

EMBRACING DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION: FOSTERING INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN SDIT IBNU TAIMIYAH AS A SCHOOL BASED ON NOBLE CHARACTER

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ABSTRACT

Education and diversity are two objects that cannot be separated. Since students have varied backgrounds, it must be able to accommodate the diversity of their characters, potentials, and abilities which is called an inclusive program. One of the schools in Bandung that has implemented this program is SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah. It is a school based on the development of noble character. This research uses qualitative methods to investigate how the foundation's chairperson and principal encourage the teachers to implement an inclusive learning environment in school. The interview and observation revealed that the foundation's chairperson can handle inclusive students and is actively involved in supporting them. Additionally, the principal ensures that teachers receive training on how to treat inclusive students. As an outcome, the teachers can embody a diverse school environment and prevent inclusive student bullying.

Keywords: diversity, education, inclusive learning environment

INTRODUCTION

Diversity in education is essential for fostering a learning environment that mirrors society, where individuals from various backgrounds, cultures, and abilities coexist. According to Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006), "Schools are places where children come to understand the world through the perspectives of others." Educational institutions are crucial in shaping how students understand and appreciate diversity. By embracing diversity, schools teach academic content and cultivate social skills such as empathy, collaboration, and respect for differences. These skills are crucial for preparing students for a globalised society where cross-cultural interactions are the norm.

Inclusive education is an idea derived from embracing diversity in education. It refers to a pedagogical approach that accommodates all students' learning needs. It is a scheme where all learners obtain the same education access although they have disabilities, different cultural backgrounds, different linguistic backgrounds, different characteristics and potential (Sahani and Patel, 2023; Armstrong, 2008; Slee, 2011; Slee, 2018). What is meant by students with different learning needs does not only refer to students who have physical or mental deficiency but also students who have special intelligence and talents (Arriani et al., 2021). These students have the same right to learn and participate in their local mainstream school without discrimination (Thomas, 1997; Arriani et al., 2021). This approach ensures equal access to education, fosters a sense of belonging for all students, fosters supportive peer relationships and reduces the potential for discrimination. (UNESCO, 2020).

The success of fostering an inclusive learning environment depends on teachers' attitudes towards inclusivity and how they develop their skills to increase their competency in the inclusive education field (Supriyanto, 2019). Teachers with a lot of experience in handling special needs students and who had prior training in teaching students with disabilities appeared to hold more positive attitudes than teachers who had not (Supriyanto, 2019; Sunardi et al., 2024). Teachers as the frontliners in delivering education to learners need continuous training to address the diverse needs of students in inclusive settings and to prevent any child from being marginalized (Smith, 2019). Duncan et al. (2021) added, that a significant part of achieving successful inclusion depends on the school's climate and culture, which are greatly shaped by leadership at both the school and systemic levels.

In private schools, school leaders usually consist of the foundation's chairperson and principal. Both of them have a similar role as leaders in encouraging inclusive school practices. They play a crucial role in achieving the school's goals and fulfilling the educational needs of all students (Yazicioglu, 2021). Duncan and Punch (2021) elaborated on the role of school leaders as follows.

1. Serve as instructional leaders by:
 - a. Promoting inclusivity throughout the entire school, establishing clear expectations for inclusion, and encouraging all teachers to recognize and value its significance.
 - b. Providing direct support and regularly monitoring teachers' skills in inclusive education. School leaders also play a vital role in supporting inclusion by recognizing and encouraging teachers' efforts, especially when they successfully meet the diverse needs of their students.
 - c. Managing diversity among the students in school.
2. Curating professional learning
3. Manage resources

Some previous studies that have been conducted by Mbua (2023) and Valdivieso (2020) claim that the success in implementing inclusive education is because of the school leaders' role. Mbua's (2023) findings showed that principals play a crucial role in enhancing achievement levels among all students within inclusive education. They encouraged new perspectives on diversity, cultivated inclusive school cultures, demonstrated positive attitudes toward inclusion, provided supportive actions, facilitated connections and designed instructional programs, and strengthened relationships between schools and their communities. While Valdivieso (2020) stated, the principals implemented several strategies to overcome the challenges in using inclusive education namely promoting inclusive values within the school, engaging with staff and the community to build a supportive climate for inclusion, and creating Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to enhance instructional methods for inclusive teaching.

