

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AS A STRATEGY FOR TRANSFORMING THE LEARNING SYSTEM TO ACHIEVE EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS FOR ALL STUDENTS IN INDONESIA: A LITERATURE REVIEW BASED ON THEORETICAL ANALYSIS AND EMPIRICAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of inclusive education as a strategy for transforming the learning system in Indonesia to achieve equality and fairness for all students. Using a literature review approach based on theoretical analysis and empirical practice, this study integrates various theories of critical education, social justice, and universal design for learning with empirical findings from various regions in Indonesia. The results of the study show that inclusive education is capable of breaking down discriminatory barriers in the learning system and strengthening the participation and empowerment of learners with diverse needs. However, the success of its implementation is influenced by the readiness of teachers, infrastructure, socio-cultural support, and supportive cross-sectoral policies. This study recommends strengthening educator capacity, improving access to technology, and holistic policy coordination as key factors in expanding and strengthening inclusive education in Indonesia. Thus, inclusive education has proven to be an effective strategy for transforming the learning system to be fair and inclusive in the country.

Keywords: Inclusive education, learning system transformation, educational equality, social justice, education in Indonesia, universal design for learning, teacher capacity building.

Introduction

Education is the main foundation in human resource development, serving as a strategic instrument that can open access and opportunities for all citizens to develop optimally. In the context of Indonesia, a country that is highly diverse in terms of social, cultural, and geographical conditions, ensuring that every child receives a proper education is a complex but crucial challenge (Tubagus et al., 2023) ; (Aslan & Shiong, 2023) ; (Nurdiana et al., 2023) . Inclusive education has emerged as an innovative paradigm that not only emphasises formal access for all children but also prioritises the principles of respect for diversity and fairness in the learning process. The implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia is one of the efforts to transform the learning system, which aims to eliminate discriminatory barriers and strengthen equal opportunities for all students without exception (Katz, 2012) .

The concept of inclusive education itself stems from the spirit of Education for All, launched by UNESCO, which emphasises that all children, including those with special needs, must have the opportunity to learn in the same environment as their

peers (Barteaux, 2014) . In the context of national policy, inclusive education is regulated in several regulations such as Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System and Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 70 of 2009. However, its implementation often faces various challenges such as limited facilities, a lack of trained human resources, and cultural and social barriers that are still inherent in Indonesian society. The transformation of the learning system through inclusive education requires a paradigm shift from an exclusive and normative system to a more adaptive, responsive, and humanistic system (Barteaux, 2014) .

Education in Indonesia has so far adopted a model that tends to be homogeneous and centralised, which is often insensitive to the diversity of students' conditions and different learning needs. This system creates significant disparities between regions and between children with special needs and regular children (Kurniawan, 2025) . In this case, inclusive education emerges as an effective strategy to overcome these disparities by upholding the principles of social justice in education, providing flexible learning spaces and including all children without discrimination. The transformation of the learning system articulated through the Merdeka Curriculum policy also provides opportunities to implement inclusive education in a more systematic and comprehensive manner (Tuhuteru et al., 2023) ; (Haddar et al., 2023) ; (Sarmila et al., 2023) .

The wide variety of needs and potential among learners, ranging from physical, cognitive, emotional, to social differences, necessitates educational services that are not merely one-directional and uniform. Therefore, the implementation of inclusive education involves learning strategies that accommodate differences through differentiation approaches, adaptation of media and assistive technology, and the development of a supportive learning environment (Kurniawan, 2025) . These interventions are not only about physical access, but also about how teachers, schools, and the school social environment can create an inclusive atmosphere so that differences are seen as assets, not obstacles.

Theoretically, inclusive education is based on various critical education and social justice theories. For example, Paulo Freire's theory places education as a practice of freedom, rejecting educational systems that oppress and marginalise certain groups. Similarly, John Rawls' view of justice as fairness, in which the education system must be designed in such a way as to provide equal opportunities and fair treatment to all individuals, especially those who are less fortunate (Handayani, 2021) . Within this framework, inclusive education is positioned not merely as a practical policy, but also as a moral and ethical agenda in the development of a humane and democratic education system.

