

## Strategies to Improve School Readiness to Accept Students with Special Needs through Inclusive Education

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### ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is increasingly recognized as a vital approach to ensuring equal access to quality education for all students, including those with special needs. However, many schools remain unprepared to implement inclusive practices effectively due to limited resources, lack of training, and insufficient systemic support. This research aims to explore strategies that can increase school readiness in accepting students with special needs through inclusive education. Using a qualitative research design, the study was conducted in three inclusive elementary schools in Indonesia over a three-month period. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, involving teachers, principals, special education coordinators, and parents. The findings reveal that teacher professional development, inclusive school leadership, adaptive learning environments, and strong parent-community engagement are key strategies that enhance readiness. Furthermore, the study highlights a positive shift in teacher attitudes through experience and reflection, promoting a more inclusive school culture. The conclusion emphasizes that readiness is not only a structural issue but also a cultural and attitudinal transformation process. This research contributes to the development of practical models for inclusive education in resource-constrained settings and provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and advocates aiming to foster more equitable and supportive learning environments.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a global movement and an ethical imperative to ensure that all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, or social differences, have equal access

to quality education. As defined by UNESCO, inclusive education is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education (Adipat, Laksana, Busayanon, Asawasowan, & Adipat, 2021). This approach not only supports the rights of children with special needs but also enhances the educational experience of all students by promoting empathy, diversity, and collaboration. In many countries, including Indonesia, inclusive education has been officially endorsed in policies and legal frameworks (Rott, Specht, & Knipping, 2021). However, the implementation at the school level, particularly in primary and secondary schools, remains a complex and challenging endeavor.

Despite its noble goals, inclusive education often faces resistance at the grassroots level due to a lack of readiness among schools to accommodate students with special needs. This lack of readiness can manifest in various forms, including inadequate teacher training, insufficient physical infrastructure, limited access to specialized resources, and negative attitudes or misconceptions about disability and inclusion. Many schools still perceive students with special needs as burdensome, primarily due to the perceived complexity of their learning needs and behavioral challenges. Consequently, these students may face rejection, marginalization, or segregation, undermining the very spirit of inclusive education. Therefore, increasing school readiness is a critical prerequisite for the successful implementation of inclusive education and the actualization of its intended benefits.

This study addresses a pressing issue that is often overlooked in the broader discourse on inclusive education: the practical strategies that can enhance school readiness in accepting and supporting students with special needs. While many previous studies have focused on the theoretical benefits of inclusion or the challenges faced by students with disabilities, fewer have explored the proactive steps that schools can take to prepare themselves for inclusive practices. This research aims to fill that gap by identifying and analyzing concrete strategies that schools can adopt to foster a more inclusive environment. These strategies may include teacher professional development programs, the redesign of learning spaces, the development of inclusive curricula, parental engagement initiatives, and the establishment of collaborative support networks involving external experts and the local community.

One of the unique aspects of this study is its holistic approach to school readiness. Rather than focusing solely on infrastructure or policy, this research views readiness as a multidimensional construct involving attitudes, knowledge, skills, systems, and support structures. Furthermore, this study explores how contextual factors—such as school culture, leadership commitment, socio-economic background, and community support—interact with institutional readiness and influence the effectiveness of inclusive education practices. By doing so, the research moves beyond a one-size-fits-all solution and offers nuanced insights tailored to diverse educational settings, particularly in developing countries or regions with limited resources.

Another notable gap in previous research is the lack of emphasis on the perspectives of school stakeholders—teachers, principals, special education coordinators, and parents—in shaping readiness for inclusion. Many policy-level studies have failed to capture the on-the-ground realities that influence how inclusion is interpreted and enacted within schools. This study seeks to bridge that gap by incorporating qualitative data from various school actors to understand the facilitators and barriers to inclusion from their point of view. Their insights are vital for developing strategies that are both contextually relevant and practically feasible.

The purpose of this article is to explore and identify effective strategies that can increase school readiness in accepting students with special needs through inclusive education. By conducting a

comprehensive literature review and case analysis, the study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on inclusive education implementation. It also aspires to inform school leaders, policymakers, teacher educators, and community stakeholders about practical approaches that can enhance inclusivity and equity in education. The findings of this study are expected to serve as a reference for schools that are in the process of transitioning toward inclusive education, helping them to anticipate challenges and leverage opportunities for inclusive transformation.