Related to the two studies above, this study aims to investigate how the foundation's chairperson and principal encourage the teachers to implement an inclusive learning environment at SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah. It is an integrated Islamic elementary school based on the development of noble character. It refers to an individual's admirable moral qualities, values, and actions. It includes traits like faith, piety, integrity, honesty, responsibility, respect for others, and the skill to integrate knowledge and beliefs into everyday life (Rohaeni, 2021). Besides focusing on noble character, this school has already implemented inclusive education since the early 2000s.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore how the leaders of SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah foster an inclusive learning environment. Qualitative research was selected since it enables an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and strategies of the foundation's chairperson and the school principal, who are key stakeholders in promoting inclusivity (Creswell, 2014). The flexible and interpretative nature of qualitative methods allows for a detailed understanding of how teachers are trained and supported in implementing inclusive practices, as well as the results of such interventions.

The justification for using this approach lies in its ability to capture the complexity and nuances of inclusive education as a process shaped by interpersonal relationships, institutional culture, and pedagogical practices. By focusing on individual narratives and real-world practices, qualitative research provides insights into the mechanisms through which inclusive education is encouraged at SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah.

The data for this research were taken from interviews and observations. The interview was conducted in person with the foundation's chairperson, school principal, and teachers. While observation process was carried out during the month of August. Both methods provided complementary data, ensuring that the study captures both the institutional perspective and the practical, day-to-day realities of inclusive education at SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

At the beginning of the founding of SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah in 1999, there was no specific and planned inclusive program since it was designed to be a regular, not special school. After this school had been running for four years, the teacher found that there was a new student who needed different treatment (here we named him student A). The principal and the foundation chairperson agreed to ask a psychologist to help diagnose him. The result said that he has some disabilities which hinder him in the learning process namely Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), speech delay because of a defective jaw, and upper limb disability. Besides the psychological and physical disability, Student A also has a habit of stealing money to buy food or snacks since he came from a poor family and could not afford it. The psychologist and some teachers suggested the school leaders transfer him to a special school since they were afraid, they could not handle him. However, the principal and the chairperson argued that if he is transferred, he will only interact with special students particularly and will demote his learning motivation. Moreover, they argued he would hardly join society in the future since he never learned to interact with regular students daily.

Since the acceptance of this student, several parents have sent their children with special needs to SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah as they see that regular schools can accept special students. Seeing this, the school leaders realized they needed to prepare the teachers and the stakeholders to make an inclusive school environment, which allows special and regular students to learn and play together under one roof without discrimination.

Roles of Foundation's Chairperson

As the mastermind of the institution, the foundation's chairperson has a core idea of inclusion. She wants to create a school not only for regular students but also for the disabled. She regrets not being able to accept students with learning disabilities, since she

believes that all children have the same right to obtain a good education. Hand in hand with the principal, she tries to embody an inclusive education program for her school.

The foundation's chairperson designed a class consisting of a maximum of 30 students with two teachers for each class. Afterwards, she started to socialize inclusivity with teachers who were blind to the topic. She realizes that making teachers aware and building their competencies in educating special needs students to promote an inclusive ecosystem is extensive work. In the beginning, she only guided the teachers by herself in indirect collaboration with a psychologist. Subsequently, she expanded the collaboration links with some parties as follows:

1. Psychological Consulting Agency

The foundation's chairperson decided to officially collaborate with a psychological consulting agency to diagnose students when they first enter school, train teachers so they can handle students with disabilities in regular situations, and handle students who have serious psychological problems and need further therapy. The agency then will decide whether the students need a helper in class or not based on the psychological test data and observation results. If the disabilities are not severe, do not disturb others, and the student will not be advised to be assisted by a special helper. Two teachers in each class are considered capable of handling 28 students with one or two special needs students in it. If the result shows severe disability and tends to disturb others, then the students are advised to be assisted by a special helper. If the result shows extremely severe disability, the school will advise the student to go to a special school or homeschool under the guidance of a professional therapist.

