



Teacher Strategies in the Potential Optimization of Children with Special Needs in Elementary School

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ABSTRAK

Implementasi pendidikan inklusi di Indonesia selama ini masih banyak menyisakan berbagai persoalan baik berkaitan dengan akses terhadap pendidikan, perlakuan yang diskriminatif, hingga keterbatasan sumber daya yang kompeten dalam menyelenggarakan pendidikan inklusi. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian terhadap strategi guru dalam optimalisasi potensi individu anak berkebutuhan khusus di sekolah dasar. Studi ini bertujuan untuk memperoleh informasi tentang strategi guru dalam optimalisasi potensi individu peserta didik inklusi di tengah keterbatasan guru yang berkompeten, kemampuan guru dalam adaptasi kurikulum, hingga kualitas dan kompetensi guru yang tidak memiliki latar belakang pendidikan luar biasa. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dan pendekatan studi kasus. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan observasi dan wawancara terhadap kepala sekolah, guru kelas, guru bidang studi, dan siswa ABK di sekolah dasar di Kabupaten Bengkalis, Riau. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa strategi yang dilakukan oleh guru dalam mengadaptasi kondisi yang terbatas sesuai kebutuhannya sangat penting dilakukan sebagai upaya sekolah memberikan pelayanan maksimal bagi peserta didik inklusi. Dalam beberapa hal, pengetahuan guru terhadap metode yang sudah lama mapan seperti IEP dan TEACCH belum dapat diimplementasikan di sekolah, namun demikian setiap langkah dan prosesnya tetap dapat dilakukan dengan pendekatan yang disesuaikan dengan kemampuan sekolah. Langkah itu berupa proses asesmen, komunikasi dengan orang tua, pengembangan tujuan pendidikan, metode dan prosedur pembelajaran, materi pembelajaran, waktu dan target capaian, dan evaluasi. Di samping itu, ketersediaan guru pendamping khusus juga merupakan syarat mutlak yang perlu dipenuhi oleh sekolah agar dapat mengelola program dengan baik.

ABSTRACT

The implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia is facing various challenges, including issues with access to education, discriminatory treatment, and a lack of competent resources to implement inclusive education. Strategies employed by teachers to optimize the potential of children with special needs in elementary school were discussed. Therefore, this research aimed to ascertain information regarding teachers' strategies in optimizing the potential of inclusive students, despite the constraints posed by competent teachers, curriculum adaptability, and the quality and competency of teachers without special education background. Furthermore, this research used qualitative methods and a case study approach. Data collection was carried out by observing and interviewing school principals, class teachers, subject teachers, and students with special needs in elementary schools in Bengkalis Regency, Riau. The research concluded that strategies used by teachers in adapting to these limitations are crucial in providing optimal services to inclusive students. In some aspects, teachers' knowledge of well-established methods such as IEP and TEACCH cannot be fully implemented in school. However, every step and process was carried out with a method adjusted to the capabilities of school. These steps included assessment processes, communication with parents, development of educational goals, learning methods and procedures, learning materials, timeframes, achievement targets, and evaluation. Additionally, the availability of special support teachers was an essential requirement to effectively manage the inclusive education program.

1. INTRODUCTION

The demand for and access to inclusive education in Indonesia has been on the rise (de Bruin, 2019). However, it has not met the minimum standard for needs of children with special needs (CSN) (Saniya et al., 2020). Since the awareness for inclusive education emerged with the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (Ainscow et al., 2019; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2022; Nilholm, 2021), UNESCO has raised global awareness about the importance of educational equality for children with special needs. This was emphasized by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 (Pit-Ten Cate et al., 2018). However, the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2021 reported that only 12.26 % of children with special needs have access to appropriate education, and approximately 3.3 % are spread across 2,017 school. The implementation of inclusive education faces various challenges (Fitra et al., 2023). Children with special needs often experience discrimination (Damayanti et al., 2017), isolation, and labeling (Morgan et al., 2023), and are not treated equally as their typically developing peers (Yunita et al., 2019). Additionally, children with special needs are mandated to attend segregated school and are not permitted to enroll in mainstream school (Mulat, 2020). Challenges arise in inclusive school services (Chairunnisa & Rismita, 2022), such as parental or community rejection, violence and abuse against children with special needs, a lack of competent support teachers, teachers' ability to adapt the curriculum (Putri & Ain, 2022), and suboptimal learning experiences (Nilholm, 2021; Setiawan et al., 2020). The imperative to improve the quality of teachers in effectively managing inclusive classrooms does not align with the current reality in the field. Strategies used to maximize the potential of inclusive students in school are impeded by the competence and proficiency of teachers who lack a background in special education (Warman, 2021), as well as insufficient training (Bertills et al., 2019). School cannot refuse to admit children with special needs due to their moral responsibility as educational institutions and the limited availability of official inclusive education school (Sugiarto, 2019). Therefore, teachers' ability (Kurniawati & Siti Mariyam, 2022; Ningsih & Suyatno, 2023) to quickly adapt and modify inclusive education models becomes crucial (Baum et al., 2021).

