



Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of Disability Friendly Learning in Inclusive Classrooms

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: February 18, 2025

Revised: March 24, 2025

Accepted: April 23, 2025

Keywords:

Disability Friendly Learning;
Inclusive Education;
Inclusive Pedagogy;
Teacher Perception;
Universal Design for Learning.

Abstract

Background: Inclusive education emphasizes equitable participation for students with disabilities within regular classrooms through adaptive pedagogy, accessible environments, and collaborative learning culture. Although inclusive policies have expanded globally, many schools continue to struggle with translating disability-friendly principles into sustainable classroom practices, particularly in resource-limited contexts where teachers rely on empathy and intuitive adaptation.

Aims: This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of disability-friendly learning implementation in inclusive primary classrooms and to identify pedagogical, relational, and institutional factors influencing inclusive practice.

Methods: A qualitative case study was conducted at a public primary school involving two classroom teachers and one principal selected purposively. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns of accessibility, instructional adaptation, interaction dynamics, and institutional support.

Result: The findings indicate that teachers demonstrated strong empathy and adaptive strategies; however, inclusive practice remained constrained by limited infrastructure, insufficient professional training, absence of specialist support, and reliance on intuitive instructional adjustments rather than structured pedagogical frameworks.

Conclusion: Disability-friendly learning emerges as a dynamic process shaped by teacher agency, collaborative school culture, and systemic readiness, highlighting the need for sustainable professional development, accessible learning design, and policy alignment to foster meaningful participation.

To cite this article: Rakhman, N. A. (2025). Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of Disability Friendly Learning in Inclusive Classrooms. *SHINE: Journal of Special Needs, Holistic Interventions, and Neurodiversity in Education*, 1(1), 30-37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.xxxx/shine.v1i1.xx>

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is grounded in the fundamental principle that every learner, regardless of physical, cognitive, emotional, or social differences, has an equal right to participate meaningfully in education. Rather than merely integrating students with disabilities into regular classrooms, inclusive education requires systemic transformation in instructional design, learning environments, assessment practices, and professional support to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students. Recent global discourse emphasizes that inclusion is not a placement issue, but a pedagogical and ethical commitment to recognizing learner diversity as a strength rather than a limitation (Ainscow, 2020).

In primary education settings, the successful implementation of inclusive learning is closely linked to teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and professional readiness. Teachers play a central role in translating inclusive policies into daily classroom practices, shaping how learning activities are adapted, how students are supported, and how differences are negotiated within classroom

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interactions. Empirical studies indicate that teachers' perceptions significantly influence their instructional decisions, willingness to differentiate learning, and confidence in managing diverse classrooms (De Boer et al., 2018). When teachers perceive inclusion as manageable and meaningful, they are more likely to adopt flexible strategies and foster inclusive classroom climates.

However, research across various educational contexts shows that teachers often experience tensions between inclusive ideals and practical realities. Limited professional training, lack of assistive resources, insufficient institutional support, and unclear implementation guidelines frequently constrain teachers' capacity to enact disability-friendly learning in inclusive classrooms (Sokal et al., 2020). These constraints may lead teachers to rely on intuitive or generalized instructional approaches rather than evidence-based inclusive pedagogy, potentially reducing the effectiveness of inclusion for students with disabilities.

In developing countries, including Indonesia, these challenges are often intensified by infrastructural limitations and uneven access to professional development. Although inclusive education policies have been formally established, their implementation at the school level remains inconsistent. Studies conducted in Southeast Asian contexts highlight that inclusive practices are frequently shaped by teachers' personal experiences rather than systematic institutional frameworks, resulting in varied interpretations of disability-friendly learning (Sharma et al., 2018). This situation underscores the importance of examining teachers' lived experiences to understand how inclusion is enacted in real classroom settings.

Moreover, inclusive classrooms are not solely academic spaces but also social environments where interaction patterns significantly affect students' participation and well-being. Research demonstrates that meaningful inclusion requires intentional efforts to promote positive teacher-student relationships, peer interaction, and emotional safety for students with disabilities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2019). Without structured strategies to facilitate interaction and participation, students with disabilities may remain physically present yet socially marginalized within inclusive classrooms. Given these considerations, exploring teachers' perceptions of disability-friendly learning provides valuable insight into both the strengths and limitations of inclusive education implementation. Understanding how teachers interpret inclusive principles, navigate constraints, and adapt their instructional practices is essential for developing responsive policies and support systems.

