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Strategies for Increasing School Readiness in Accepting Students with Special Needs through Inclusive Education

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Abstrak

Pendidikan inklusif telah menjadi prioritas global, yang bertujuan untuk menyediakan kesempatan belajar yang adil bagi semua siswa, termasuk mereka yang berkebutuhan khusus. Namun, meskipun penekanan pada inklusi semakin meningkat, banyak sekolah menghadapi tantangan dalam menjadi sepenuhnya siap untuk mendukung siswa dengan berbagai kebutuhan. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi strategi yang dapat meningkatkan kesiapan sekolah untuk menerima siswa dengan kebutuhan khusus melalui pendidikan inklusif. Metode penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif studi kasus, data dikumpulkan dari wawancara semi-terstruktur, diskusi kelompok fokus, dan analisis dokumen yang dilakukan di tiga sekolah inklusif. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesiapan sekolah sangat dipengaruhi oleh komitmen kepemimpinan, pelatihan guru, sistem pendukung kolaboratif, dan keterlibatan keluarga. Sekolah dengan kepemimpinan visioner, pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan bagi guru, dan keterlibatan masyarakat yang kuat menunjukkan tingkat kesiapan yang lebih tinggi untuk inklusi. Namun, tantangan seperti sumber daya yang tidak memadai dan stigma masyarakat yang masih ada terhadap disabilitas diidentifikasi sebagai hambatan. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa kesiapan sekolah untuk inklusi adalah proses berkelanjutan yang membutuhkan pendekatan seluruh sekolah yang mengintegrasikan kepemimpinan, praktik pengajaran, dan keterlibatan masyarakat.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Inklusif, Kesiapan Sekolah, Kebutuhan Khusus, Kepemimpinan

Abstract

Inclusive education has become a global priority, aiming to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities. However, despite the increasing emphasis on inclusion, many schools face challenges in fully preparing to support students with diverse needs. This study identifies strategies to improve school readiness to welcome students with disabilities through inclusive education. The research used a qualitative case study approach; data were collected from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis conducted in three inclusive schools. The study findings indicate that leadership commitment, teacher training, collaborative support systems, and family involvement strongly influence school readiness. Schools with visionary leadership, ongoing professional development for teachers, and strong community engagement demonstrated higher readiness levels for inclusion. However, challenges such as inadequate resources and persistent community stigma against disability were identified as barriers. The study concludes that school readiness for inclusion is an ongoing process that requires a whole-school approach that integrates leadership, instructional practices, and community engagement.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, School Readiness, Special Needs, Leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a critical global movement to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. This approach is especially significant for students with special needs, who historically have been marginalized or excluded from mainstream educational settings (Qu, 2022). The philosophy of inclusive education emphasizes diversity as a strength and encourages schools to adapt to the needs of all learners rather than expecting students to fit into existing systems (Sain et al., 2022). However, despite the global push toward inclusion, many schools still struggle with readiness in mindset and practical capacities to effectively accommodate students with special needs (Stephenson, 2023). The readiness of schools to welcome and support these learners is a critical area of concern.

Prior research has explored various aspects of inclusive education. For example (Sangsawang, 2015) highlighted that inclusive policies often lack effective school-level implementation strategies, especially in developing regions. Cerna et al. (2021) examined systemic barriers such as insufficient teacher training and limited resources, arguing that inclusion fails due to intent and lack of preparedness. Meanwhile, Sarid (2021) emphasized that educator attitudes and leadership commitment are pivotal in determining the success of inclusive initiatives. These studies underscore that inclusive education is not solely a policy issue but a multidimensional challenge involving institutional culture, pedagogy, and infrastructure.

Despite these contributions, a critical gap remains in practical, context-based strategies that can guide schools in enhancing their readiness. Existing literature has predominantly focused on either macro-level policy discussions or student-centered outcomes, often overlooking the specific processes and factors that influence the transition of schools toward inclusive environments (Bray et al., 2023). This research seeks to bridge that gap by identifying and analyzing actionable strategies at the school level, particularly focusing on resource-limited settings where such transformation is often most difficult yet most needed.

