

Building Child-Friendly Schools in Rural Areas: The Power of Inclusive Education Management

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyse education empowerment in rural areas through inclusive management to create child-friendly schools. The study is based on the increasing need for an education system that can serve all children, including those with special needs, especially in rural areas, so inclusive management in schools plays a vital role in ensuring equal opportunities for all students. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study methodology, using in-depth interviews and observations as data collection techniques, with data analysis according to the Miles and Huberman approach. The study's findings revealed that empowering child-friendly schools in rural areas requires the implementation of a responsive curriculum, a safe and inclusive school environment, qualified teachers with continuous professional development, and active community participation. A secure and discrimination-free environment fosters students' social and emotional development, while professional development for teachers enhances their ability to meet the various needs of students. In addition, community participation in inclusive management strengthens the support of resources, facilities, and social collaboration, significantly contributing to the creation of stronger inclusive education in rural areas. The study contributes to understanding the essential components needed to implement inclusive education in rural areas.

Keywords: *Empowerment of Education, Rural Areas, Inclusive Management, Child-Friendly Schools*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pemberdayaan pendidikan di daerah pedesaan melalui manajemen inklusif untuk menciptakan sekolah ramah anak. Penelitian ini didasarkan pada meningkatnya kebutuhan akan sistem pendidikan yang dapat melayani semua anak, termasuk mereka yang berkebutuhan khusus, terutama di daerah pedesaan, sehingga manajemen inklusif di sekolah memegang peranan penting dalam memastikan kesempatan yang sama bagi semua siswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metodologi studi kasus, menggunakan wawancara mendalam dan observasi sebagai teknik pengumpulan data, dengan analisis data menurut pendekatan Miles dan Huberman. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa pemberdayaan sekolah ramah anak di daerah pedesaan memerlukan penerapan kurikulum yang responsif, lingkungan sekolah yang aman dan inklusif, guru yang berkualitas dengan pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan, dan partisipasi aktif masyarakat. Lingkungan yang aman dan bebas diskriminasi mendorong perkembangan sosial dan emosional siswa, sementara pengembangan profesional bagi guru meningkatkan kemampuan mereka untuk memenuhi berbagai kebutuhan siswa. Selain

itu, partisipasi masyarakat dalam manajemen inklusif memperkuat dukungan sumber daya, fasilitas, dan kolaborasi sosial, yang secara signifikan berkontribusi pada penciptaan pendidikan inklusif yang lebih kuat di daerah pedesaan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi untuk memahami komponen penting yang dibutuhkan untuk menerapkan pendidikan inklusif di daerah pedesaan.

Kata Kunci: *Pemberdayaan Pendidikan, Pedesaan, Manajemen Inklusif, Sekolah Ramah Anak*

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INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the main pillars in a country's social and economic development. Inclusive education, which focuses on the acceptance and empowerment of each child regardless of their background, special needs, or physical condition, is a fundamental principle in a fair and equitable education system (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024; Kenny et al., 2023). In Indonesia, the diversity of students with special needs, including children with disabilities, is a challenge in providing quality education, especially in rural areas (Carvalho et al., 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2024; Somad et al., 2024). Special Schools (SLB), as educational institutions explicitly designed for children with disabilities, have a vital role in realizing equal educational opportunities for them (Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024; Sorkos & Hajisoteriou, 2021; Warman, 2021). Although SLBs have a clear mission to serve children with special needs, many SLBs, especially in rural areas, face various challenges in terms of management, teaching quality, as well as limited human resources and facilities

SLB PGRI Pademawu, located in Buddagan Village, Pademawu District, Pamekasan Regency, Madura, is one of the extraordinary schools that strategically provide education access for children with special needs in rural areas, as an institution that is expected to provide educational services to children with various disabilities. As a school located in a rural area, SLB PGRI Pademawu faces some challenges that often hinder the optimal educational process, such as difficulties in implementing more structured management, lack of facilities and infrastructure that suit the needs of students with disabilities, limited number and quality of educators trained in teaching children with special needs, and low public awareness about the importance of education for children with special needs.