Ultimately, this research hopes to contribute to the long-term goal of building an education system that truly leaves no child behind. By focusing on readiness rather than reactive accommodation, the study emphasizes the importance of intentional planning, systemic change, and collaborative engagement in fostering inclusive schools. It calls for a shift from viewing inclusion as a legal or moral obligation to recognizing it as a catalyst for educational innovation and social justice. In doing so, the research underscores the idea that preparing schools for inclusion is not just about adjusting to the presence of students with special needs it is about transforming schools into communities where every child feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential.

## 2. METHODS

This research employed a qualitative approach to explore the strategies for increasing school readiness in accepting students with special needs through inclusive education. The qualitative method was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena, particularly the attitudes, perceptions, and practices of school stakeholders in the context of inclusive education. The study was conducted in three inclusive elementary schools located in Riau, Indonesia, over a period of three months from April to June 2025. These schools were selected purposively based on their commitment to inclusive practices and their diverse student populations. The research sought to capture real-life experiences and contextual factors influencing school readiness, involving key informants such as school principals, classroom teachers, special education coordinators, parents of children with special needs, and education office representatives.

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participant observations, and documentation analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 15 participants to gain rich narratives and insights into the strategies they used or recommended to improve readiness for inclusion. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participant observations were carried out during teaching and learning activities, school meetings, and inclusive planning sessions to observe interactions, teaching methods, and the use of facilities (Fransiska, 2016). In addition, relevant school documents such as inclusive education policies, individual education plans (IEPs), and training modules were analyzed to supplement the primary data. The sources of data were thus both primary (interviews and observations) and secondary (official school documents) (Huda, Fransiska, Mokodenseho, Tabilantang, & Mokodompit, 2024). To ensure data validity, the researcher employed triangulation of sources and methods, prolonged engagement in the field, and member-checking with participants.

Data analysis followed an interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and categories from the interview transcripts, observation notes, and document reviews. Coding was done manually, and themes were developed iteratively through constant comparison between data sets. The analysis focused on identifying not only the strategies that enhanced readiness but also the contextual enablers and barriers influencing their implementation.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' perspectives. The ultimate goal of the methodology was to generate contextualized, practical insights that could inform inclusive education practices in similar educational settings.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative research reveal several interconnected strategies that effectively increase school readiness in accepting students with special needs within the framework of inclusive education. These strategies are not isolated efforts but rather part of a broader, systemic approach that involves the collaboration of all school stakeholders. The analysis of interviews, observations, and document reviews shows that the most impactful strategies center on teacher empowerment, inclusive school leadership, and community involvement. These findings illustrate how readiness is built not merely through infrastructure or policy mandates, but through shared values, continuous learning, and structural support.

One of the most prominent findings is the role of sustained and targeted teacher professional development in shaping school readiness. Teachers who participated in regular training on inclusive pedagogies, differentiated instruction, and behavior management demonstrated greater confidence and competence in handling diverse learners. Moreover, teachers reported that mentoring programs—especially those involving special education experts significantly improved their ability to design and implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students with special needs. The presence of collaborative planning sessions, peer discussions, and reflective practices further enhanced teachers' preparedness. These efforts cultivated a learning community within the school, where teachers viewed inclusion as a shared responsibility rather than an individual burden (Purnama, Fransiska, Muhdi, Muflihah, & Meisarah, 2023).

School leadership also emerged as a crucial driver of readiness. The principals in the selected schools played a proactive role in promoting an inclusive vision, mobilizing resources, and creating a supportive school climate. Their commitment was reflected in the formulation of inclusive policies, flexible curriculum adjustments, and the appointment of inclusion coordinators to bridge communication between general and special education staff. In schools where leadership was strong, inclusive practices were more systematically embedded into the daily operations of the school. The principals did not only act as administrators but also as change agents who inspired their staff to embrace inclusive values. Their ability to mediate between policy demands and practical realities made a significant difference in the school's level of preparedness.

In terms of physical and learning environment, the findings show that readiness is enhanced when schools make deliberate efforts to create inclusive-friendly spaces. Although resources were often limited, schools took adaptive steps such as modifying classroom layouts, providing assistive technologies, and ensuring access to basic facilities like ramps and accessible toilets (Fransiska, 2022). More importantly, these modifications were guided by the actual needs of students, as identified through consultations with parents and specialists. The emphasis on flexibility and responsiveness was evident in the way schools designed learning environments that promoted comfort, engagement, and accessibility for all students.