However, the ideal picture of inclusive education often conflicts with the reality on the ground. Many empirical studies show that despite progress in policy, the implementation of inclusive education in various regions still faces significant obstacles

(Aditya, 2024). Factors such as inadequate facilities, lack of teacher training in inclusive methods, and community attitudes that still stigmatise people with disabilities or children with special needs are major obstacles. This situation requires a more in-depth study of practices in the field that can describe the reality and identify feasible solutions to improve the quality and quantity of inclusive education (Komarudin & Kaeni, 2023).

In Indonesia, the success of inclusive education cannot be separated from the role of multiple parties, including the central and regional governments, educational institutions, teachers, and the wider community. Active community involvement and cross-sector support are key to creating an inclusive education ecosystem (Sari, 2022). In addition, various practical innovations such as the development of adaptive curricula, the use of assistive technology, and continuous training for educators have been proven to increase the effectiveness of inclusive learning. Empirical studies from a number of inclusive schools in urban and rural areas indicate that the commitment of various stakeholders is a major factor in the successful transformation of the learning system through inclusive education (Almeqdad, 2023).

The role of teachers in inclusive education is very strategic because they are at the forefront of direct interaction with students. Teachers not only function as providers of material, but also as facilitators who must be able to understand different learning needs and provide appropriate pedagogical treatment. The ideal conditions for inclusive teachers require specific competencies, ranging from the principles of inclusivity and responsive classroom management to the use of differentiated learning methods (German, 2020). Therefore, developing the capacity and professionalism of teachers through training and scholarships for inclusive education needs to be prioritised in the national education agenda.

From a policy perspective, the Indonesian government has committed itself through various regulations to integrating inclusive education into the national education system. However, the implementation of this policy needs to be accompanied by monitoring, evaluation, and bureaucratic reform in order to function effectively. One important aspect that must be focused on is the allocation of adequate and sustainable budgets, which are not only used for physical infrastructure but also for improving the quality of human resources and implementing inclusive learning technologies. Thus, this transformation strategy requires coordination and consistency of policies across sectors and levels of government (Kimhi, 2025).

The context of cultural and social diversity in Indonesia also influences how inclusive education can be accepted and adapted. Each region has its own unique culture and social traditions that can be either strengths or challenges in the process of inclusive education. Culturally sensitive inclusive practices have the potential to strengthen a sense of togetherness and national identity without eliminating local diversity. However, this requires a flexible approach and contextual policies, so that

national policies are able to adapt to regional needs and community characteristics (Lestari & Wijaya, 2024) .

The transformation of the learning system through inclusive education is also in line with the development of digital technology, which offers various opportunities for expanding access and personalised learning. The use of assistive tools and inclusive online learning platforms can bridge physical and geographical barriers and support more adaptive learning (Hadi, 2023) . However, the digital divide remains an obstacle that must be overcome so that technology can truly function as an inclusive tool and not widen the educational gap (Sekar & Wulandari, 2020) .

Given the urgency and complexity of implementing inclusive education, this study will comprehensively examine two main aspects, namely a theoretical analysis that examines the principles and normative frameworks as the strategic basis for inclusive education in Indonesia, and an empirical analysis that examines the implementation of inclusive education in various regional contexts. This literature review approach is essential to combine various theories and empirical data in order to produce evidence-based policy and practice recommendations for achieving educational equality and equity for all students.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical literature review method to examine the implementation of inclusive education as a strategy for transforming the learning system in Indonesia. Data was collected from various secondary sources in the form of scientific journal articles, government policy reports, official documents from the Ministry of Education, and publications from international organisations such as UNESCO and UNICEF (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025) . Data analysis was conducted thematically through data reduction, grouping of key concepts related to inclusive education theory and empirical practices in the field, and critical interpretation of the relevance and success of implementation in the Indonesian context. This study aims to formulate a comprehensive understanding and evidence-based recommendations in order to achieve equality and justice for all students through inclusive education (Adlini et al., 2022) .

Results and Discussion

Theoretical Analysis – Inclusive Education as a Strategy for Transforming the Learning System

Inclusive education is a paradigm that rejects traditional exclusive education that discriminates against students based on physical, mental, or social abilities. As a concept, inclusive education places all children, including those with special needs, in the same learning space with fair and equal educational services (Fraser, 2021) . This paradigm is not only based on physical access, but also emphasises the sustainability of

participation and empowerment of students through the adaptation of the curriculum, methods, and learning environment. The transformation of the learning system based on inclusive education requires a paradigm shift from a hierarchical and standardised system to a holistic, flexible, and humanistic system (Ramadhan, 2022) .