Educational empowerment in SLB in rural areas needs to be handled with a more holistic and inclusive approach. Inclusive management in this context is not only concerned with supporting administrative and policy processes (Zhllima et al., 2023) but also includes the creation of a child-friendly, safe, and supportive learning environment that can support the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of each student, regardless of their disability (Cahyono et al., 2023; Faye et al., 2024). Child-friendly, inclusive schools in the context of SLB have a deeper essence because it is expected to be a place that not only educates (Syamsi & Tahar, 2021) but also nurtures, protects, and provides opportunities for children with disabilities to grow and develop according to their potential.

The concept of child-friendly schools in SLB in rural areas must involve various aspects, ranging from the provision of facilities that suit the needs of

students with disabilities, the fulfillment of children's psychological and social rights, to increasing the capacity of teachers and educators in dealing with the specific needs of each individual (Setianto & Risdiani, 2024; Sujarwanto et al., 2024). Inclusive management in this case plays an important role in designing a flexible curriculum, adaptive teaching methods, and encouraging teachers to carry out learning that suits the needs of students (Ayomsari & Azizah, 2024; Tawa et al., 2024).

Research conducted by Al-Karimah et al. (2024) shows that inclusive education management putsizes the management of inclusive education programs—namely, planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling. Inclusive education management in the learning process and teachers' handling of children with special needs (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021), must carry out management functions related to planning, organizing, activating, coordinating, directing and supervising starting from the learning strategy process, learning media, teacher attitudes and evaluation of learning outcomes (Allam & Martin, 2021; Demchenko et al., 2021). The management of inclusive education services is carried out by providing facilities and infrastructure that meet the needs of Students with Special Needs (PDBK), competent educators, modifying the curriculum and assessment system for PDBK, and creating a pleasant learning atmosphere (Ilyas et al., 2022; Nofiaturrahmah & Kusmiyarsih, 2023; Simorangkir, 2021). The concept of school-based inclusive education management can be a solution to the problem of inclusive schools at every level in improving the quality of education by optimizing the role of educational components such as teachers as the leading resource in managing the system to evaluating the learning process in the modified curriculum, facilities, and infrastructure (Dignath et al., 2022; Shutaleva et al., 2023)—the goals of inclusive education are to improve the quality of education for children with special needs.

While many studies have emphasized the importance of inclusive education, there is still a lack of specific research focusing on empowering education in rural areas, especially in Special Schools (SLB). Previous studies have focused on inclusive education management in urban contexts, ignoring the unique challenges schools face in rural areas, such as limited resources, infrastructure, and teacher competencies. This research gap highlights the need for deeper exploration of how inclusive management practices can specifically address the challenges in rural SLB and provide tailored solutions to empower the education system in these areas. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the impact of inclusive management strategies in rural SLB and its potential to transform these schools into child-friendly environments that meet the needs of students with disabilities.

The main objective of this study is to investigate how inclusive management practices can empower education in rural areas, specifically in the Special School (SLB) of the Indonesian Teachers Association (PGRI) Pademawu, Pamekasan. This study focuses on identifying and analyzing factors that influence the effectiveness of inclusive management in improving the quality of education for children with special needs in rural SLB, especially in terms of infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum modification. The study seeks to examine how

the creation of child-friendly schools can enhance the overall development of students, both academically and socially. The study's originality lies in examining inclusive education in a rural context, emphasizing the importance of adapting management strategies to meet the specific needs of students in these areas, thus offering a new perspective on a well-established topic.

The need for inclusive education in rural areas is not just a theoretical ideal but also a practical necessity. Rural schools, especially special schools, face many challenges that hinder their ability to provide quality education, including limited infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and low public awareness of the importance of inclusive education for children with special needs. The study argues that inclusive management practices—such as curriculum adaptation, teacher empowerment, and the provision of accessible facilities—can significantly improve the learning experience for students in rural special schools. By addressing these challenges through a child-friendly approach, inclusive management empowers students and creates a sustainable education system that can thrive in rural areas.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative case study approach (Matta, 2022). This approach was chosen to deeply understand the implementation of inclusive management in creating child-friendly schools in rural areas. The study aims to explore existing practices and analyze how certain factors influence the success of inclusive education in these environments.