In practice, different programs and strategies have been implemented to support children with special needs, including Individualized Educational Programs (IEP) (Çikılı & Ünal, 2022; Mueller et al., 2019; Wong & Mohd Rashid, 2022), initiated by Samuel Gridley Howe in 1871 (Arriani et al., 2021), and TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children) for children with autism (Ardianingsih, Ashar, & Wijastuti, 2023; Eftekhari, Muslim & Irvan, 2023). Other methods have also been developed, such as Communication Oriented (Dee-Price et al., 2021), Task Analysis (Kim & Fienup, 2022), Direct Instruction (Eratay, 2020), and Prompts (Bibi et al., 2019). However, it is essential to recognize that not all teachers are acquainted with or have researched these specialized programs and methods. Due to these limitations, they are compelled to adapt and seek out strategies suited to their unique circumstances in the field.

This research endeavors to investigate teachers' strategies aimed at maximizing the potential of children with special needs in elementary school, despite inherent limitations in accessing resources, knowledge, and supportive facilities. Ideally, education for ABK in public schools is assisted by a special companion teacher who is professional and has an extraordinary educational background. Schools also prepare good facilities to create a positive climate and parents also get good knowledge concerning the program prepared. However, in the absence of special accompanying teachers, qualified support facilities, and unorganized programs, teachers are required to be creative and innovative in creating inclusive classrooms. Specifically, the research delves into the strategic processes underpinning the creation of learning programs, encompassing different aspects such as the steps, assessment procedures, formulation of educational objectives, description of learning services, as well as the timing, duration, and evaluation of the learning process. Concerning parental involvement, the research seeks to reinforce and build on previous findings (Foteini et al., 2023; Gedfie et al., 2021; Mueller & Vick, 2019) regarding the importance of parental roles in education.

2. METHOD

A qualitative method was employed with a case research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to gather information on teachers' strategies for the potential optimization of inclusive students. The procedures included preparation stages, which consisted of a literature review, initial observation, problem identification and formulation, analysis of relevant examinations, research design, and preparation of instruments. The next stage was fieldwork, which involved direct observation, interviews, documentation, and in-depth research on the collected data. The collected data were subjected to thorough processing during the data analysis stage and the phase involved data reduction, data presentation, data analysis, discussion, conclusion, and validation of data integrity. Data collection included face-to-face interviews with participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which involved school principal, classroom teachers, and subject

teachers. Direct observation was conducted on the research site, while documentation was gathered from different sources or documents available to the respondents (Sugiyono, 2019), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Instrument

Phenomenon Examined	Aspects Examined	Indicators	Data Sources
Teacher strategies in the potential optimization of inclusive students.	Strategic processes in adapting to suitable programs and methods.	1. Initial assessment of children 2. Communication with parents 3. Development of short-term and long-term goals 4. Designing learning methods and procedures 5. Determining learning materials 6. Timeframes and achievement targets 7. Evaluation	Interviews Observations Documentation