Some disabilities that cannot be accepted at SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah are Down syndrome, hearing impairment, visual impairment, neurological disorder, cerebral palsy, and other conditions that need extra treatment from experts. While commonly, the chairperson and the principal agree to accept students whose disabilities can be managed by the teachers, such as dyslexia, some spectrum of autism, ADHD, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), slow learners, Thalassemia, obesity and other conditions that are not too burdensome for teachers. Besides students with disability, SDIT IbnuTaimiyah also has some students who have a problematic character and need professional help, like the students described before.

2. School Visit

In the early 2000s, SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah was a new school that implemented an inclusive program to foster diversity in education. It needed guidelines and coaching from schools that had already implemented the program. Although the word "inclusive" is barely used in public schools, some private schools in Bandung have already executed the program. The chairperson then contacted the leaders of two distinguished private schools to carry out a comparative study. The chairperson observed the school ecosystem and class situation during the learning process; how the teacher indulges with the special students, how the regular students engage with the special students, and how the special students are involved in the class activity. She also requested the principals to be a mentors for her in implementing an inclusive education scheme in her school.

The result from the comparative study and mentoring was then discussed with the principals and the teachers. Here she involved all the teachers, not only those who in their class have special students, since the inclusive program is for a whole school as a society which interacts with the special students. Subsequently, since that time until now, she has been active in mentoring the teachers and evaluating the program thoroughly.

3. Social Enterprise

In January 2024, the chairperson signed a cooperation contract with a social enterprise focused on diversity in education called Peace Generation (PeaceGen). She blends the school curriculum with the PeaceGen curriculum to advance the inclusive program. The curriculum consists of 12 basic values of peace which discuss accepting oneself with all of the strengths and weaknesses and intercommunicating with people with different cultural backgrounds, religions, genders, and people who have disabilities.

Roles of Principal

1. Alliance with The Provincial Education Office

To help support the mental and cognitive development of special students, the principal contacted the Provincial Education Office to become an inclusive school legally, thus the school is not working alone, but with assistance from the government. The Provincial Education Office suggested building a typical building in the same area as the main school building as the place for all special students to learn, including those who have mild and severe disability. They will give everything needed in the construction process, including facilities for the disabled in the school environment. Nevertheless, the principal considered some points. Primarily, if the special needs study in a separate room from other students, then inclusivity will not occur optimally or possibly will not occur at all, since the purpose of inclusive school is to provide special needs students opportunity to learn and play in a regular school situation with regular people. Furthermore, if the building is only for those who have severe disability, the school lacks sufficient land for constructing a new building. Therefore, the application to become a legally inclusive school cannot be realized.

The principal asked the Provincial Education Office to allow students whose intelligence is not developed not to take the National Examination, instead they will take a final test based on their thinking capacity. Afterwards, the score of the final test will be converted into a National Examination score to be written on the graduation certificate. She provided the psychological test results of the students to the government to be reviewed. After some review and discussion, the government approved the principal's request.

On the day of the trial for the National Examination, the special students sit with their friends in the same class. They only practice how to fill out the National Examination answer sheet, how to write their identity on the answer sheet, and how to circle the answer choices neatly, while their other friends practice answering questions. Therefore, on the day of the National Examination, the special students feel they are included normally as the others.

2. Teacher Training

The principal actively encourages teachers to take part in training related to handling students with special needs, inclusive education, and anti-bullying. Since 1999, almost all teachers have attended training programs or seminars on implementing inclusive programs and self-development for teachers, which are mostly organized by private organizations. In 2023, a teacher who serves as a vice principal for curriculum representing the school for Special Mentor Training (*Diklat GPK*) held by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Republic of Indonesia.

3. Weekly Teacher Evaluation

Every Tuesday, all teachers gathered to evaluate the learning process for the past week. Each teacher reports what they have done for the learning process, and every case they

found among the students. The principal evaluates the success in achieving program objectives, the effectiveness of learning methods, student participation, parental support, student learning outcomes, teacher's ability in problem-solving, and hindrances in implementing inclusion programs. Usually, the foundation chairperson gives some lectures regarding inclusive education based on cases in inclusive education that she has handled, the results of training she has attended, and what she has read.

Teacher Practices and Outcomes

1. Reduction In Learning Outcomes

At the beginning of the new school year, first-class teachers are given a psychological test result of the students from the psychologist, while other teachers receive students' reports from the previous class teachers. It serves as a guide for teachers to determine student learning outcomes for a year. If there are special students, the teacher may decrease the learning outcomes for them.

