

TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN TEACHING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN PUBLIC KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOMS

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Abstract Inclusive education in early childhood settings emphasizes equal learning opportunities for children with special needs within regular classrooms. However, the implementation of inclusive practices in public kindergarten classrooms presents various challenges for teachers, particularly due to diverse learner needs and limited institutional support. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by teachers in teaching children with special needs in public kindergarten classrooms. Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, the study was conducted in a public kindergarten that implements inclusive education. The participants were kindergarten teachers selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience teaching children with special needs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, and were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and issues. The findings indicate that teachers encounter significant challenges in managing children's behavior and attention, implementing instructional adaptations without systematic planning, assessing inconsistent developmental progress, and coping with emotional stress. These challenges are further intensified by limited professional competence, lack of formal training in inclusive education, and minimal institutional support, including the absence of support teachers and specialist services. The study highlights the need for targeted professional development, structured instructional planning, and strengthened school support systems to ensure the effective and sustainable implementation of inclusive education in public kindergarten settings.

Abstrak. Pendidikan inklusif pada jenjang pendidikan anak usia dini menekankan pemberian kesempatan belajar yang setara bagi anak berkebutuhan khusus dalam kelas reguler. Namun, penerapan praktik pendidikan inklusif di taman kanak-kanak negeri masih menghadapi berbagai tantangan, terutama akibat keberagaman kebutuhan peserta didik dan keterbatasan dukungan institusional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi tantangan yang dihadapi guru dalam mengajar anak berkebutuhan khusus di kelas taman kanak-kanak negeri. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif deskriptif dan dilaksanakan di sebuah taman kanak-kanak negeri yang menerapkan pendidikan inklusif. Partisipan penelitian adalah guru taman kanak-kanak yang dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling berdasarkan pengalaman langsung mereka dalam mengajar anak berkebutuhan khusus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan observasi kelas, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola dan permasalahan yang muncul. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru menghadapi tantangan signifikan dalam mengelola perilaku dan perhatian anak, menerapkan adaptasi pembelajaran tanpa perencanaan yang sistematis, menilai perkembangan anak yang tidak konsisten, serta menghadapi beban emosional. Tantangan-tantangan tersebut diperparah oleh keterbatasan kompetensi profesional, kurangnya pelatihan formal dalam pendidikan inklusif, serta minimnya dukungan institusional, termasuk ketiadaan guru pendamping dan layanan spesialis. Penelitian ini menegaskan perlunya pengembangan profesional guru yang terarah, perencanaan pembelajaran yang terstruktur, serta penguatan sistem dukungan sekolah untuk memastikan implementasi pendidikan inklusif yang efektif dan berkelanjutan di taman kanak-kanak negeri.

Kata Kunci: anak berkebutuhan khusus; pendidikan inklusif; guru taman kanak-kanak; taman kanak-kanak negeri; tantangan guru

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a key priority in global educational reform, emphasizing the right of all children, including those with special needs, to learn together in regular educational settings (UNESCO, 2017). This approach promotes equity, social participation, and early intervention, particularly in early childhood education where foundational cognitive, social, emotional, and language development occurs (Forlin, 2010; Larysa et al., 2020). Public kindergartens play a crucial role in implementing inclusive education because they serve diverse populations and often represent children's first formal learning environment.

Children with special needs, such as those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder, speech delays, and other developmental conditions, require individualized support, flexible instruction, and responsive classroom management strategies (Tomlinson, 2014). In kindergarten classrooms, these needs are often more pronounced due to children's limited self-regulation, developing communication skills, and dependency on adult guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). As a result, kindergarten teachers are expected to simultaneously address diverse learning profiles while maintaining a structured and supportive learning environment for all children.

Despite inclusive education policies, the implementation of inclusive practices in public kindergarten classrooms presents significant challenges. Teachers frequently encounter difficulties related to instructional planning, classroom management, communication, and assessment when working with children with special needs (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015). These challenges are further intensified by large class sizes, limited instructional time, and the need to balance attention between children with special needs and typically developing peers (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). In early childhood settings, behavioral issues, attention difficulties, and language delays often disrupt classroom routines and complicate instructional delivery (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

In many public kindergarten contexts, inclusive education is implemented without adequate institutional and professional support. Teachers often lack access to specialized teaching materials, assistive technologies, and professional collaboration with special education experts such as psychologists or speech therapists (Mieghem et al., 2018). Moreover, research has shown that many early childhood teachers receive

minimal formal training in inclusive or special education, leaving them feeling unprepared to meet the diverse needs of their students (Donath et al., 2023; Forlin, 2010). This lack of preparation may lead to increased workload, emotional stress, and reliance on trial-and-error strategies in classroom practice.