The data collection techniques used in this study consist of primary and secondary data, as shown in Table 1. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews and observations on implementing inclusive management in creating child-friendly schools in rural areas. Secondary data was obtained through literature reviews, such as journals, articles, and documentation relevant to the research topic.

Table 1. Data Collection Matrix

Aspects	Indicator	Technique	Report
Responsive Curriculum	A curriculum that is responsive to the needs of students	Interviews, Observations	Teachers, Principals, Parents
Safe and Inclusive Environment	A safe and inclusive environment for students with special needs	Observations, Interviews	Teachers, Principals, Students, Parents
Teacher Qualification and Development	Qualification and professional development of teachers	Interviews, Observations	Teacher, Principal
Community Participation	Community participation in inclusive management in SLB	Interviews, Observations	Parents, Community, Community Leaders
Inclusive Policies	Implementation of inclusive policies in schools	Observations, Interviews	Principal, Teacher

Data analysis in this study was carried out in four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusions based on the Miles and Huberman approach (Truman, 2023). The first stage is data collection through interviews and observations. After that, the data obtained is reduced to filter

relevant information. Then, the selected data is presented systematically to facilitate understanding. Finally, conclusions are drawn based on the results of the data analysis that has been presented.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Responsive Curriculum

In the increasingly dynamic development of education, the need for a curriculum responsive to students' diversity is becoming increasingly relevant, especially in special education environments such as Special Schools (SLB). SLB plays a significant role in ensuring fair and equitable education for students with special needs. The responsive curriculum is designed to adapt to each student's potential, needs, and limitations, providing more personalized and effective access to the teaching and learning process.

In line with what Yuliana said as a teacher of SLB PGRI Pademawu, "the responsive curriculum is applied by adjusting the material and learning methods according to the needs of each student. Each student has different characteristics, so a learning program is designed specifically for them by compiling an Individual Learning Program (ILP) with learning targets for each ability." In realizing responsive curriculum synchronization, teacher involvement is crucial. Teachers not only play the role of teachers but also as facilitators who can understand student needs and design effective learning strategies.

Implementing a responsive curriculum also requires support from various parties, such as school principals, parents, and the community. This statement is supported by Muhammad Maski Khalil, a teacher, who said, "In addition to teachers, parents play a critical role in implementing the responsive curriculum. They are very supportive of children's development. In addition, there is cooperation with psychological therapists to understand the condition and needs of children." Thus, a responsive curriculum is a curriculum that is developed and designed based on the needs, potential of students, their socio-culture, and environment.

Table 2. Implementation of Curriculum Based on Grade Level

No	Ladder	Classification	Class	Curriculum
1	SDLB	Low	1-4	Curriculum 2013
		Tall	5-6	Independent Curriculum
2	SMPLB	Low	7-8	Curriculum 2013
		Tall	9	Independent Curriculum
3	SMALB	Low	10-11	Curriculum 2013
		Tall	12	Independent Curriculum

Table 2 illustrates the curriculum adjustment according to the needs and ability levels of students at each level of education, aiming to ensure that the material provided is appropriate to their development and learning needs. The curriculum is designed to be more flexible and adaptive to diverse students, including those with special needs. Several actors are involved in preparing the responsive curriculum, including teachers, school principals, parents, and local communities. Based on the results of observations, each student has a PPI that is

routinely monitored and evaluated by teachers. This program is adjusted based on the material and learning methods according to the needs of each student.

