus group discussion involved 15 informants, comprising teachers and school principals. Nine of the informants were recruited for in-depth interviews, which lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The results of this study show that inclusive education policies have been formally implemented. Schools have accepted disabled students in accordance with the principles of inclusive education as stipulated in Ministerial Regulation decree No. 70 of 2009. However, the policy implementation is primarily administrative in nature and has not addressed the technical aspects of inclusive learning. This aligns with findings that the curriculum remains uniform for all students, without significant modifications. Teachers struggle to adapt teaching strategies for students with disabilities, and local government support is limited to written regulations, not structured programs. Furthermore, most principals and teachers do not fully understand the laws and regulations governing inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Disabled students, Government policy, Senior high schools, Students

1. Introduction

The 1945 Constitution (UUD 45) of the Republic of Indonesia states that education is the right of all citizens. Therefore, there is no discrimination in access to education. Education must fundamentally be inclusive and fair for all students. Meanwhile, Law No. 23 of 2002 concerning Child Protection states that every child has the right to live, grow, develop, and participate adequately while upholding humanitarian values. Children also have the right to be protected from violence and discrimination (Daly, Stern, & Leviner, 2022; Kurian, 2020)^[3, 6]. One of these rights is access to education that supports their personal and intellectual development, in accordance with their individual interests and talents.

Everyone has the right to an education from childhood to adulthood, including children with special needs (Engdahl & Losso, 2019; Sihvonen, Lappalainen, Herranen, & Aksela, 2024)^[16]. Inclusive education is an educational concept that emphasizes the importance of acceptance and participation of all children, including those with special needs, in the general education environment. This concept reflects the spirit of equality and non-discrimination guaranteed by various national and international policies, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the National Education System Law in Indonesia. Inclusive education is also considered a strategic step to ensure fair and equitable access to education, especially for children with physical, mental, intellectual, or social disabilities.

Inclusive education is currently a government priority, focusing on efforts to integrate or incorporate children with special needs into the general education system (Ydesen & Daniels, 2024)^[19]. Inclusive education for children with special needs is an approach aimed at integrating them into the general education system. The primary goal is to ensure that all children, including those with special needs, have equal opportunities to learn and develop in a supportive and welcoming environment (Yang, Wang, & Xiu, 2025)^[18]. This aligns with the mandate of the 1945 Constitution, which states that education must be comprehensive and inclusive for all. Children with special needs or disabilities often experience social exclusion in society because they are considered unable to contribute to their group and the wider community. In reality, those born with special needs or disabilities are able to contribute with the assistance or support of their group and other members of the community who are otherwise normal. Inclusive education for children with special needs is a crucial step towards a more equitable and just education system (Woolfson, 2025)^[17]. Providing opportunities for all children to learn together not only helps them reach their full potential but also builds a more inclusive and respectful society. Inclusive means holistic, involving everyone without exception. In the context of education, inclusive education refers to an approach that treats students equally in all aspects of learning facilities. Students with special needs, including those with special needs and/or students from diverse cultural, ethnic, economic, social, and other backgrounds, can all learn

together in the same environment. Inclusive education refers to the practice of educating children with special needs in regular classes, rather than in separate schools or classes. This allows them to interact with their peers, gain access to the general curriculum, and participate in social activities together. Inclusive education is defined as an education system that does not discriminate against students and places students with special needs in regular or mainstream schools alongside students with disabilities.

Inclusive education has become a key agenda in global education development. The Salamanca Declaration (1994), adopted by UNESCO, affirms that inclusive education is the right of every child, regardless of their physical, mental, intellectual, or social conditions (Ainscow, Slee, & Best, 2019) ^[1]. This is supported by various international policies that focus on the importance of providing equal access to education for all children. One of the main objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to ensure inclusive and equitable education, as outlined in SDG 4, which mandates quality education for all. In Indonesia, inclusive education has become a top priority in national education policy. The government issued Ministerial Regulation No. 70 of 2009 concerning Inclusive Education, which stipulates that general schools accept students with special needs. The goal of inclusive education in Indonesia is to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, have access to an equal and supportive educational environment. However, despite the policy's implementation, challenges remain across regions, particularly in infrastructure, teacher training, and support for students with special needs. In recent years, the Indonesian government has been working to expand inclusive education, including at the senior high school level, to ensure that all students receive equal educational opportunities.