The data analysis technique used is based on the interactive and continuous analysis technique of Miles and Huberman, continuing until data saturation is achieved. The analysis process involves four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2020).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This research was conducted in elementary school in Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province. Specifically, there were only 5 school that have been granted permission to implement inclusive education, scattered across 3 districts on Bengkalis Island (Yasmita et al., 2022). This caused difficulty for mainland Bengkalis residents to access inclusive education services, despite the higher population density on the mainland. This situation was exacerbated by the lack of competent teacher resources. One important component in improving quality education services for children with special needs was strategies used to optimize the potential of these children. In contrast, school cannot refuse to admit children with special needs since they are morally obligated as educational institutions to treat all children equally. From this research, teachers in school try to innovate and obtain strategies to improve the learning process for inclusive students. This started with an assessment of the students, formulating information, setting criteria, creating learning plans and objectives, designing methods and procedures, and conducting evaluations. These steps were conducted despite facing certain limitations, including a restricted familiarity with well-established conceptual models, theories, and methods, limited training on inclusive education for students with special needs, and the absence of dedicated special teacher assistants in school. Some aspects of the process may not have been fully optimized, but there is a gradual progression toward embracing knowledge, awareness, and professionalism among teachers, contributing to the ongoing development of more comprehensive programs.

The research on teacher strategies in the potential optimization of children with special needs in elementary school can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Results

Strategic Process Indicators	Problem	Teacher Strategies
1. Initial assessment of children	- Lack of specific assessment methods	- Assessment is conducted by observing children's condition in the first 3 months of the education process at school - Determining the type and criteria of special needs of children to provide specific treatment
2. Communication with parents	- Parents reject their children being labeled as special needs - Limited understanding of parents about their	- Building good communication with parents - Providing an understanding of children's condition to parents - Requesting parents to accompany children's learning activities at home

Strategic Process Indicators	Problem	Teacher Strategies
3. Development of short-term and long-term goals	children's initial condition - Parents fully rely children on school Development of learning plans is conditional and case research	- Requesting parents to provide special teacher assistants if possible Development of learning plans is conditional and case research
4. Designing learning methods and procedures	- Limited knowledge of teaching patterns for children with special needs - Limited training on children with special needs - Limited enjoyable learning media - Absence of special teacher assistants	- Personal method to children with special needs - Arranging seating positions of students to encourage socialization - Creating research groups - Finding solutions to students' needs and difficulties - Providing motivation and instilling positive affirmations - Giving appreciation and praise - Creating enjoyable learning media - Providing additional lessons and services outside the classroom
5. Determining learning materials	- No specific curriculum	- Learning materials are the same as other students, but the achievement targets are adjusted to the child's needs, such as writing, reading, basic math, and arithmetic skills.
6. Timeframes and achievement targets	- No specific timeframes and targets	- Timeframes and achievement targets are adjusted to the child's difficulty level. - For children with learning difficulties, the target is to understand general subjects - For children with speech delay, the target is to develop speech
7. Evaluation	- No reference assessment because of the lack of reference criteria - Cannot perform continuous and comprehensive assessments due to the absence of special teacher assistants	- No general minimum competency standards are applied - Special report cards based on children's difficulty level - Assessment of attitudes inside and outside the classroom.

In the context of the initial assessment of children, school lacks specific assessment models such as IEP or TEACCH. This is because school is not formally designated as an institution for inclusive education. As part of their method, teachers diligently observe the condition of each child during the initial one to three months of the education process, identifying the type and criteria of any special needs. Following this observation period, teacher prepares a comprehensive report for submission to school principal, who initiates necessary actions. It is the judgment of school principal that determines whether children necessitate special treatment, effectively communicated to the parents or guardians involved.

After school has ascertained the specific type and criteria of the child's special needs, communication with the parents is initiated to foster an in-depth understanding of the child's condition. This communication is conducted tactfully and persuasively to avoid any unintentional offense to the parents. During this process, it is common for parents to exhibit reluctance in acknowledging that their child has special needs, citing different reasons. Moreover, parents may possess limited knowledge regarding the various types and criteria associated with children with special needs, restricting their familiarity to only autism-related conditions. After obtaining parental consent, school proceeds to design specialized program tailored to suit the child's needs. As part of this collaborative effort, school kindly requests the parents' active involvement in supporting the child's learning at home. In some instances, school may also seek the

parents' cooperation in providing special teacher assistant to aid the progress of the child. Following the acquisition of parental consent, the next crucial step involves school formulating short-term and long-term goals for educational development. In certain cases, this important phase is overlooked, and some school directly proceed to design learning methods and procedures without comprehensive planning. Consequently, the absence of well-organized documentation and an approved curriculum led to a more casuistic method to implementing service programs.