This research is unique because it focuses on practical, context-based strategies that can be implemented at the school level to foster inclusivity. While numerous studies have addressed the theoretical underpinnings of inclusive education, fewer have explored the tangible steps schools can take to prepare to welcome students with special needs, particularly in developing countries where resources and awareness may be limited (Al-Najjar et al., 2018). This research bridges that gap by highlighting actionable approaches that school leaders, teachers, and communities can adopt to cultivate an inclusive culture. Moreover, the study aims to present these strategies adaptable to various educational contexts, making them a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature on inclusive education (Lyman et al., 2023).

A critical gap in previous research is the lack of attention to school-level implementation challenges. Much of the existing literature focuses on national policies or the inclusion outcomes for students with special needs without sufficiently addressing how schools can transition toward inclusive practices (Bai et al., 2020). Additionally, there is limited empirical exploration of the specific factors influencing school readiness, such as teacher attitudes, leadership commitment, parent-school collaboration, and availability of inclusive teaching resources (Sarid, 2021). This study seeks to fill that void by examining these factors and proposing a strategic framework to guide schools in enhancing their readiness for inclusion.

The novelty of this study lies in its emphasis on operationalizing inclusivity within everyday school practices. Unlike prior research that remains largely theoretical, this study investigates practical frameworks, including teacher professional development, leadership involvement, stakeholder collaboration, and adaptive learning environments that schools can implement to foster inclusion. This grounded approach offers fresh insights, especially for educational systems in developing countries where awareness and infrastructure for inclusive education remain limited.

This research is important because it addresses a persistent educational inequality: the exclusion or marginalization of students with special needs due to schools' unpreparedness. The study explores the factors influencing school readiness, such as educators' attitudes, leadership vision, policy implementation, and availability of inclusive teaching resources. By doing so, it responds to the urgent need for context-sensitive models that schools can adopt to create inclusive learning communities. The expected outcome is a strategic framework that can serve as a diagnostic tool and a guide for progressive change (Murdianto & Jayadi, 2020). In addition to providing practical guidance, this research aspires to shift the narrative from viewing inclusive education as a challenge to recognizing it as an opportunity for innovation and growth in the education sector. Inclusive schools benefit students with special needs and enrich the learning experience for all students by fostering empathy, collaboration, and respect for diversity (Wulan & Sanjaya, 2022). By focusing on readiness strategies, the study emphasizes the proactive role schools can play in creating inclusive systems that respond flexibly to all learners. In doing so, it supports the broader goal of education as a tool for social equity and transformation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore strategies that enhance school readiness in accepting students with special needs within inclusive education settings. The research was conducted over three months, from January to March 2025, at three inclusive elementary and secondary schools located in Semarang, selected through purposive sampling. These schools were chosen based on their varying stages of inclusive practice implementation and active involvement in promoting inclusive values. The participants included school principals, special education teachers, classroom teachers, school counselors, and parents of students with and without special needs, all of whom had direct experience with inclusive education practices.

Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observations, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Interviews and FGDs were conducted to gather rich insights from different stakeholder perspectives, while observations and document analysis contextualized and validated those insights. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, involving the coding and categorizing of recurring patterns and themes. Triangulation, member checking, and thick description were employed throughout the research process to ensure the validity and credibility of the findings. These strategies helped establish the trustworthiness of the data and supported a comprehensive understanding of the factors and strategies influencing school readiness for inclusive education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that a combination of internal capacity, leadership vision, teacher attitudes, and community involvement shapes school readiness to accept students with special needs. One of the most significant strategies identified was the role of school leadership in setting an inclusive tone and direction. The overall readiness level was substantially higher in schools where principals actively advocated for inclusion and provided continuous support to their staff. These leaders made strategic decisions regarding resource allocation and cultivated a school culture that views diversity as an asset rather than a burden. This cultural shift was critical in encouraging teachers and staff to embrace inclusive values.