Theoretically, inclusive education is based on the principles of social justice that place the rights and needs of all children as the top priority in the implementation of education. John Rawls' theory of justice, which emphasises fairness and equal opportunity, provides a normative basis that the education system must be able to provide fair treatment, especially for those who are marginalised (Freire, 2006) . Inclusive education seeks to dismantle discriminatory structures that have limited learning opportunities for children with disabilities or from low social backgrounds. Thus, inclusivity is not merely an educational model, but a moral agenda that demands the commitment of the state and society to the principles of justice and equality.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy theory also provides a strong foundation for inclusive education, which views education as a practice of liberation from oppression and marginalisation. Freire rejects the "banking" model of education, which only transfers knowledge in one direction and aims to shape obedience. Instead, inclusive education seeks to create dialogue between teachers and students, value different individual experiences, and develop critical awareness of social injustice. With this model, an inclusive learning system can build students' critical thinking skills and change unjust social structures (Dewi, 2022) .

The inclusive education paradigm is also in line with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach, which emphasises the importance of designing a learning environment that is responsive to the diverse needs of students. UDL encourages flexibility in teaching methods, materials, and assessment so that all children, without exception, can access them. By designing an inclusive learning system from the outset, physical, cognitive, and social barriers to learning can be minimised. The implementation of UDL within the framework of inclusive education is a concrete example of how theory can be operationalised to accommodate individual differences in the learning system (Pratiwi, 2024) .

The development of an adaptive curriculum is an important aspect of inclusive education as part of the transformation of the learning system. An inclusive curriculum not only focuses on the same content, but also accommodates different learning styles through differentiation of content, processes, and learning products (Wibowo, 2021) . This is in line with constructivist learning theory, which places learners at the centre of the learning process by considering the uniqueness of how they construct knowledge. With an inclusive curriculum, schools can provide programmes that are relevant and meaningful for all learners, including those with disabilities or special needs (Kliwer, 2015) .

The role of teachers in inclusive education is crucial because they are agents of change who must internalise the principles of inclusivity and implement them in their daily teaching. The theory of inclusive teacher competence states that educators must have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support student diversity. Teachers must be able to use differentiated learning strategies, manage multi-ability classes, and build a supportive and inclusive learning environment. The transformation of the learning system requires continuous improvement of teachers' professional capacity in order to meet these demands (Todapa, 2024a).

In addition, the educational ecosystem theory views the learning system as a network of interactions that includes internal school factors and external factors such as family, community, and government. Inclusive education broadens the scope of learning system transformation by integrating the involvement of various stakeholders. Cross-sector collaboration and community participation are important foundations in creating an inclusive and sustainable educational environment. Thus, the success of inclusive education does not only depend on schools and teachers, but also on systemic support from relevant stakeholders (Todapa, 2024b).

Furthermore, inclusive education as a strategy for transforming the learning system must also be oriented towards developing the character of students, emphasising the values of tolerance, empathy, and respect for differences. This character development greatly supports an inclusive school climate and encourages the creation of harmonious social relationships among students. Social-emotional development theory explains that an inclusive learning environment plays an important role in shaping children's emotional and social well-being, which in turn strengthens engagement and learning achievement (Rawls, 2025).

The transformation of the learning system with an inclusive approach cannot be separated from the use of educational technology as a medium that can expand access and facilitate personalised learning. Technology-based learning theory asserts that the use of adaptive digital media and assistive technology tools can overcome the physical and cognitive barriers experienced by learners. Thus, technology becomes an important catalyst in expanding the scope of inclusive education and increasing the effectiveness of learning system transformation strategies (Puspitasari & Sari, 2023).

However, the transformation towards inclusive education also faces various theoretical and practical challenges. Theoretically, there is still resistance to the paradigm of traditional education systems, which tend to be homogeneous and prioritise administrative efficiency over diversity and inclusivity (Ummah, 2024). This old paradigm creates structural barriers that are difficult to overcome, so that transformation requires an intensive approach to cultural change and paradigm shift. In practical terms, limited resources and competencies are also obstacles to realising quality and sustainable inclusive education (Yuliana, 2023).