Previous research on inclusive education has largely focused on primary and secondary school levels, with comparatively fewer studies examining inclusive practices in kindergarten and early childhood contexts, particularly in public schools (Larysa et al., 2020; Mieghem et al., 2018). Additionally, much of the existing literature emphasizes policy frameworks and learning outcomes, while teachers lived experiences and everyday challenges remain underexplored. Understanding teachers' perspectives is essential because teachers serve as the primary agents of inclusion in classroom settings and directly influence the effectiveness of inclusive practices (Stoll et al., 2006).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges faced by teachers in teaching children with special needs in public kindergarten classrooms. Adopting a qualitative research approach, this study seeks to capture teachers' experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies in implementing inclusive education at the early childhood level. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of inclusive kindergarten practices and provide practical implications for teacher education programs, school administrators, and policymakers in strengthening support systems for inclusive early childhood education.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study is theoretically grounded in the principles of inclusive education, which emphasize equal access to quality education for all learners, including children with special needs, within regular classroom settings. Inclusive education promotes equity, social participation, and respect for learner diversity, particularly in early childhood education, where foundational cognitive, social, and emotional development takes place (Forlin, 2010; UNESCO, 2017). In public kindergarten contexts, inclusive education requires teachers to accommodate diverse developmental needs while maintaining a supportive learning environment. However, the successful implementation of inclusive practices depends heavily on teachers' professional preparedness and institutional support. When inclusive policies are implemented without adequate resources, training, and support

personnel, teachers are more likely to encounter instructional and emotional challenges (Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is understood as a socially mediated process that occurs through interaction between children and more knowledgeable others, particularly teachers (Vygotsky, 1978). In inclusive kindergarten classrooms, children with special needs often require intensive scaffolding, individualized guidance, and emotional support to engage meaningfully in learning activities. Teachers are expected to provide this support while simultaneously managing the learning needs of the entire class. Limited instructional time, large class sizes, and behavioral challenges can constrain teachers' ability to offer sustained scaffolding, which may result in difficulties in maintaining children's attention, regulating emotions, and ensuring active participation during classroom activities.

Differentiated instruction theory further informs this study by emphasizing the need to adapt instructional content, processes, and learning outcomes to accommodate individual differences among learners (Tomlinson, 2014). In inclusive kindergarten settings, differentiation is essential for supporting children with special needs, such as those with attention deficits, autism spectrum disorder, or speech delays. Although teachers may implement flexible and situational adaptations during instruction, the absence of systematic planning and individualized written learning plans can limit the effectiveness and consistency of differentiation. Consequently, instructional adjustments often become reactive rather than proactive, increasing teachers' workload and uncertainty in meeting diverse learning needs.

Classroom management theory also provides an important lens for understanding teachers' challenges in inclusive early childhood classrooms. Effective classroom management involves establishing routines, maintaining positive behavior, and creating a learning environment that supports engagement and participation for all students (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015). Children with special needs may display behaviors such as hyperactivity, emotional outbursts, or difficulty concentrating, which can disrupt classroom routines and learning processes. Without sufficient training in behavior management strategies and inclusive practices, teachers may struggle to balance behavior regulation with instructional demands, making classroom management a significant source of challenge.

Teacher preparedness and professional competency constitute another critical theoretical foundation of this study. Teacher preparedness refers to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and confidence required to implement inclusive education effectively (Forlin, 2010). Research has shown that limited professional development opportunities in inclusive or special needs education negatively affect teachers' readiness and self-efficacy (Donath et al., 2023). In many public kindergarten settings, teachers rely heavily on personal experience and trial-and-error approaches due to the lack of formal training and specialist support. This condition contributes to feelings of unpreparedness, professional stress, and emotional burden, as teachers are expected to meet diverse learner needs without adequate guidance or resources (Mieghem et al., 2018).