Another important theme that emerged from the data is the role of parent and community engagement in building readiness. Schools that actively involved parents of children with special needs in planning, decision-making, and school activities reported higher levels of trust and collaboration. Parents were not merely informed but were seen as partners whose insights were valued. Furthermore, partnerships with local health services, psychologists, and disability organizations enabled schools to access additional expertise and support. These networks helped fill gaps in knowledge and resources, making inclusive education a more manageable and sustainable endeavor.

Interestingly, the findings also highlight a shift in mindset among teachers and school staff as a result of inclusive practices. Initially, some teachers held stereotypical beliefs about students with disabilities, viewing them as academically incapable or socially disruptive. However, through ongoing exposure, training, and successful experiences with inclusion, these perceptions gradually changed. Teachers began to recognize the unique strengths and contributions of each student, and the concept of "readiness" itself transformed — from a focus on students being ready to enter school, to schools being ready to adapt to all students. This attitudinal change was pivotal in fostering a culture of acceptance and equity.

Despite these promising findings, the research also uncovered persistent challenges. Some schools still struggled with inconsistent support from local education authorities, limited funding for inclusive programs, and high teacher workload. These constraints sometimes hindered the full implementation of inclusive strategies. Nonetheless, the data suggests that schools that emphasized creativity, collaboration, and commitment were better able to overcome these obstacles. They demonstrated that readiness is not a static condition, but a dynamic process that evolves through continuous reflection, adaptation, and shared effort.

In summary, the results of this study affirm that increasing school readiness in accepting students with special needs requires a multidimensional and participatory approach. Effective strategies include strengthening teacher capacity, cultivating inclusive leadership, adapting physical environments, and fostering strong family and community partnerships. Most importantly, readiness is rooted in a belief system that values diversity and embraces the responsibility of creating a school for all. These findings provide a foundation for developing contextually relevant models of inclusive education, particularly in settings with limited resources but a strong commitment.

Table 1. Key Strategies to Increase School Readiness for Inclusive Education

Strategy	Implementation in Schools	Impact on School Readiness
Teacher Professional Development	-Workshops on inclusive pedagogy -Peer mentoring and coaching	-Improved teacher confidence and competence - Better IEP implementation
Inclusive Leadership	-Principals promoting inclusive vision -Appointment of inclusion coordinators	-Stronger policy alignment -School-wide support for inclusive practices
Adaptive Learning Environment	-Rearranging classroom layout -Use of assistive tools -Basic infrastructure upgrades	-Adaptive Learning Environment -Better engagement of students with special needs
Parental and Community Involvement	-Parent consultation sessions -Collaboration with NGOs and therapists	- Increased trust and cooperation -Additional expert support in classrooms
Cultural and Attitudinal Change	-Reflective discussions among teachers - Sharing success stories of inclusion	-Reduced stigma and resistance - Positive school climate for all students

This table 1. summarizes the five main strategies identified through data analysis as essential to improving school readiness for inclusive education. Each strategy was implemented through specific school actions, such as teacher training or stakeholder engagement, and showed clear impacts. For instance, teacher training led to higher competence in managing diverse classrooms, while adaptive

physical environments ensured greater accessibility. The involvement of parents and community also proved crucial in providing holistic support to students. Overall, the table highlights that readiness is not a single action but the result of multiple, coordinated efforts that transform the school system culturally, structurally, and pedagogically.

The analysis of the research findings indicates a strong alignment with existing literature and theoretical perspectives on inclusive education, particularly in terms of the factors that influence school readiness in accepting students with special needs. As revealed in this study, teacher professional development emerged as a core strategy, which is consistent with findings from Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2012), who emphasized that teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy significantly influence the success of inclusive practices. The teachers in this study reported increased confidence and competence after participating in regular inclusive education training, echoing the theoretical framework of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which highlights the role of self-efficacy in shaping behavior. As teachers felt more capable, they were more willing to engage in inclusive practices, suggesting that readiness is deeply intertwined with professional belief systems and skill development.