Safe and Inclusive School Environment

A safe and inclusive environment in a child-friendly school is the foundation to create a conducive learning atmosphere for students, especially at SLB PGRI Pademawu. The school environment must be free from discrimination and bullying, and must have facilities and infrastructure that support all the needs of children with special needs. This is reinforced by the opinion of Dwi Kurnia Maulidia, as the principal of SLB PGRI Pademawu, "A comfortable and conducive environment is very important for students, not only focusing on physical aspects such as accessibility and physical safety, but also creating a warm atmosphere, where every child feels accepted and valued. It also ensures that all children feel comfortable interacting. "All parties in SLB have a role in creating a safe and inclusive environment, including principals, teachers, staff, and students.

Teachers must have empathy and understanding of the special needs of children. In addition, parents also play a role in supporting this program by ensuring that their children feel comfortable, accepted, and valued in the school environment. This is in line with Yuliana's statement as a teacher, "All parties have an important role. Teachers, of course, must have empathy and understanding regarding student needs. The role of school principals, staff, and school guardians is also important. All must work together to create a positive and supportive environmental culture. In addition, parents also have a role by providing support and understanding what the school is trying to do." Thus, a safe and inclusive school environment is comfortable, conducive, and discrimination-free. It also has supportive infrastructure facilities and a warm family atmosphere, so children feel accepted and appreciated. All parties, including principals, teachers, staff, and parents, have a role in creating a safe and inclusive school environment.



Figure 1. Impact of Safe and Inclusive Schools

The buildings at SLB PGRI Pademawu, which look simple and have a disability-friendly design, are considered accessible for students with physical disabilities in Figure 1. In the classroom, the school arranges to be comfortable and adequate for various student needs. To support a comfortable environment, teachers strive to create a family atmosphere through personal communication with students and emotional support for students so that they feel comfortable and valued.

Teacher Qualification and Professional Development

Teachers have a central role in building an optimal learning environment. Therefore, it is important for teachers to have special qualifications and always strive to improve their competence through various activities such as training, workshops, and seminars. The statement of Dwi Kurnia Maulidia supports this: "Teachers must always learn and adapt. Teachers at SLB Negeri Pademawu actively participate in special training, such as learning methods based on individual needs and communication skills with students with special emotional conditions. The training helps face various challenges, because each child has a different way of learning and needs."

The education office and local government play a role in improving the quality of education in child-friendly SLB. In supporting the teacher profession, this institution must collaborate in developing policy strategies that ensure the improvement of teacher competence, create an inclusive learning environment, and support the special needs of students. Through continuous training, the education office provides relevant knowledge and skills for teachers to optimize the teaching and learning process. This aligns with Yuliana's statement, "Teachers often participate in trainings held by the education office. The school also occasionally conducts training independently for more specific training on student needs. Hope for the government to be able to provide more specific training for the needs of SLB teachers, including child-friendly schools, it is also hoped that there will be support in the form of more complete learning facilities."

It can be concluded that teacher qualifications and competencies must continually be developed to support teachers' skills in the learning process based on different student needs through training activities held by the government or independently. Based on the findings, each teacher has a special education certification and regularly participates in training related to inclusive learning techniques. This helps them deal with students with different needs professionally and effectively.

Community Participation in Inclusive Management

Collaboration between schools and communities is essential in creating a fair and sustainable society to support the sustainability of inclusive management in schools. By involving the community, SLB PGRI Pademawu can get wider support to become a child-friendly school and meet the needs of students. The statement supports this as a teacher of "Community participation is constructive, even though it has limited resources. Parents are very involved in school activities, supporting learning activities and school events. Other support also comes from community leaders who indirectly strengthen the morale of parents related to the importance of education. Also, establish cooperation with the village community to get facility assistance".

A welcoming and inclusive environment requires support from all parties, including parents, residents, the government, and various communities. However, there are challenges to providing child-friendly SLB. Inclusive education requires understanding and cooperation between the community and schools to create an environment that encourages the potential of children's welfare. This argument is in line with the statement of Muhammad Maski Khalil as a teacher: "Efforts to

increase community participation can be carried out by community education, especially through the collaboration of community leaders."