Therefore, this study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of the implementation of disability-friendly learning in inclusive primary classrooms, focusing on instructional practices, interaction patterns, and institutional support. By capturing teachers' voices within their authentic educational context, this research seeks to contribute to a more grounded and human-centered understanding of inclusive education in practice.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore inclusive education practices within a real-life school context. A case study approach allows researchers to examine complex educational phenomena holistically, capturing interactions between instructional practices, institutional conditions, and participant perspectives (Meyer, 2020). This design was considered suitable because inclusive education is deeply contextual and shaped by local policies, resources, and professional experiences. By focusing on a single school, the study aimed to generate a nuanced understanding of how inclusive education is enacted in everyday practice.

Participant

The participants in this study were three key informants selected purposively to provide in-depth insights into the implementation of inclusive education at a public primary school in Central Java, Indonesia. The participants consisted of two classroom teachers and one school principal who were directly involved in daily inclusive educational practices. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience and firsthand knowledge of inclusive classroom implementation. This approach is appropriate in qualitative research where depth of understanding and contextual richness is prioritized over representativeness (Hennink et al., 2020). All participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study and were informed about the purpose and ethical considerations of the research.

Instrument

Data were collected using two primary instruments: an observation guide and a semi-structured interview protocol. The observation guide focused on key aspects of inclusive education, including physical accessibility, teaching methods, teacher–student interaction, student–student interaction, and available support resources. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding inclusive practices. This flexible interview format enabled participants to express their views freely while ensuring consistency across interviews. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized as effective for capturing rich, experience-based data in educational research (Kallio et al., 2016).

Procedures

Data collection was conducted over one full school day in June 2025. Observations were carried out during classroom learning activities and informal school routines to capture authentic inclusive practices. Following the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher maintained a reflective stance to minimize bias and to respect participants' professional and personal experiences. Ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and respect were strictly upheld during all stages of the research process (Tracy, 2020).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic analysis approach. The process involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, and interpretation. This method allows researchers to identify meaningful patterns while remaining attentive to context and participant voice (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Coding was conducted iteratively, moving between data segments and emerging themes to ensure analytical depth. To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher applied strategies such as prolonged engagement with the data, careful documentation of analytic decisions, and alignment between findings and raw data. Reflexive thematic analysis supports interpretive rigor while acknowledging the researcher's active role in meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on classroom observations and in-depth interviews with two key informants, Mr. KI, and Mr. JSA, who are directly involved in implementing disability-friendly learning in inclusive classrooms. The results are organized into several thematic sub-sections to reflect the actual practices, experiences, and challenges encountered by teachers in their daily instructional context.

Classroom observations revealed that the school environment had not yet been fully designed to accommodate the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Physical accessibility remained limited, as classrooms lacked ramps, tactile guidance, visual markers, or assistive auditory devices. These conditions constrained the mobility and independence of students with physical and sensory impairments, requiring teachers to provide additional assistance during routine activities.

Mr. KI acknowledged these limitations and expressed concern about their impact on students' participation: *"We realize that the facilities are still not friendly enough for children with disabilities. Ideally, there should be ramps and special signs, but the school has not been able to provide them yet."*

Despite these infrastructural constraints, teachers attempted to compensate through adaptive classroom management. Seating arrangements were modified so that students with special needs could sit closer to the teacher, allowing for easier monitoring, guidance, and emotional reassurance during learning activities.

Mr. JSA emphasized that teachers often relied on personal initiative to address environmental barriers: *"Because the facilities are limited, we adjust what we can in the classroom. At least the children feel noticed and supported, even if the environment is not ideal."*

In summary, while physical accessibility had not been prioritized institutionally, teachers demonstrated awareness and empathy by making small, practical adjustments to create a more inclusive and emotionally safe learning space. The findings indicate that teachers implemented disability-friendly learning primarily through flexible and intuitive instructional strategies. Lesson delivery was adapted by simplifying instructions, allowing extended time for task completion, and modifying learning materials to match students' abilities. However, these adaptations were not always based on formal guidelines or structured pedagogical frameworks.