Furthermore, the findings related to school leadership reinforce prior studies that underscore the transformative role of principals and administrators in implementing inclusive education. For example, research by Ainscow and Miles (2008) identifies inclusive leadership as a catalyst for systemic change, noting that strong leadership is necessary to shift school culture and structure in support of diversity. This study confirms that principals who demonstrated commitment to inclusion—by enacting inclusive policies, supporting teachers, and encouraging collaboration—were able to significantly elevate their schools' readiness. This resonates with Fullan's Change Theory, which emphasizes the importance of leadership in initiating and sustaining educational reform. The leaders observed in this study functioned not merely as policy enforcers but as visionaries and facilitators of inclusive transformation.

The modification of physical learning environments found in this research also aligns with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which advocates for the creation of flexible learning spaces that accommodate diverse learners. Schools that adjusted classroom layouts, integrated assistive technologies, and ensured accessible infrastructure demonstrated higher levels of readiness. This mirrors findings from Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), who argue that inclusion is not about making students fit into existing systems, but about redesigning systems to fit all students. The adaptation efforts observed suggest that schools adopting a UDL-informed approach can more effectively create inclusive settings that benefit not only students with special needs but all learners.

One of the significant contributions of this study is the emphasis on parent and community engagement as a pillar of readiness. While this aspect is often mentioned in inclusive education policy documents, it receives less empirical attention in implementation studies. The findings of this research highlight how meaningful partnerships with families and external professionals (e.g., therapists, counselors, disability advocacy groups) provide critical support that schools alone may not be able to offer. This supports Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, which posits that learning is most effective when the efforts of families, schools, and communities intersect. By involving parents in decision-making and drawing on community resources, schools in this study were better equipped to meet the holistic needs of students with special needs.

In terms of attitudinal change, the research findings suggest that inclusion itself can serve as a driver of cultural transformation within schools. Initially, some teachers held negative stereotypes or doubts about students with disabilities. However, through repeated exposure, professional development, and firsthand experience, their perceptions evolved. This aligns with the Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), which asserts that interpersonal contact under appropriate conditions can reduce prejudice and foster positive intergroup attitudes. The practical experiences of teachers in inclusive classrooms helped them to recognize the potential and strengths of students with special needs, thereby reinforcing the belief that inclusion is not only possible but also beneficial for all parties involved.

When juxtaposed with prior research, this study also fills several gaps. Many previous studies, especially in developing countries, have emphasized the barriers to inclusion—such as lack of funding,

insufficient infrastructure, or resistance from educators—without offering detailed insights into how schools can proactively build readiness despite these limitations. This study contributes to that discourse by showcasing strategies that have been effectively implemented in resource-constrained settings. It highlights that while material resources are important, the most powerful enablers of readiness are mindset, collaboration, and strategic leadership. This is a crucial point in the broader debate on inclusion, as it challenges the assumption that inclusive education is only feasible in well-resourced schools.

Moreover, this study's multidimensional perspective on readiness—encompassing structural, pedagogical, and cultural elements—aligns with the Systems Theory approach to education reform. Schools function as complex systems where change in one area influences others. The findings reveal that improvements in teacher training, leadership practices, physical accessibility, and stakeholder engagement are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. This holistic view is supported by the theoretical model of Inclusive School Development proposed by Booth and Ainscow (2002), which advocates for the simultaneous development of inclusive policies, cultures, and practices to achieve sustainable inclusion.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study conclude that increasing school readiness in accepting students with special needs through inclusive education requires a comprehensive and collaborative effort that encompasses teacher development, inclusive leadership, adaptive learning environments, and active stakeholder engagement. The researcher's initial concern that many schools remain unprepared to implement inclusive education effectively has been addressed through evidence showing that even in resource-limited contexts, readiness can be fostered through strategic planning, commitment, and community support. The study affirms that inclusive education is not solely dependent on infrastructure or formal policy, but more critically on the beliefs, capacities, and coordinated actions of those within the school system. Readiness, in this sense, is a continuous and evolving process rather than a fixed achievement.

However, the study acknowledges several limitations. The research was conducted in a limited number of schools within a specific region, which may not fully represent the diverse educational landscapes of other areas. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, while rich in depth, does not offer generalizable data across broader populations. Future research is recommended to adopt a mixed-methods approach to quantify the impact of the identified strategies on student outcomes and expand the scope to include rural or underdeveloped regions. Longitudinal studies are also encouraged to track changes in school readiness over time, and to assess how sustained inclusive practices influence the academic and social development of students with special needs.

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