For example, Student B who graduated in 2022 has autism and is a slow learner. When he was in the first until third grade, he could only understand lessons for kindergarten students. Later on, when he was in fourth grade, he was evaluated again because there seemed to be development in his thinking process. The result says that his capacity rises one level. Therefore, his fourth-grade teacher levelled up his lesson by giving him material for first graders. Evidently, his abilities remained at the same level until he was in sixth grade. For six years of school, he was only able to learn simple addition and subtraction, read in three syllables, memorize Arabic letters, and memorize half of Juz 30 of The Qur'an. He passed the final exam which was suitable for his ability.

2. No Bullying Program

At SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah, there are no cases of bullying involving students with special needs. During the observation process, students appeared to interact with their peers with special needs comfortably, without feeling awkward, fearful, or annoyed. If any student intentionally or unintentionally engages in bullying, the teacher takes firm action. The lesson is paused, and the class discussion shifts to addressing the topic of bullying. The perpetrator will be interviewed and advised, helping them to understand their mistake and become fully aware not to repeat it.

SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah's journey toward inclusive education reflects a proactive approach in an environment initially limited in resources and expertise. The school's foundation chairperson and principal played central roles in shaping an inclusive model that extends beyond the traditional acceptance of students with special needs. Initially, the school was not designed to support students requiring unique accommodations. However, recognizing the need for inclusivity, the chairperson began reshaping the school's policies and culture to welcome all students. She took practical steps to engage with external support, such as psychologists and social enterprises and collaborated with teachers to build their awareness and competencies in supporting diverse students. By working closely with staff and partnering with agencies like PeaceGen to integrate a peace-centred curriculum, the chairperson and principal established a structure where diversity is embraced rather than merely accommodated, enriching the school's educational environment and social values.

The impact of these inclusive practices on the school community has been significant. Teachers report becoming more adept at recognizing and supporting students' varied needs through regular training and evaluation sessions. Weekly meetings allow teachers to discuss progress, share experiences, and address challenges collaboratively,

fostering a collective sense of responsibility for all students. This structure not only enhances teachers' abilities to handle diversity but also establishes a culture of acceptance among students. The 'No Bullying' program has been effective in promoting understanding and empathy, with students interacting naturally with peers who have different abilities. By introducing the values of acceptance early on, the school not only reduces incidents of bullying but also helps students develop lifelong skills in tolerance and collaboration, essential qualities for contributing to a diverse society.

Despite these positive strides, SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah continues to face challenges in its mission to fully support inclusive education. Limited resources and local policy constraints prevent the school from officially registering as a fully inclusive institution. This limitation affects its capacity to accept students with severe disabilities, as the school must carefully balance inclusivity with practical considerations of staff availability and infrastructure. The principal's decision to keep special needs students integrated in regular classes, despite government recommendations to create separate facilities, underscores her commitment to true inclusion. While more challenging, this approach allows special needs students to learn alongside their peers, fostering natural social interactions and reducing feelings of isolation. This case demonstrates that while inclusive education may require substantial resources, a commitment to inclusivity, coupled with community partnerships and continuous professional development, can lead to meaningful integration and positively impact the entire school community.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah's transformation into an inclusive educational institution exemplifies how intentional leadership and strategic partnerships can foster an environment of acceptance and support for all students. Despite initially being a regular school, the proactive efforts of the foundation's chairperson and principal gradually established a culture that values inclusivity. Through partnerships with psychologists, collaboration with organizations like PeaceGen, and ongoing teacher training, the school has embedded inclusivity into its framework, benefiting both special needs students and their peers. This approach not only nurtures empathy and tolerance among students but also builds teachers' competencies to support diverse learning needs, creating a more cohesive and supportive community.

While limitations in resources and infrastructure pose ongoing challenges, SDIT Ibnu Taimiyah demonstrates that inclusive education is achievable with strong commitment and adaptability. The school's choice not to isolate special needs students in separate facilities underscores its dedication to authentic inclusivity, allowing all students to interact, learn, and grow together. This case highlights that inclusive education is not only about accommodating students with special needs but also about enriching the entire school environment, cultivating values essential for students' personal development and societal integration.

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