Mr. KI reflected on this practice by stating: *"We try to adjust the lessons as best as we can, but honestly, we don't have clear guidelines. Most of the time, we rely on experience and instinct."* Teachers frequently used visual aids, concrete objects, and repetition to support students' understanding. Learning activities were adjusted on the spot, depending on students' responses and emotional readiness. While this approach reflected care and responsiveness, it also indicated a reliance on improvisation rather than systematic differentiation.

Similarly, Mr. JSA highlighted the challenges of adapting instruction without sufficient training: *"I want to teach them properly, but I'm still learning how to handle different types of needs. Sometimes I'm not sure whether the strategy I use is appropriate"*. Overall, the results suggest that teachers demonstrated strong commitment and flexibility in adapting instruction, yet the absence of structured training and instructional models limited the consistency and effectiveness of disability-friendly curriculum implementation.

Observations showed that teacher–student interactions were generally warm, supportive, and emotionally responsive. Teachers frequently provided encouragement, stayed close to students who appeared confused, and offered individual assistance during tasks. These interactions fostered a sense of security and acceptance for students with special needs.

Mr. KI described his approach to supporting students emotionally: *"I usually stay longer with children who need more attention. I don't want them to feel left behind or ignored."* However, while emotional support was evident, instructional assistance tended to remain general rather than individualized. Support was often based on immediate classroom observations instead of a structured understanding of students' specific learning profiles.

Mr. JSA openly acknowledged this limitation: *"I help them with patience, but I still don't fully understand the best way to support each child. Sometimes I'm afraid of making mistakes."* In conclusion, teacher–student interactions reflected empathy and care, yet the lack of pedagogical competence and professional guidance constrained teachers' ability to provide targeted and individualized instructional support.

Interactions among students were generally positive and inclusive in terms of social acceptance. Students with special needs were not excluded from classroom activities and were treated respectfully by their peers. During group activities and break times, students interacted naturally without overt discrimination.

Mr. KI observed this positive social climate: *"So far, the other students treat them well. They play together and don't intentionally exclude them."* However, participation by students with special needs was often passive. They were present in group activities but rarely initiated interaction or took active roles. The absence of structured peer-support programs limited opportunities for meaningful collaboration and social skill development.

Mr. JSA noted this challenge clearly: *"We don't have special programs to train other students to accompany or collaborate actively with children with special needs."* Thus, although social acceptance was present, the findings indicate that meaningful inclusion requires deliberate strategies to foster active participation and reciprocal peer interaction.

The study found that institutional support for inclusive education was limited. The school did not employ shadow teachers or specialized staff, and most teachers had not received formal training related to disability-friendly instruction. Assistive learning tools such as Braille books, visual communication boards, or digital supports were also unavailable.

Mr. KI highlighted budgetary constraints as a major issue: *"Our biggest obstacle is funding. Training for teachers is rarely provided, and we must manage on our own."* This lack of resources placed a heavy burden on teachers, who were expected to handle diverse learning needs independently.

Mr. JSA reinforced this concern by stating: *"If there were assistant teachers, it would be much easier. Right now, we do everything ourselves."* In summary, insufficient institutional support emerged

as a significant barrier to the effective implementation of disability-friendly learning. The absence of trained personnel, learning aids, and continuous professional development limited teachers' capacity to translate inclusive ideals into sustainable classroom practices

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of inclusive education in the observed primary school reflects a meaningful commitment at the attitudinal level yet remains constrained at the structural and pedagogical levels. Across the five observed aspects, facility accessibility, curriculum and teaching methods, teacher–student interaction, student–student interaction, and institutional support, the results suggest that inclusion is largely driven by teachers' empathy and moral responsibility rather than by systematic institutional readiness.