The transformation of the learning system through inclusive education also requires holistic and integrated cross-sectoral policies, which are not sufficient to merely implement partial programmes. The theory of change management in educational organisations teaches that systemic change must involve effective communication, the involvement of all stakeholders, and capacity building at all levels. Inclusive education policies must be understood as long-term development that is interconnected with social, health, and child protection policies in order to have an optimal and sustainable impact (Santoso, 2023).

Furthermore, inclusive education as a strategy for transforming the learning system is in line with the vision of national education development, which aims to develop Indonesians who are faithful, have noble character, are competitive, and uphold social justice. The inclusive paradigm shifts the focus of education from mere academic achievement to education that strengthens human and social values, so that the learning system is able to respond to the challenges of the times by ensuring that no child is left behind. This is important in the context of Indonesia, which is moving towards a more inclusive, democratic, and just society (Suryani, 2022).

The transformation of the inclusive learning system also has an impact on the development of educational evaluation indicators that are more accommodating to the diversity of students. Evaluation is no longer based on a single rigid standard, but accommodates variations in abilities and learning needs. Thus, the assessment system must be adapted to provide a fair and comprehensive picture of student achievement. This will strengthen the achievement of inclusive education goals and support continuous improvement in the learning system (Murawski, 2008).

Finally, inclusive education as a strategy for transforming the learning system in Indonesia provides a great opportunity to strengthen social integration and cultural diversity as the nation's social capital. By creating an inclusive learning space, schools become a microcosm of society that teaches mutual respect and cooperation in diversity. This paradigm not only supports the achievement of educational equality, but also contributes to the development of a more harmonious, just, and democratic society. Thus, inclusive education is a strategic foundation for the future of education and the Indonesian nation as a whole.

Empirical Analysis – Practices of Inclusive Education Implementation in Indonesia

The implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia has received serious attention in the last two decades, in line with the government's commitment through various policies and programmes. The Indonesian government has formulated Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 70 of 2009 as the legal basis for the implementation of inclusive education in primary to secondary schools (Nugraha, 2024). This implementation is particularly evident in local government efforts to provide child-friendly schools with facilities that are accessible to students from various backgrounds,

including children with special needs. However, the reality on the ground shows varying degrees of success influenced by geographical, cultural, and economic factors in the region (Basit, 2025).

Empirical studies highlight that the success of inclusive education is highly dependent on the readiness of educational institutions, particularly the availability of facilities and infrastructure and teacher competence. Successful inclusive schools, such as those in Surabaya and Yogyakarta, demonstrate that specialised teacher training in inclusive education is key. Teachers who have a strong understanding of the principles of inclusivity and differentiated learning methods are able to provide teaching and learning processes that are adaptive and responsive to the needs of students (Katz, 2012). However, many schools in remote areas still face obstacles in accessing this type of training, hindering the effectiveness of the learning system transformation.

Infrastructure conditions are a significant challenge found in field research. Many schools in rural and remote areas do not yet have full accessibility facilities such as ramps, special toilets, and adequate classrooms for children with special needs. These limitations result in physical barriers that directly affect children's full participation in the learning process. On the other hand, schools in urban areas are better able to overcome these barriers, but they still face other challenges such as social stigma and a lack of public understanding about the importance of inclusive education (Barteaux, 2014).

Social and cultural aspects also play a major role in the practice of inclusive education in Indonesia. Some communities still view children with special needs as a burden or stigma, which results in low social support and motivation for the implementation of inclusivity in schools (Kurniawan, 2025). Research shows that changes in the attitudes and awareness of the community, including parents and community leaders, are important factors in the successful implementation of inclusive programmes. Community education initiatives and awareness campaigns involving local leaders have had positive results in reducing discrimination and increasing the participation of inclusive children (Handayani, 2021).

Collaboration between schools, families, and communities is a key pillar in the effective implementation of inclusive education. Case studies in Flores and Bali reveal that schools that successfully integrate parents and communities in supporting inclusive learning have higher success rates in terms of student attendance and achievement. Parental involvement in the learning process and training for parents to support their children at home also contribute to the smooth implementation of inclusive education in schools (Aditya, 2024). In addition, the involvement of various stakeholders, such as education agencies, social institutions, and NGOs, provides important support in strengthening the inclusive learning system. Many regions in Indonesia have established strategic partnerships with non-governmental organisations that provide teacher training, inclusive curriculum development, and mentoring for schools. A concrete

example can be found in Yogyakarta, where local NGOs provide training and ongoing supervision so that teachers are able to provide inclusive and humanistic education services (Komarudin & Kaeni, 2023).