So, the community's and parents' participation is very important in implementing inclusive education. This support can help the inclusive education process run optimally. Parents actively provide information and guidance on communicating best with their children, such as using simple sign language or visual methods. This helps teachers adjust their learning methods according to each student's needs.

Discussion

The curriculum in education plays a massive role in determining the progress of a country's education, from concepts to applications and practices in the field (Elmassah et al., 2022). The educational curriculum is a series of plans and guidelines that govern the learning process in an educational institution. This includes various elements, such as subject matter, learning objectives, teaching methods, assessment, and curriculum development (Fahmi et al., 2024; Ibad, 2024). The responsive curriculum is designed to meet students' learning needs, including children with special needs in SLB. This flexible and adaptive curriculum adjusts to materials and learning methods according to students' abilities, interests, and needs. In the context of a child-friendly school, this curriculum prioritizes the comfort and welfare of children in the learning process. Responsive curriculum is the key to facing the dynamics and challenges of the times.

Students' needs, abilities, learning objectives, challenges, and opportunities must be considered when developing a responsive curriculum. Because it sees that students at SLB have different special needs in both intellectual, physical, and emotional aspects, thus the responsive curriculum is a solution in creating an inclusive and child-friendly learning environment by giving children equal opportunities to develop according to their potential. A responsive curriculum must adapt to local and global needs and developments (Indrawati & Kuncoro, 2021), so that students develop a deep understanding of global and local issues and the skills needed. Participate in an increasingly complex and connected society.

The curriculum used in SLB PGRI Pademawu uses the regular curriculum that applies in public schools. However, because the diversity of obstacles experienced by students with special needs varies greatly, ranging from light to severe, in its implementation, the regular curriculum needs to be modified or aligned in such a way that it suits the needs of each student. There are two curricula, namely the 2013 curriculum, which is applied to high grades, and the independent curriculum, which is applied to low grades.

A comfortable and inclusive school environment is a form of implementation of child-friendly schools. Child-friendly schools strive to acquire and retain children from diverse backgrounds, respect diversity, and ensure non-discrimination (Cahyono et al., 2023). A safe and inclusive school environment is an environment where all students, without exception, feel protected, valued, and well accepted. In SLB, this concept involves equal treatment for each child by paying attention to their mental, physical, and emotional special needs. Creating a safe and supportive learning space is the role of teachers to form a positive

educational environment (Demchenko et al., 2021; Zaini & Fahmi, 2023). The main factor in creating this safe atmosphere is not limited to the physical aspects of the classroom, but also involves the social and emotional dimensions. A comfortable and safe classroom environment allows students to speak, express themselves, and ask questions without fear of ridicule or judgment (Sorkos & Hajisoteriou, 2021). Supporting children's mental and emotional well-being must be the primary concern. Building an inclusive school culture, minimizing discrimination, and providing psychosocial support can make the school environment safer and more comfortable for all students.

Child-friendly schools aim to ensure that all children, including children with special needs, receive equal education and protection. The concept of child-friendly schools is not intended to build new schools, but to create comfortable conditions in schools for children, and children's rights to education and protection are fulfilled. Implementing child-friendly schools in SLB includes providing facilities and services that cater to special needs, such as physical accessibility, learning aids, and competent and patient teachers in coaching and learning processes (Cahyono et al., 2023). Children in SLB must also be guaranteed protection from all forms of violence in the school environment. So, a safe and inclusive environment can be realized at SLB by creating an environment that supports academics and children's physical, emotional, and social well-being.

Teachers are one of the most important factors in implementing inclusive education; the success and achievement of education will depend on the teacher's readiness. Teacher readiness is the key to success in implementing inclusive education (Kasmah et al., 2023). Teacher qualifications at SLB refer to the competency standards that must be possessed by teachers in order to educate students with special needs. Teachers must have special skills and knowledge to support students with special needs.