First, limited physical accessibility indicates that inclusive education has not yet been fully integrated into school infrastructure planning. The absence of ramps, accessible toilets, and assistive classroom features reflects a broader pattern observed in many low- and middle-income contexts, where inclusion policies advance faster than infrastructural transformation. Recent studies emphasize that inaccessible environments not only restrict mobility but also symbolically marginalize students with disabilities by reinforcing dependency and exclusion (Graham et al., 2018). Teachers' awareness of these limitations, as expressed in the interviews, demonstrates ethical sensitivity; however, without institutional investment, such awareness cannot translate into equitable participation.

Second, findings related to curriculum and teaching methods highlight a critical gap between teachers' inclusive intentions and their pedagogical capacity. While teachers provided additional time and informal adjustments, instruction largely remained generalized, and intuition based. This aligns with research showing that inclusive practices often rely on compensatory strategies rather than structured differentiation when teachers lack formal preparation in inclusive pedagogy (Schwab, 2019). Without access to evidence-based frameworks for differentiated instruction, teachers may unintentionally reproduce exclusion through well-meaning but insufficient adaptations.

Third, teacher–student interactions were characterized by warmth, patience, and emotional responsiveness. These relational strengths are a crucial foundation for inclusive education, as positive teacher–student relationships have been shown to enhance engagement and emotional security for students with disabilities (Zee & Koomen, 2016). However, the findings also indicate that emotional support was not accompanied by individualized instructional scaffolding. This suggests that empathy alone, while essential, does not guarantee pedagogical effectiveness in inclusive classrooms, particularly when teachers lack diagnostic tools to understand diverse learning profiles.

Fourth, student–student interactions reflected social acceptance but limited active participation by students with special needs. Although peers did not engage in overt exclusion, the absence of structured peer-support mechanisms resulted in passive inclusion. Recent literature distinguishes between social presence and social participation, emphasizing that meaningful inclusion requires intentional facilitation of peer collaboration and shared responsibility (Bossaert et al., 2020). Without guided interaction, students with disabilities risk becoming socially invisible despite being physically included.

Finally, insufficient institutional support emerged as a central barrier across all dimensions. The lack of trained support staff, assistive learning tools, and sustained professional development placed a disproportionate burden on classroom teachers. Studies consistently demonstrate that inclusive education is most effective when supported by coordinated systems involving school leadership, specialized personnel, and ongoing professional learning communities (Deppeler et al., 2021). In the absence of such systems, inclusion becomes dependent on individual resilience rather than collective capacity.

Overall, these findings underscore that inclusive education is not solely a pedagogical challenge but a systemic one. Teachers' goodwill and commitment provide an important starting point; however, sustainable inclusion requires alignment between policy, infrastructure, professional development, and classroom practice. Strengthening this alignment is essential to ensure that students with disabilities are not only present in schools, but are genuinely supported to learn, participate, and flourish within inclusive educational environments.

Taken together, the findings suggest that disability friendly learning in inclusive classrooms should be understood as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between teachers' empathy,

pedagogical competence, and institutional support. While teachers demonstrated strong ethical commitment and adaptive responses to students' needs, sustainable inclusion requires a gradual transition from intuitive practice toward more structured and reflective pedagogical frameworks. In this sense, inclusive education is not only about accommodating difference, but about cultivating collaborative learning environments where participation is intentionally facilitated through accessible design, professional learning, and shared responsibility among educators and school leaders. By bridging personal initiative with systemic support, inclusive classrooms can move beyond symbolic acceptance toward meaningful engagement, allowing students with special needs to develop agency, confidence, and a genuine sense of belonging within the educational community.

Implications

The findings of this study carry significant pedagogical, institutional, and policy implications for strengthening disability-friendly learning in inclusive primary classrooms. At the pedagogical level, the results emphasize that empathy and positive teacher attitudes, while essential, must be complemented by structured professional knowledge and evidence-based inclusive instructional frameworks. Schools should therefore prioritize continuous professional development programs that equip teachers with strategies for differentiated instruction, individualized scaffolding, and collaborative classroom management. Institutionally, the lack of accessible infrastructure and specialist support highlights the need for coordinated school planning that integrates inclusive principles into physical design, resource allocation, and long-term strategic development. From a broader policy perspective, inclusive education should move beyond symbolic compliance toward sustainable investment in training, assistive technologies, and collaborative partnerships among teachers, school leaders, families, and local education authorities to ensure meaningful participation for all learners.