Assessment theory in inclusive education emphasizes process-oriented and formative assessment approaches that focus on children's learning progress rather than standardized academic outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). For children with special needs, developmental progress is often inconsistent and individualized, making assessment a complex task for teachers. In the absence of clear assessment guidelines and benchmarks, teachers may experience confusion in setting appropriate learning targets and evaluating children's development. This challenge not only affects instructional decision-making but also contributes to teachers' emotional strain, particularly when expectations for inclusive assessment are unclear or unrealistic.

3. METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore teachers' challenges in teaching children with special needs in public kindergarten classrooms. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of complex social phenomena within natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Teaching children with special needs involves contextual, emotional, and pedagogical dimensions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone. Specifically, this study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach, which focuses on describing and interpreting participants' perspectives based on rich verbal data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This design is appropriate for examining teachers' real-life challenges in inclusive classrooms, including instructional planning, classroom management, communication with children, and availability of institutional support. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a

comprehensive and contextualized description of the challenges faced by teachers in public kindergarten settings.

Site and Participants

The research was conducted in a public kindergarten that implements inclusive education by enrolling children with special needs alongside typically developing children. The site was selected purposively because it represents a common public-school context where inclusive practices are implemented with limited resources and support. This setting provided relevant and authentic data aligned with the objectives of the study. The participants of this study were kindergarten teachers who were directly involved in teaching children with special needs, such as children with ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and speech delays. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they possessed firsthand experience relevant to the research focus (Patton, 2015). The number of participants was limited to ensure depth of data rather than breadth, which is consistent with qualitative research principles. All participants had experience teaching in inclusive classrooms and were willing to share their experiences and perspectives.

Technique of Collecting the Data

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to obtain rich and triangulated data. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection technique because they allow participants to express their experiences freely while still addressing key research themes (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The interview questions focused on teachers' challenges related to instructional strategies, classroom management, communication with children with special needs, assessment practices, and institutional support. In addition, classroom observations were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' practices and challenges in real classroom contexts. Observations allowed the researcher to examine teacher–student interactions, classroom routines, and responses to children with special needs during learning activities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Field notes were taken systematically to document observed behaviors, situations, and classroom dynamics relevant to the study. To enhance the credibility of the data, triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews and observations (Patton, 2015). All data collection procedures were conducted ethically, with informed consent obtained from participants, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Challenges in Managing Children's Behavior and Concentration

Research findings indicate that teachers face significant challenges in managing the behavior and concentration of children with special needs in regular classrooms. Children often display hyperactive behavior, difficulty focusing, tantrums, and unstable emotions, which disrupt the learning process. One teacher explained that children's focus is very limited, "Their focus is very brief, at most five minutes. Then they walk around, run around" (Respondent 1). Another teacher also expressed difficulty in controlling children's emotions, "If things don't go according to their wishes, they immediately cry, scream, and may even throw themselves down" (Respondent 4). These conditions require teachers to continuously adjust their strategies to keep classroom activities running.

Flexible yet Unstructured Learning Adaptations

Learning adjustments for children with special needs are conducted flexibly and situationally, but are not yet supported by systematic written planning. Teachers generally use the same plans as for other children and make modifications during activities. This is evident from a teacher's statement, "The planning is actually the same as for other children, but I adjust the implementation" (Respondent 1). Another teacher added, "I don't create specific written plans, but I adjust during implementation" (Respondent 2). Adaptations include providing direct examples, intensive guidance, and simplifying tasks according to children's abilities.

Limited Teacher Competency and School Support

Research findings also reveal limitations in teacher competency in handling children with special needs, exacerbated by minimal institutional support from schools. All respondents stated they had never attended specialized training, so learning strategies were mostly obtained from personal experience. One teacher stated, "Never. So far, I've learned on my own from classroom experience" (Respondent 1). Additionally, schools have not provided support teachers or special facilities, as expressed by a respondent, "From the school, it's just limited to giving permission and understanding. There are no special teachers" (Respondent 1). This situation makes teachers feel uncertain and lacking in confidence to implement inclusive learning optimally.