The methods and learning processes for inclusive students vary and demand innovation from teachers. Some common problems include limited knowledge about the learning patterns of children with special needs, lack of training, scarcity of enjoyable learning media, and the absence of special teacher assistants. To address these challenges, several strategies are implemented, such as the personal method to students, arranging seating positions to promote socialization with other peers, creating research groups, finding solutions to their needs and difficulties, providing motivation and instilling positive affirmations, giving appreciation and praise, creating enjoyable learning media, as well as offering additional lessons and extracurricular services beyond regular class hours. School lack specific curricula for inclusive students when determining the learning materials and this forces teachers to adjust the materials according to needs of students. Typically, the materials provided are more general and less in-depth compared to those for other students.

These learning materials are also related to the time and achievement targets desired. The time and achievement targets are adjusted based on the student's level of difficulty. Children with learning difficulties are given targets to master general subjects, such as writing, reading, basic arithmetic, and simple mathematical operations. In addition, children with speech delays are given targets until they become more comfortable with speaking. Autistic children are provided with additional flexibility and accommodations in the classroom to create an environment that promotes their comfort and well-being. Meanwhile, the time allocated for achieving academic and developmental targets may vary, ensuring that all students remain an integral part of school community. In the evaluation process, school lacks specific and continuous reference benchmarks. However, it employs alternative evaluation methods that differ from those used for other students, eschewing reliance on standard passing grades. Inclusive students are provided with a general report card containing completion grades for general administration, and special report card highlighting areas requiring improvement. Teachers also furnish personal notes on completion, learning progress, attitudes, and other relevant aspects. Inclusive students are not overwhelmed with excessive academic requirements but the focus is on achieving their individual difficulty targets. In cases where subjects remain uncompleted, remedial work is provided. This may entail revisiting previous questions or providing lower-level questions, which can be assisted by the student's parents. In challenging instances, school may request parents to seek the assistance of a psychiatrist for special therapy for their children.

Discussion

This research aims to explore strategies employed by teachers in optimizing the potential of inclusive students in elementary school. The results show that there are strategic efforts to provide excellent services to inclusive students despite their limitations in knowledge, theories, and established strategies. These efforts are evident in the steps taken, which are not different from IEP ([Newcomer & Morin, 2020](#)). The steps include assessment, determination of methods, materials, time, targets, and evaluation.

Assessment is the most crucial initial identification and screening stage in any program for inclusive students ([Xu & Kuti, 2021](#)). The results, which encompass learning function, social-emotional aspects, communication, and neuromotor skills, play a significant role in determining the type and form of services needed by the students ([Arriani et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, the potential of each inclusive student will be incorporated into the learning program. The assessments are also used to determine the appropriate types and forms of interventions for the students. This research reinforces previous findings ([Ningsih & Suyatno, 2023](#); [Nugroho & Minsih, 2021](#); [Saniya et al., 2020](#)) regarding the importance of the assessment process for inclusive students. However, another alternative is provided when schools still have limitations in implementing structured and systematic assessments. In an ideal context, the assessment should involve observation and interviews with parents, and the collaboration of psychologists, educators, occupational therapists, and speech therapists ([Nugroho & Minsih, 2021](#)). From the data obtained, it appears to be challenging to prepare more structured and systematic initial assessments. This is due to inadequate school facilities, cost, and the availability of professional human resources. In addition, parents are reluctant to label their children ([Morgan et al., 2023](#)). Therefore, the "assessment by process" is a feasible alternative. Teachers and school observe the students' conditions within a maximum of 3 months, to obtain a general

overview of their potential and limitations. After discussing with parents, school can initiate specific steps and strategies to optimize the potential of the students.

Another significant issue is determining short-term and long-term goals in the learning process. The quality of education for inclusive students relies on the extent to which educational goals can be quantified within a designated timeframe. The goals must be formulated to facilitate students' access to the general education curriculum and address their diverse educational requirements. This includes ensuring observability, measurability, functionality, generalizability, daily tasks, and the clarity of the set objectives (Goodwin et al., 2022). From this research, the fundamental problem lies in the limited human resources to formulate educational goals for inclusive students. This confirms the findings (Ruble et al., 2022), stating the lack of ability to create educational goals, assess the strengths and weaknesses of students, and provide comprehensive database support.