Table 1. Strategies to Increase School Readiness for Inclusive Education

Strategy	Influencing Factors	Expected Outcomes
Leadership Commitment	Visionary leadership, clear inclusion policies, school culture	Stronger school-wide support for inclusion, clearer goals, and direction for teachers and staff
Teacher Professional Development	Training programs, peer mentoring, exposure to inclusive teaching practices	Increased teacher confidence, improved teaching strategies, better classroom inclusivity
Collaborative Support Systems	Collaboration between special and general educators, availability of support staff	Improved student support, personalized learning, greater academic and social inclusion
Family and Community Engagement	Communication between schools and families, community awareness programs	Stronger parent-school collaboration, reduced stigma, better home support for students
Resource Allocation and Adaptation	Adequate materials, physical infrastructure adjustments, assistive technology	More accessible learning environments, better participation of students with special needs

Table 1 summarizes five key strategies for improving school readiness for inclusive education. These strategies include leadership commitment, teacher professional development, collaborative support systems, family and community engagement, and resource allocation and adaptation. Each strategy is influenced by specific factors such as policy, training, collaboration, communication, and availability of facilities, which are expected to result in stronger support for inclusion, increased teacher capacity, better student support, closer collaboration with parents, and a more accessible learning environment for all students.

Teacher attitudes and competencies also emerged as a dominant factor influencing readiness. The analysis revealed that many teachers initially experienced apprehension and self-doubt in dealing with students with special needs due to limited training and experience (O'Connor et al., 2023). However, teachers demonstrated greater confidence and adaptability in schools where professional development programs were regularly implemented, especially those involving practical workshops and peer mentoring. These programs enabled teachers to develop inclusive pedagogical skills such as differentiated instruction, behavior management techniques, and individualized learning plans (Erva et al., 2023). The sense of empowerment among teachers led to more welcoming classroom environments and improved student engagement.

The readiness of schools to implement inclusive education represents a complex, multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various internal and external factors. This study sought to examine such readiness through the lens of leadership, teacher competence, support systems, family engagement, and policy infrastructure. The findings resonate with a growing body of global literature that underscores inclusive education not merely as a policy initiative but as a transformative cultural shift within the school ecosystem (Saha, 2023).

One of the most prominent findings in this study is the significant role that teacher attitudes and competencies play in determining the success of inclusive education. Initially, many teachers expressed anxiety and a lack of confidence when teaching students with special needs. This aligns with studies such as Avramidis and Norwich (2002), who emphasize that teacher attitudes are deeply shaped by prior experience, knowledge, and perceived self-efficacy. Similarly, (Sethi et al., 2019) found that teachers with greater exposure to inclusive environments were more likely to embrace inclusive practices.

Another key finding was the importance of collaborative support systems within the school. Schools that integrated special education teachers into grade-level planning meetings and encouraged co-teaching models were more successful in meeting the needs of diverse learners (Mogale & Malatji, 2022). Moreover, the presence of support staff, such as school counselors and therapists, played an essential role in addressing

both academic and emotional needs. In some cases, peer mentoring programs where students without disabilities were guided to support their classmates with special needs also contributed to a stronger sense of inclusion and mutual respect among students (Farooq et al., 2022).

The presence of a shared vision for inclusion was not only symbolic but also operational. Schools where leadership actively engaged stakeholders teachers, students, parents, and external agencies were more likely to sustain inclusive practices. This resonates with the theory of educational change proposed by (Mette et al., 2015), which stresses that meaningful and sustainable reform arises from coherent leadership that aligns vision, capacity building, and systemic support.