However, the implementation of inclusive education policies in Indonesian high schools has yet to receive attention from researchers. Yet, understanding the implementation of inclusive education policies is crucial to fostering public and government understanding and supporting equitable access to education for students with disabilities. Therefore, this study will examine the process of implementing inclusive education policies in high schools in Palu City, Indonesia, to contribute to academics and practitioners, particularly the government and other education providers.

2. Literature review

2.1 Public policy implementation

Public policy implementation is the stage at which decisions or plans formulated at the policymaking level are put into practice (Howlett, 2019; Linder & Peters, 1989) ^[4, 7]. This encompasses the process of implementing policies by government agencies and other relevant actors to achieve established objectives. Effective implementation is crucial to ensuring that policies deliver the desired results and positively impact society. Policy implementation involves various steps, including resource allocation, staff training, and monitoring and evaluation to ensure that policies are implemented as planned (Capone, 2025) ^[2]. Failure to implement can result in well-formulated

policies being ineffective or even counterproductive. The success of public policy implementation is influenced by various factors (Muthanna & Sang, 2023) ^[8], including:

- **Political factors:** Political stability and stakeholder support significantly influence policy implementation. Political support can facilitate the allocation of necessary budgets and resources, while political uncertainty can hinder policy implementation.
- **Economic factors:** The availability of financial resources is crucial for policy implementation. Policies requiring significant investment may be hampered if funding is unavailable. Furthermore, favorable economic conditions can increase support for a particular policy, while unfavorable conditions can lead to resistance.
- **Social factors:** Public perceptions and attitudes toward a policy also play a significant role. If the public supports a policy, implementation tends to be smoother. Conversely, if there is public resistance, implementation can face significant challenges.
- **Cultural factors:** Local culture and social norms can influence how a policy is received and implemented. Policies that are inconsistent with a community's cultural values may be difficult to implement, while policies that align with social norms are more likely to be well-received.

Furthermore, according to Shmagun, Shim, Kim, Choi, & Oppenheim (2023) ^[15], there are several models used to understand and analyze public policy implementation:

- **Top-down model:** This model emphasizes that policy implementation begins at the top level, namely, policymakers and government institutions. In this model, successful implementation depends heavily on leadership, clear instructions, and oversight from the central government. Proponents of this model argue that a clear hierarchical structure can strengthen the effectiveness of policy implementation.
- **Bottom-up model:** In contrast to the top-down model, this model emphasizes the importance of local-level actor participation in the implementation process. In this approach, successful implementation depends on how policies are received and implemented by individuals and communities. Proponents of this model argue that local community involvement can enhance policy implementation by providing constructive feedback and appropriate adjustments to the local context.
- **Combination model:** This model integrates elements of both approaches, recognizing that policy implementation requires collaboration between policymakers and implementers on the ground. This approach seeks to balance top-down and bottom-up influences, emphasizing communication and coordination among all parties involved in implementation. Public policy implementation is a crucial stage in the policy cycle that requires attention to various factors that influence its success.

2.2 The concept of inclusive education

To this day, it is believed that education improves a nation's quality. An educated nation is one that advances with relevant,

continuously evolving ideas. Education is truly impartial; it is a right for every citizen, regardless of their circumstances (Obiagu, 2024)^[12]. The state provides every citizen with equal access to education, from elementary school to higher education. In Islam, people with disabilities are often referred to as *dzawil ahat dzawil ihtiyaz al-khashah* or *dzawil a'dzar* (Kosim, Muqoddam, Mubarok, & Laila, 2023)^[5]. This term refers to people with limitations, special needs, or specific disabilities, as explained in Surah al-*Hujurat*, verse 9 of the Quran:

O people, indeed, we have created you from a man and a woman. Then we made you into nations and tribes so that you might know one another. Indeed, the noblest among you in the sight of Allah is the most pious one. Indeed, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Compliant (Q.S al-Hujurat [49]:13)^[1].