Challenges in Assessing Development and Teachers' Emotional Burden

Teachers assess the development of children with special needs based on daily observations and the learning process, not solely on academic results. However, this assessment becomes challenging due to the inconsistent development of children. One teacher stated, "Sometimes they can do it today, but tomorrow they don't want to again" (Respondent 1). Another teacher expressed confusion in determining assessment standards: "I'm confused about setting targets, because I don't know whether they should be the same as or different from other children" (Respondent 3). This situation creates an emotional burden for teachers, such as feelings of being overwhelmed and unprepared, despite their commitment to support the children. This is reflected in the statement, "Sometimes I feel unprepared, but I just go through with it" (Respondent 1).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that kindergarten teachers face complex challenges in implementing inclusive education for children with special needs. These challenges encompass behavioral management, instructional adaptation, professional competence, institutional support, and teachers' emotional well-being. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing that inclusive education in early childhood settings requires pedagogical readiness, adequate support systems, and specialized teacher competencies.

Managing the behavior and attention of children with special needs emerged as a major challenge in this study. Children who display hyperactivity, tantrums, emotional instability, and limited attention spans require responsive and consistent classroom management strategies. This finding supports Emmer & Sabornie (2015) assertion that challenging behaviors in early childhood can disrupt learning processes when teachers lack effective classroom management strategies. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) theory highlights the importance of adult support or scaffolding to enable children's active participation in learning activities. However, the limited time available and the responsibility of managing the entire class restrict teachers' ability to provide sustained individual support.

Another key finding reveals that instructional adaptations were implemented flexibly but lacked systematic planning. Teachers adjusted learning activities spontaneously based on classroom situations rather than through individualized written plans. This practice reflects informal differentiated instruction, as described by Tomlinson (2014), who emphasizes the need to tailor instruction to students' readiness and learning

needs. Nevertheless, without structured planning, differentiation tends to be reactive and heavily dependent on teachers' intuition, which may reduce consistency and effectiveness in supporting children with special needs.

The study also highlights limitations in teachers' competencies and the lack of institutional support. Teachers reported having no formal training in inclusive or special needs education, leading to feelings of uncertainty and low confidence in their instructional decisions. This finding is consistent with Forlin (2010) and Forlin & Chambers (2011), who argue that insufficient training negatively affects teachers' readiness for inclusive education. Moreover, Donath et al. (2023) emphasize that professional development is a critical factor in the successful implementation of inclusive practices. The absence of teaching assistants and professional support services in the school further supports Mieghem et al.'s (2018) observation that inclusive education is often implemented without adequate structural support.

In addition to pedagogical and structural challenges, the study reveals difficulties in assessing children's development and the emotional burden experienced by teachers. Teachers relied on process-based and observational assessments to evaluate children's progress; however, inconsistent development and the absence of clear assessment guidelines posed significant challenges. This finding aligns with Johnson & Johnson (1994) emphasis on process-oriented assessment in inclusive and cooperative learning environments, which nonetheless requires clear and appropriate indicators. The lack of such guidelines contributed to teachers' emotional strain, including feelings of overwhelm and unpreparedness, echoing Forlin (2010) assertion that inclusive demands without sufficient support can negatively affect teachers' emotional well-being.

Overall, the findings underscore that the success of inclusive education in kindergarten settings depends not only on teachers' commitment but also on their professional preparedness, institutional support, and appropriate assessment systems. Despite working within limited resources and knowledge, the teachers in this study demonstrated strong empathy and dedication toward children with special needs. Therefore, strengthening teacher training programs, providing professional support personnel, and establishing systematic school policies are essential to ensure sustainable and effective inclusive education in early childhood contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that teachers in public kindergarten classrooms face complex challenges in implementing inclusive education for children with special needs, including difficulties in managing behavior and attention, adapting instruction without systematic planning, conducting appropriate assessments, and coping with emotional stress. These challenges are compounded by limited professional training and insufficient institutional support, such as the absence of specialist assistance and inclusive learning resources. Although teachers demonstrate strong commitment and empathy toward children with special needs, their efforts are often constrained by inadequate preparation and support systems. Therefore, the findings highlight the urgent need for targeted professional development, clear assessment guidelines, and strengthened school-level support to ensure the effective and sustainable implementation of inclusive education in public kindergarten settings.

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