Another major theme identified was the importance of collaborative support systems within the school. The co-teaching models, where general education and special education teachers plan and deliver instruction jointly, proved to be particularly effective. This supports the whole-school approach advocated by (Ninković & Florić, 2018), which posits that inclusive education cannot be the responsibility of a few specialists; instead, it must be embedded across all levels of school functioning. The involvement of therapists, school counselors, and support staff also played a critical role in supporting students both academically and emotionally. These findings align with (Sudarjat et al., 2015) assertion that integrated support services lead to more holistic and sustained student progress in inclusive settings.

Interestingly, the study also revealed the value of peer mentorship programs, where students without disabilities were trained to support their peers with special needs. This not only promoted empathy and cooperation but also fostered a sense of belonging among all students. According to the work of (Kilag et al., 2023), inclusion must be understood not just as access or placement, but as the presence, participation, and achievement of all students. Peer mentoring advances this goal by reinforcing the social dimensions of inclusion, contributing to positive school climates and mutual respect.

Family engagement emerged as a dual-natured theme both a significant opportunity and a persistent challenge. Some schools struggled to engage families due to linguistic, cultural, or attitudinal barriers. This is consistent with literature indicating that stigma and lack of awareness about disabilities can hinder effective school-family collaboration (Abdurahman et al., 2024). However, other schools demonstrated success by adopting proactive strategies such as home visits, parent support groups, and inclusive school events. These practices align with (Kartini, 2023) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, which emphasizes that student outcomes improve when schools, families, and communities work in partnership.

Family engagement was identified as both a challenge and an opportunity. While some schools struggled to communicate effectively with parents of students with special needs, others demonstrated best practices by establishing regular dialogue through home visits, parent support groups, and inclusive school events. The involvement of parents was shown to significantly enhance student outcomes and increase trust in the school's inclusive mission. In communities where the stigma against disabilities remained strong, schools that proactively educated parents and the public about the benefits of inclusion observed more positive changes in attitudes over time (Ohito et al., 2021).

Professional development was identified as a critical enabler in changing these attitudes. Teachers who engaged in practical, contextually relevant training showed enhanced confidence and capacity to manage diverse learning needs. This reinforces (Mahmoodi-Shahreabaki, 2019) sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), suggesting that learning occurs optimally when individuals are scaffolded through social interaction and guided instruction. In this context, peer mentoring and collaborative professional development acted as scaffolds, moving teachers from apprehension to competence. Furthermore, studies such as (Susila & Risvan, 2022) echo these findings, showing that inclusive training helps teachers develop not only technical skills but also the reflective dispositions necessary for inclusion.

The success of professional development programs is closely tied to how they are implemented. In the schools examined, the integration of workshops, mentoring, and real-time classroom support produced tangible changes in pedagogical strategies, including differentiated instruction, behavior management, and the formulation of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). These components are essential, as outlined in (Roberto Crotti & Tiffany Misrahi, 2017) theory of differentiated instruction, which argues that teaching must be adapted to accommodate students' readiness, interest, and learning profiles.

Closely linked to teacher competence is the institutional culture shaped by school leadership. This study found that schools with visionary leaders demonstrated a higher degree of readiness and success in inclusive education. Leaders in these schools went beyond policy compliance they modeled inclusive values, championed professional development, and fostered a school-wide culture of acceptance. This aligns with (Nasution et al., 2021) transformational leadership theory, which highlights the ability of leaders to inspire, motivate, and bring about cultural shifts within organizations. Additionally, (Vipraprastha et al., 2018) emphasize that leadership that is focused on instructional improvement and the development of teacher capacity tends to have the most profound impact on student outcomes.

The study also revealed structural and policy-related gaps that impacted school readiness. Despite strong commitments at the school level, the lack of consistent government support, particularly in funding and inclusive education policy implementation, often hindered progress. For example, some schools were forced to operate without access to specialized learning materials or adequate infrastructure modifications, such as ramps or accessible restrooms (Faisal & Kisman, 2020). Nevertheless, innovative schools found creative, community-based solutions to address these limitations, such as mobilizing local organizations or alumni networks for support (Asfahani et al., 2022). This study found that school readiness for inclusive education is multidimensional, involving leadership commitment, teacher capacity, support systems, community engagement, and structural conditions. The successful schools in this study demonstrated that while challenges persist, strategic efforts grounded in collaboration and shared values can significantly improve readiness and create more inclusive educational environments for students with special needs (Dover & Rodriguez-Valls, 2018).