This verse explicitly affirms the existence of social equality between people with and without disabilities. Both must be treated equally and accepted with sincerity, without discrimination in social life. The concept of inclusive education is built on the foundation of equality. One of the rights of human beings and citizens of the Republic of Indonesia is to receive and experience proper schooling. Formal education is a program and policy created to manifest the government's concern for the nation's future generations and to serve as a forum to support children's development. It is a systematically designed platform that places learning at the core of the educational process. It is the right of every citizen, regardless of their circumstances, to receive education from elementary school to university, regardless of the uniqueness of each individual. Inclusive education then becomes a shared solution that enables children with special needs or differences to participate in and attend school together, enjoying the same rights as other children in public or regular schools. With inclusive education, it is hoped that equality and collaboration will be established that can improve the quality of learning, especially for children with special needs, and provide rich social experiences for children with normal conditions.

3. Methodology

This study uses qualitative methods. In qualitative research, the use of theory is only a guide data gathering and analysis (Nurdin & Pettalongi, 2022; Nurdin, Stockdale, & Scheepers, 2014)^[9, 11]. The data was collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and written document analysis at the research site (Rusli, Hasyim, & Nurdin, 2021; Rusli & Nurdin, 2022)^[13, 14]. The research was conducted in three public high schools in Palu. The researcher chose the location based on the consideration that the schools have a considerable number of disabled students. The results of this study can later serve as a reference and a guideline for building a peaceful life and for making these two schools a model for other educational institutions.

Data were collected through direct observation, focus group discussion, in-depth interviews, and written document analysis. The interviews involved three school principals, five teachers, and one staff member. The interviews were recorded and

transcribed. The results of the transcripts were consulted with the participants to obtain their consent (Nurdin, Scheepers, & Stockdale, 2022; Nurdin, Stockdale, & Scheepers, 2014)^[10, 11]. The data analysis technique used a deductive thinking technique, which can be interpreted as a research procedure that produces deductive data from the interviews and field notes. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis from Strauss and Corbin (1998). The analysis started with open, axial, and selective coding. The final result of the data analysis is the themes found from the data.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 The implementation of the inclusive education policy

Inclusive education is an integral part of national policy aimed at realizing a fair and equal education system that reaches all students without discrimination, including children with special needs (ABK). At the policy level, the government has established various regulations, such as Minister of Education and Culture Regulation Number 70 of 2009 and Law Number 8 of 2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities, which encourage all educational units, including Senior High Schools (SLTA), to develop inclusive education services. However, in Palu City the capital of Central Sulawesi Province the implementation of this policy presents dynamics that reflect not only technical readiness but also structural and cultural challenges. Based on observations and interviews at several senior high schools in Palu City, it was found that the implementation of the inclusive education policy is still in its early stages and does not fully meet the standards set by the national policy. Therefore, this sub-chapter will discuss in detail how the inclusive education policy is implemented in senior high schools in Palu City, covering the regulatory, technical, and sociocultural aspects that influence its implementation. The number of students with disabilities in the three schools that were the objects of this research is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Number of disabled students in senior high schools in Palu City

Grades	Number of students
10	17
11	9
12	14
Total	16

Source: Senior High Schools of Palu

The Central Sulawesi Provincial Education Office designated the school selected for this study as an inclusive education provider. Interviews with the principal and several teachers revealed that the school has been accepting students with disabilities and implementing an inclusive education program since 2017, as stipulated in a Governor's Regulation. The categories of disabilities generally accepted include slow learners, children with concentration difficulties, mild autism spectrum disorders, and some physical disabilities. Some of the policies implemented include:

a) Adaptation of teaching method for students with disability students

Inclusive policies in schools are implemented through curriculum adjustments. Teachers use differentiated learning strategies, such as providing simpler worksheets or additional time to complete assignments.

"We try to adapt learning methods to the child's abilities. For example, if they are typically slow learners, we simplify their School Card so they can adapt to the learning objectives."