The role of technology in inclusive education practices has also increased, particularly with the Covid-19 pandemic forcing online learning. Empirical studies show that the use of assistive technology such as screen reader applications, interactive learning software, and alternative communication devices helps overcome the physical and cognitive limitations of students. However, the technology access gap remains a major problem, especially in disadvantaged areas that do not yet have adequate internet infrastructure (Aslan et al., 2020); (Manullang et al., 2021).

On the curriculum side, adapting learning materials is a significant challenge. Inclusive schools in various regions implement curriculum differentiation with varying degrees of success. The case in Surabaya shows that the practice of developing learning modules tailored to student needs can increase engagement and learning outcomes (Sari, 2022). However, in many other schools, the lack of resources and official guidelines for teachers has limited curriculum innovation, resulting in inclusive education not running optimally.

Difficulties in conducting assessments are also a real problem in inclusive education practices. Many teachers experience difficulties in adapting evaluation methods that are sensitive to the uniqueness of students with special needs. Rigid, one-size-fits-all assessment systems often do not represent the true abilities of inclusive children, requiring alternative assessment approaches that are more holistic and humanistic to evaluate learning success (Almeqdad, 2023).

Furthermore, policies implemented in the field often experience inconsistencies between central regulations and local conditions. Studies evaluating inclusive education policies in several districts show that although the central government has issued progressive policies, these policies have not been fully and effectively adapted at the regional level due to differences in resources, priorities, and monitoring systems. This has led to significant disparities in implementation between regions, necessitating decentralisation strategies and policy adaptations that are more responsive to the local context (German, 2020).

Support for teacher training and capacity building remains a key recommendation emerging from various empirical research findings. Teachers, as agents of implementation, must be provided with ongoing training, not only in inclusive learning techniques but also in inclusive classroom management and socio-cultural understanding. Innovative, practice-based training programmes have proven effective in improving the quality of learning and fostering teachers' commitment to implementing inclusive education (Kimhi, 2025).

Teachers' motivation and perceptions of inclusive education also influence its implementation in schools. Survey results in several provinces indicate that teachers

who have direct understanding and experience with children with special needs tend to have a positive attitude and are more confident in applying inclusive strategies. Therefore, building a positive culture in schools that values diversity and inclusiveness is one of the keys to the success of the learning system transformation (Lestari & Wijaya, 2024).

In terms of monitoring and evaluation, practices in Indonesia still face significant challenges. A monitoring system that is not well integrated between levels of government and educational institutions results in a lack of valid and comprehensive data on the progress of inclusive education. Accurate and continuous evaluation is needed to determine the effectiveness of programmes and identify appropriate interventions to improve the quality of inclusive education across all regions (Hadi, 2023).

Finally, several cases of local innovation show that inclusive education can work well if supported by visionary school leadership and strong commitment. Inclusive leadership can drive cultural change, mobilise resources, and initiate cross-party collaboration for the success of inclusive programmes.

Conclusion

The implementation of inclusive education as a strategy for transforming the learning system in Indonesia has shown great potential in realising equality and fairness for all students. From a theoretical perspective, inclusive education is based on the principles of social justice, critical education theory, and the universal design for learning approach, which demands a paradigm shift in education from an exclusive model to one that is responsive to the diversity of students. This transformation requires not only the adaptation of the curriculum and learning methods, but also the development of teacher capacity and the management of a learning environment that supports the appreciation of differences as a strength.

Empirically, the practice of inclusive education in Indonesia shows various challenges and successes that are influenced by school readiness, teacher competence, availability of facilities, and support from families and communities. Successful inclusive schools have implemented adequate teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and active community involvement. However, obstacles such as infrastructure limitations, social stigma, technological gaps, and policy disparities between regions remain challenges that need to be overcome to expand the reach and ensure the sustainability of the transformation of inclusive learning systems.

Therefore, inclusive education as a strategy for transforming the learning system must be supported by holistic policies, human resource capacity building, and broad social support. Strengthening cross-sector collaboration and technological innovation needs to be optimised to overcome obstacles in the field. These efforts will not only strengthen access to and quality of education for children with special needs, but also

strengthen the national education system in carrying out its mission of justice and equality, so that all students in Indonesia have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

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