In the next stage, the development of teaching strategies and methods is equally important (Nyborg et al., 2022). Teachers face challenges in terms of competence, attitude, motivation, and strategies when dealing with inclusive students (Wong & Mohd Rashid, 2022). Placing students with special needs in inclusive classrooms can present challenges when not accompanied by rigorous classroom management. Inclusive classes can have both positive and negative impacts on students (Dell'Anna et al., 2021). In the diversity of needs possessed by ABK, the implementation in the field must also be modified according to the needs of students (Asiyah, 2018; Baum et al., 2021). Subsequently, this condition forces the teacher to adapt learning material to the needs of students (Putri & Ain, 2022). Learning methods and processes for ABK vary and demand innovation from teachers (Bertills et al., 2019). Problems that often surface include the limited knowledge of teachers on learning patterns for ABK, as well as the lack of training, fun learning media, and special accompanying teacher for ABK.

Therefore, educational institutions must develop separate programs that bridge regular in-class activities with supplementary extracurricular pursuits. Research (Alexandre et al., 2022) shows that children spend a great deal of time engaged in informal learning outside of educational settings. This method optimizes the potential of inclusive students by providing additional time and support. In certain cases, the traditional learning process within the classroom may prove less effective for inclusive students, considering their unique requirements compared to their peers. It is essential to alleviate them from identical burdens placed on other students. However, it is equally crucial to embrace and actively involve them in conversations, socialization, and discussions, as well as encourage their class participation, nurturing confidence and self-expression. Outside the classroom, the learning process can be more effective with a more individualized method and materials tailored to the targets and goals of each student. Jensen et al. (2023) and Nelson et al. (2023) state that this approach is very helpful in the study of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Therefore, the development of extracurricular activities oriented toward inclusive students should be conducted by school.

Special education teachers play a crucial role in the process of optimizing the potential of inclusive students. This reinforces previous research (Azmi & Nurmaya, 2020; Berlinda & Naryoso, 2018; Himmah, 2023) with similar conclusions. Special education teachers become the backbone, assisting in building discipline (Suprihatiningrum et al., 2022), providing understanding to students experiencing learning difficulties (Wang & Kuo, 2019), guiding and providing solutions to learning problems (Kasirer & Shnitzer-Meirovich, 2021), and becoming coaches to sharpen students' skills according to their potential (Andzik et al., 2021).

In the context of evaluation, the design of an IEP model needs to be considered as a solution. IEP uses the Criterion-Referenced Assessment (CRA) method, which considers the level of a student's success by comparing their achievements to predetermined criteria (Arriani et al., 2021). The criteria refer to the minimum acceptable behavioral standard based on the initial assessment. The two types of evaluation used are process and outcome but teachers only conducted outcome evaluations.

This research found that the competence of teachers for students with special needs still indicted a significant gap. For inclusive classroom settings to increase in the future, it is important to equip all prospective teachers with basic knowledge on special education hence the forefront of managing ABK learning does not solely rely on specialized support teachers. This qualitative research is conducted by interviewing research participants with limited numbers and scope, and the results cannot be generalized to the optimization of the individual potentials of ABK across a broader region. Therefore, future analyses should involve quantitative research with an adequate number of respondents to generalize the result on a larger scale.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the potential optimization of students with special needs requires specific programs and strategies. By implementing specialized programs and strategies, the aspiration of attaining a high standard of education can be actualized. In certain instances, well-established programs such as IEP and TEACCH faced limitations in full implementation within educational institutions, owing to constraints in human resources, theoretical knowledge, teacher motivation, training, supporting facilities, and funding. However, each step and process was executed with a method tailored to the capacity and capabilities of school. These steps encompassed the assessment of students, formulation of pertinent information, establishment of criteria, development of individualized learning plans and objectives, design of appropriate methods and procedures, and conduction of comprehensive evaluations. The presence of qualified special education teachers represented a vital prerequisite that school must fulfill to effectively manage and operate the program.

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