Teachers in professional inclusive education have skills and abilities according to general and special competency standards. Inclusive teacher competence must be based on four main competencies: pedagogical, personality, social, and professional (Khotimah et al., 2024; Muna et al., 2021). Inclusive teacher competencies are oriented explicitly to three abilities, namely (generalability), basic abilities (basic ability), which include religious character and personality, having attitudes and abilities to actualize themselves as citizens, and an attitude of appreciating the diversity of students.

By reviewing students in SLB who have different needs from those in regular schools, teachers must have qualified qualifications and competencies. This is a challenge for teachers who must understand how to support children's development and learning. Teachers need training activities to develop their professional competence. Participating in teacher training can provide good services for students, so that a child-friendly learning process is created by paying attention to aspects of comfort, conduciveness, and inclusiveness. Child-friendly schools in SLB aim to provide a safe, comfortable, and inclusive environment for all students, especially children with special needs (Akmaliyah et al., 2021). Community participation in inclusive management at SLB is the involvement of the community to support, supervise, and assist SLB in realizing inclusive and child-friendly education.

Parents are the closest people who understand children's special needs. In realizing child-friendly schools in SLB, they are the leading partners of teachers and education personnel. Active involvement of parents in school activities can increase their commitment to children's education and strengthen the relationship between home and school (Yulianti et al., 2021). In addition, the school also collaborates with communities and organizations that support inclusive education. This collaboration involves various parties, including health professionals, psychologists, non-governmental organizations, and local communities.

The surrounding community also has a role in supporting the creation of child-friendly schools in SLB. This participation can be done through involvement in school events, providing access to child-friendly facilities, and instilling inclusive values in their surroundings. The community leaders also play an important role in supporting the creation of child-friendly schools in SLB by acting as a liaison between the school and the community, helping to increase public understanding of the importance of supporting children with special needs, and encouraging inclusivity in various social events. This opinion is relevant to research conducted by Nilholm (2021), who stated that as understanding increases, people become more open to integrating inclusive approaches in the local education system. The importance of community participation is not only limited to symbolic support, but also involves them in the planning and implementing inclusive education programs. More people and parents actively supporting teaching and learning activities, both inside and outside the classroom, can create a more comfortable and inclusive environment.

The implementation of genuine community participation in SLB can be done in various ways, including: First, building open and collaborative communication: this means that schools need to create a communication forum with parents and the surrounding community so that all parties can discuss with each other about how to support the development of children with special needs in SLB—second, holding an educational program for the community, meaning holding a special educational program for parents, teachers, and the community that includes an understanding of the importance of inclusive education for children with special needs and how to support these children—third, providing facilities that support children with special needs, meaning that schools work with the government and social organizations to provide facilities such as learning aids—fourth, developing inclusive school policies, meaning that the community is involved in preparing school policies related to inclusivity, so that fair and child-friendly rules are created that ensure that school policies are by the needs of children with special needs.

The implications of this study indicate that implementing a responsive curriculum and creating an inclusive and safe school environment are essential to support the development of students with special needs, especially in special schools (SLB). These findings provide valuable insights for education policymakers, teachers, and the community in designing more adaptive and child-friendly education programs. Thus, this study can be a reference for developing more comprehensive and sustainable education policies, as well as providing a

basis for developing training programs for teachers to be better prepared to face challenges in inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

Responsive curriculum in SLB adapts learning materials and methods to the specific needs of each student. Teachers act as facilitators who design Individual Learning Programs (ILP) to support student development. A safe and inclusive school environment, such as in SLB PGRI Pademawu, is important to ensure students feel protected. Disability-friendly facilities are provided to create a comfortable learning environment, supported by the cooperation of teachers, principals, staff, and parents. Professional development of teachers in inclusive education is urgently needed, including special training provided by the education office. Community support in inclusive management helps realize equitable education. Collaboration between schools and communities creates a learning environment that values diversity and meets the needs of children with special needs. This study has several limitations, including focusing on one case study in SLB PGRI Pademawu, which may not fully represent the challenges other schools face in rural areas. Future research should consider expanding the scope to include several SLBs in various regions to gain a broader understanding of the implementation of inclusive education in various contexts.

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