Furthermore, parental support is crucial for the implementation of the inclusive policy at this school. However, their involvement varies; some actively assist, while others leave the responsibility entirely to the school. Inclusive education in Palu City schools is already underway and implemented in accordance with applicable policy guidelines. This is evident in the formation of a Special Teacher Assistance Team, which has specific duties and functions to assist inclusive students in learning at school. Schools designated to implement inclusive education are designated by decree. The Special Teacher Assistance Team consists of teachers who have received specific training in inclusive education and serve as representatives, sharing positive insights with other teachers and school staff about their understanding of inclusive education.

b) Providing inclusive classrooms

In addition to a dedicated team of teacher mentors to support the implementation of inclusive education, the schools also have a dedicated room called the Inclusion Room, which serves more than just a Guidance and Counseling (BK) room. This Inclusion Room serves as the GPK team's office and provides intensive support for students with special needs. In an interview with one informant regarding the inclusion room at the school, he stated the following:

"There is an inclusion room that is used, for example, if a subject teacher needs a place to provide special guidance to certain children, they can use this room. However, this room is still just a room. Learning aids are not yet available. So, we are just maximizing what is available here. It is also used for data collection and screening of students suspected of having disabilities."

However, the existing inclusion rooms are not properly equipped, such as the lack of psychological aids in the room that can be used when handling inclusive students who require special services. Nevertheless, the availability of inclusion rooms helps teachers minimize the handling of students with special needs. This was conveyed by the following informant:

"There was an incident where I was with Mrs. Dian. There was a student in the class who was in the tenth grade last year. He wouldn't come in and kept wandering around. So for a day, he was wandering around outside. He only wanted to talk to Mrs. Dian. So, I was called here, in this room, because I was with Mrs. Dian at the time. Then we talked, but I don't know what we were talking about. Basically, it was like being coaxed into coming into class. That's roughly how inclusion works."

The interviews revealed that the special inclusion teacher's room is operational. Still, the Teachers' Group itself has not provided a clear direction for inclusive guidance for students with special needs that can be clearly understood and comprehensively applied by other teachers. This situation is more related to a lack of internal socialization regarding inclusion itself.

c) Providing special trained teachers

Schools designated as pilot schools for implementing inclusive education have Special Assistant Teachers (GPK). The GPK is appointed directly by the Education Office, but the principal's appointment is a matter of school policy. Teachers even argue that the GPK's concrete actions are not yet clearly visible. Furthermore, regarding infrastructure, schools designated by the Education Office as role models for implementing inclusive education lack adequate facilities for students with special needs. There are no wheelchairs, minimal ramps, or special restrooms for students with special needs. Undeniably, inadequate infrastructure prevents inclusive students from being entirely accepted and served at the school. One informant further elaborated on this situation:

"For example, if a student with a severe disability is admitted to Senior High School Two, then they can submit a request to the Department of Special Education and Special Services to request a teacher and facilities. That's the rule. If that's the case, we coordinate with the Education Office."

From the interviews, it appears that special assistant teachers and infrastructure will be available if the school requests them from the Education Office when certain types of disabilities are present in the city of Palu.

d) Providing learning modules

Observations conducted during this research period revealed that inequities persist in the implementation of inclusive education in schools. This is evident in several aspects of its implementation, such as inadequate coordination within the special needs teacher support team. This conclusion was drawn from observations obtained when researchers requested data on children with special needs, which lacked standardized data collection, and each team lacked a common database. Data inequities also existed among other teachers. Each teacher requested data, in this case, the vice principal for student affairs and curriculum, who also has teaching duties and responsibilities, lacked valid data on the conditions and identities of children categorized as inclusive or with special needs.

Invalid data undoubtedly impacts the provision of enrichment and educational services to children with special needs. Furthermore, this was evident in the explanation of classroom learning conditions, where specific lesson plans were not developed to address the inclusive nature of the students.

"Our teaching modules are no different from others, as they're not evenly distributed across classes. For example, in tenth grade, there's no uniform distribution, which is probably why there aren't any teaching modules for inclusion. So, we're using the same learning methods for them."

4.2 Challenges in inclusive implementation

Inclusive education is an educational concept that allows children with special needs to attend school and receive the same education as other children without special needs in regular schools. The concept of inclusive education is well understood by educators and staff in all schools. Every teacher, and even non-teachers interviewed, demonstrated a strong understanding of inclusion, children with special needs, and how they integrate with their peers at school. Inclusion is not a new, unfamiliar term. However, in practice, teachers still lack a complete understanding of how to serve inclusive students properly. Teachers continue to employ monotonous teaching systems and techniques, seemingly neglecting children with special needs. According to the teachers interviewed, the most important thing is for these children to socialize well, as the school cannot meet their specific academic needs.