Research Contribution

This study contributes to the growing discourse on inclusive education by providing a nuanced, contextually grounded analysis of teachers' perceptions of disability-friendly learning within an authentic classroom environment. Unlike many studies that focus primarily on policy evaluation or quantitative indicators, this research foregrounds teachers' lived experiences and reflective practices, offering deeper insight into how inclusive principles are negotiated within everyday teaching realities. By integrating analysis across accessibility, instructional adaptation, interpersonal interaction, and institutional support, the study presents inclusion as a dynamic relational process rather than a static pedagogical model. Furthermore, the findings extend existing theoretical discussions by illustrating how teacher agency interacts with systemic constraints, thereby enriching contemporary understandings of sustainable inclusive pedagogy in resource-limited educational settings.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single school context with a small number of participants, which may limit the transferability of findings to other educational environments with different socio-cultural or institutional characteristics. The qualitative case study design prioritizes depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization, and therefore the findings should be interpreted as context-specific insights. Additionally, the perspectives of students with disabilities and their peers were not directly explored, which restricts a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive participation from multiple viewpoints. The relatively short duration of observation also limits the capacity to capture long-term developments in teacher professional growth and institutional change.

Suggestions

Future research is encouraged to adopt multi-site or comparative designs to examine how inclusive education policies are implemented across diverse school contexts and resource conditions. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insight into how teacher efficacy, professional learning, and institutional support evolve over time and influence inclusive outcomes. Researchers are also encouraged to incorporate the perspectives of students with disabilities, parents, and peer groups to

enrich the relational dimension of inclusion. From a practical standpoint, future investigations may explore the integration of adaptive technologies, peer-mediated learning strategies, and universal design learning frameworks to strengthen participation and autonomy among students with special needs. Such directions can help bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities while advancing inclusive education toward more humane, sustainable, and context-responsive educational practices.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the expectations articulated in the Introduction regarding the importance of understanding teachers' perceptions and experiences in implementing disability-friendly learning are meaningfully reflected in the Results and Discussion. The findings reveal that inclusive practices in the observed primary school are shaped by teachers' empathy, adaptive strategies, and commitment to supporting students with diverse needs, yet remain constrained by limited infrastructure, insufficient professional preparation, and restricted institutional support. This alignment between the initial research aims and empirical findings confirms that inclusive education is not merely a policy aspiration, but a complex process negotiated within real classroom contexts. The Results and Discussion highlight that teachers' intuitive adjustments and relational strengths provide an important foundation for inclusion; however, sustainable disability-friendly learning requires a transition from individual initiative toward structured pedagogical frameworks and systemic collaboration. Inclusive education therefore emerges as a collective endeavor that integrates accessible environments, differentiated instructional practices, and continuous professional development. These findings extend current discussions by emphasizing that meaningful inclusion depends not only on attitudinal readiness but also on the integration of pedagogical competence and institutional commitment. Looking forward, the study opens opportunities for the development of more context-responsive inclusive education models that combine reflective teaching practices with collaborative school leadership and policy alignment. Future research may explore longitudinal changes in teacher efficacy, the integration of universal design for learning, and the role of peer-mediated support in strengthening participation. Practically, the findings provide guidance for educators and policymakers to design humane, sustainable, and culturally responsive inclusive learning environments. Ultimately, this research affirms that inclusive education becomes transformative when ethical commitment is supported by structured practice, enabling students with disabilities to participate meaningfully and develop a strong sense of belonging within the educational community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author sincerely extends appreciation to the adaptive physical education teachers for their openness, cooperation, and generous time throughout the research process. Gratitude is also conveyed to the principal of the public primary school in Central Java for granting permission and providing a supportive environment that enabled meaningful data collection.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

NR conceptualized the research focus, designed the qualitative case study framework, and conducted data collection through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. NR performed data coding, thematic interpretation, and methodological validation to ensure analytical rigor and alignment with inclusive education principles. NR prepared the original manuscript draft, conducted critical revisions to strengthen theoretical coherence and clarity of argumentation, and approved the final version of the article for publication. The author assumes full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and ethical standards of the research process and the scholarly contribution presented in this manuscript.

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