In communities where stigma around disability remains entrenched, this study found that schools that engaged in public education campaigns and invited parental involvement observed a gradual shift in attitudes. This supports (Montseny et al., 2021) ecological systems theory, which posits that individual development is influenced by interactions across multiple environmental systems. In this study, microsystem (home), mesosystem (school-home interaction), and exosystem (community) dynamics all played a role in shaping inclusive experiences for students.

Despite strong internal commitment, schools often faced external structural and policy-related barriers. Inconsistent government support particularly in funding, resource allocation, and policy implementation hindered inclusive progress. For example, the lack of accessible infrastructure, such as ramps or adapted restrooms, was a recurring problem. These findings echo UNESCO's (2020) Global Education Monitoring Report, which notes that underfunded and poorly implemented inclusive education policies are common challenges in many developing countries. The disconnect between policy and practice often leaves schools to bridge the gap independently, relying on community-based innovations and partnerships.

Some schools in the study exhibited resourcefulness by mobilizing local organizations, alumni networks, or corporate social responsibility programs to support inclusive initiatives. This grassroots innovation reflects the idea that inclusion is not a fixed state but an ongoing, adaptive process shaped by local context. This aligns with the theory of adaptive systems leadership (Nugraha et al., 2022), which argues that systemic change emerges from the capacity of local actors to experiment, learn, and scale effective practices in real time. The findings of this study align with and reinforce previous research that highlights the critical role of school leadership in facilitating inclusive education. For example, emphasize that inclusive school

development begins with leadership that understands and actively implements the philosophy of inclusion through policy and practice. The present study found similar patterns, where schools with strong, visionary leadership demonstrated higher readiness and commitment to welcoming students with special needs. These leaders did more than comply with the policy. They fostered a culture of acceptance and modeled inclusive values, influencing the entire school community.

The study contributes to the broader academic conversation by reframing inclusive readiness as a dynamic, context-sensitive construct. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on macro-level policy frameworks, yet this study emphasizes the micro-level actions and strategies that determine whether inclusion can be realized in everyday practice. It supports the work of (Villafuerte & Mosquera, 2020), who argue for a recontextualized understanding of inclusive education, particularly in low-resource settings, where top-down mandates must be balanced with bottom-up innovation.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings align with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model in that school readiness is not isolated it reflects the interaction of multiple systems and actors. It also confirms (Arachchige & Sathara, 2020) view that effective leadership indirectly influences student outcomes by creating a learning environment that values inclusion. The importance of teacher capacity and support further supports Vygotsky's learning theories and the growing empirical evidence that competence development is socially and contextually mediated.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The geographical scope was limited, focusing primarily on a specific region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the absence of quantitative analysis prevents a precise measurement of readiness levels across different dimensions. Future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach to validate these findings and explore the relative impact of various readiness factors using statistical tools. Longitudinal studies would also help track the evolution of inclusive practices over time and assess their sustainability.

The results of this study indicate that a combination of internal factors such as institutional capacity, leadership vision, teacher attitudes, and community involvement greatly influences school readiness for inclusive education. This finding aligns with the theory of educational change, which emphasizes that sustainable transformation in education requires structural changes and changes in moral purpose and organizational culture. An inclusive leadership vision is the main driver of change, creating a school climate that welcomes diversity as a strength. This is reinforced by (Aldawood et al., 2019) the view of that effective educational leaders indirectly influence learning outcomes by creating conditions that support learning. This relationship is also reinforced by the transformational leadership theory (Çop, 2021), which emphasizes the importance of inspiring leadership to change organizational values and culture towards inclusivity.