The implementation of inclusive education in all schools still faces several obstacles that impact its effectiveness. These obstacles stem from teacher perceptions, limited human resources, infrastructure, and stakeholder support. One major obstacle is teachers' perceptions of inclusion policies. Inclusive education is an educational concept in which children with special needs attend regular schools and receive the same education as other children, together in one room without discrimination. Several teachers stated that, while this policy is sound in principle, they feel unprepared to implement it. The main obstacle teachers encounter is the lack of in-depth training and outreach on how to treat students with special needs properly. One teacher stated:

"If it's a mild disability, it might be acceptable. But if it's more severe, it's difficult to access here because the facilities and infrastructure are inadequate. Even students' mild disabilities can't be handled, so they're left wandering around during class time."

The informants' opinions above indicate a normatively supportive attitude, but this is not accompanied by adequate infrastructure and pedagogical skills. Other teachers even emphasized that dealing with students with disabilities is difficult for most teachers to grasp. One informant stated:

"How to implement, how to understand, and how to apply it? What methods should we employ? Training is not comprehensive. However, there is training through PMM."

The lack of structured training for students with special needs has led teachers to teach only within their existing abilities. The challenges that arise are more specific to vocational learning. Practicing teachers, for example, stated that the demand for technical skills makes it challenging to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities, as one informant said:

"In any school, regardless of the type of disability, due to inclusion, we cannot refuse. However, during admissions, there will be an interview. We will certainly inform parents about whether children who cannot speak are suitable. While we are in Tourism or Hospitality, we will discuss how they will serve them. For example, if they are in Beauty, how will they ask their clients? So, they are given an understanding."

Students with special needs are also not allowed to participate in internships outside of school. This is due to concerns that they might make mistakes that could have fatal consequences. Students who pursue specialized industries, such as hospitality, will only practice within the school environment under limited conditions and with special supervision.

In addition to teacher perceptions, limited human resources are a significant obstacle. None of the three schools studied had a dedicated support teacher (GPK), whose primary function is to provide special support to students with special needs. Each school's teaching staff consisted of only general studies or specialized subject teachers, with none from special education or special education backgrounds. This situation undoubtedly impacted how students' situations were handled in the classroom. If a student encountered a problem, it would be handled directly by the guidance and counseling teacher.

There were no dedicated support teachers for students with special needs, who naturally possess the knowledge and concepts necessary for their academic competence. Another obstacle identified was inadequate infrastructure and a lack of inclusion-friendly support. Furthermore, there was a lack of stakeholder support. Parents of children with special needs were often passive, simply handing their children over to school without intensive communication. Analysis of these findings indicates that the obstacles to implementing inclusion in high schools in Palu City are not only technical but also cultural. Ambivalent teacher perceptions, limited human resources and facilities, and weak stakeholder support indicate that the scaffolding that should support inclusive learning remains very weak. From the perspective of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, this obstacle means that social interactions and environmental support that should optimize children's development in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) have not been running adequately.

5. Conclusion

Based on interviews and observations at several schools, the formal implementation of inclusive education policies is already underway. Schools have accepted students with special needs (ABK) in accordance with the principles of inclusive education as stipulated in Ministerial Regulation No. 70 of 2009. However, this implementation is primarily administrative in nature and has not addressed the technical aspects of inclusive learning.

This aligns with teachers' findings that the curriculum remains uniform for all students, without significant modifications. Teachers struggle to adapt teaching strategies for students with disabilities, and local government support is limited to written regulations, not structured programs. Furthermore, most principals and teachers do not fully understand the laws and regulations governing inclusive education, such as Ministerial Regulation No. 70 of 2009 concerning Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities and Potential for Special Talents. Another challenge is that many schools still lack concrete technical guidelines for implementing inclusive policies, resulting in improvisational and inconsistent implementation. According to Thomas R. Dye, public policy is "what the

government chooses to do or not to do." In the context of Palu City, the government has chosen to implement an inclusion policy, but at the implementation level, there is still "non-action" (not fully implemented), for example, the absence of a special budget, monitoring, and teacher support programs.

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