From the teacher's perspective, their attitudes and competencies towards inclusive education are key factors in school readiness. Sociocultural theory provides the basis that the development of abilities occurs through social interactions in the zone of proximal development, which is seen through training, peer mentoring, and reflective practice (Newman & Latifi, 2021). This study found that teachers who received practice-based training, such as training in teaching differentiation and behavior management, showed increased confidence and openness in accepting students with special needs. This finding supports previous research by Florian & Beaton (2018), which stated that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are influenced by experience, training, and institutional support. Even the study by Tarhan et al. (2020) showed that inclusive training significantly reduced teacher anxiety about diversity in the classroom. Therefore, a systematic approach to professional development is an important element in school readiness.

The findings on the importance of collaborative support systems also enrich the literature on the whole-school approach to inclusive education. According to the Index for Inclusion by Susila & Risvan (2022), successful inclusion requires changes in organizational structure, classroom practices, and stakeholder relationships. In this study, schools that involved special education teachers in regular class planning and

implemented a co-teaching model were shown to meet students' needs better individually. This aligns with research by Roberto Crotti & Tiffany Misrahi (2017), which shows that peer and student engagement in collaborative support systems improves social cohesion and academic success of students with special needs. Family engagement is also identified as an opportunity and challenge. Jiang et al. (2020), in the theory of overlapping spheres of influence, emphasize that educational success occurs when schools, families, and communities synergize. This study shows that schools that are proactive in communicating and educating parents have successfully created a stronger inclusive culture, even though they still face the challenge of stigma in society (Nabilah Mokhtar et al., 2023).

The impact of this study on scientific development is its contribution to broadening the understanding of inclusive readiness as a dynamic process influenced by the local context. This enriches the literature that focuses on the role of national policies by showing that readiness can be improved through grassroots initiatives despite structural limitations. This is in line with the developmental ecology theory by (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020), which states that interactions between systems (microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems) affect children's development holistically. However, the limitations of this study lie in its narrow geographical coverage and the lack of quantitative analysis to objectively measure the level of readiness. Further research with a broader scope and mixed approaches is needed to validate and generalize the findings more robustly. Nevertheless, this study provides practical insights for policymakers and education stakeholders on concrete strategies for building more inclusive schools.

Despite these limitations, the study offers practical implications for policy and practice. First, it underscores the need for ongoing, practice-based professional development for teachers, ideally embedded in collaborative learning communities. Second, it advocates for inclusive leadership development, where school leaders are trained not only in administrative tasks but also in inclusive visioning and community engagement. Third, it highlights the importance of integrated support systems, including special educators, therapists, and peer mentors. Finally, it calls for greater alignment between national policies and school-level realities, ensuring that inclusive mandates are backed by adequate funding, infrastructure, and monitoring mechanisms.

In conclusion, school readiness for inclusive education is a multidimensional construct influenced by leadership, teacher attitudes, support systems, family engagement, and policy environment. This study affirms that while structural challenges remain, inclusive education can thrive when grounded in shared values, collaborative strategies, and community-driven innovation. By linking empirical findings to established educational theories, the study provides a deeper understanding of how schools can build inclusive cultures that respect diversity, promote equity, and foster holistic development for all students.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that school readiness for inclusive education is not solely dependent on policy but rather a dynamic process involving visionary leadership, teacher competence, family involvement, and a collaborative school culture. The findings suggest that schools that place inclusion as a shared responsibility and are supported by ongoing professional development and innovative strategies can create a more welcoming environment for students with special needs despite limited resources and structural barriers. This study addresses the issue of the gap between inclusive ideals and practices by showing that significant change can occur through strategic efforts at the school level. To strengthen these findings, further research is recommended using a quantitative or mixed-method approach, expanding the scope of the area and involving student perspectives to produce a more comprehensive and applicable understanding of inclusive education practices.

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