

Rethinking Social Studies Learning for Student with Special Needs: A Critical Review of Pedagogical Challenges in Secondary Education

by

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Abstract

Inclusive education has become a key focus in the field of education in Indonesia. Essentially, the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia is regulated by Presidential Regulation No. 68 of 2020, which is derived from Article 134 of Law No. 8 of 2016. However, there is a gap between the programs and regulations and the reality on the ground. Based on these issues, the objectives of this study are 1) to analyze the state of inclusive education in Indonesia; and 2) to analyze the challenges in implementing inclusive education for students with special needs in social studies (IPS) instruction. The research method employed is a qualitative literature review, analyzing secondary data related to the implementation of inclusive education in social studies (IPS) instruction. The results of the study indicate that the state of inclusive education in Indonesia remains suboptimal, as evidenced by the continued lack of adequate facilities provided by schools to accommodate students with special needs in the educational process. The implementation of social studies instruction also faces challenges within the context of inclusive education. These issues stem from a shortage of human resources (special education teachers), resulting in students with special needs not being adequately supported.

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Introduction

The implementation of inclusive education generally faces significant challenges, particularly for children with special needs (F. Oktaviani & Harsiwi, 2024; Sijuola & Davidova, 2022). This is because children with special needs differ from typical children in that they require a specialized approach to learn effectively. On the other hand, the unique characteristics of each individual present a challenge for teachers in providing effective instruction to children with special needs. Technically, teachers must adapt and modify their teaching methods using pedagogical approaches to cater to appropriate learning styles and

provide intensive academic support to achieve maximum academic achievement. (Angreni & Sari, 2022).

Essentially, the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia is governed by Peraturan Presiden Nomor 68 Tahun 2020 as a provision of the section 134 Undang-Undang Nomor 8 Tahun 2016. That law generally stipulates that persons with disabilities have the right to the fulfillment of measures to ensure and realize a quality, fair, prosperous, and dignified standard of living, as well as to protect persons with disabilities from exploitation and discriminatory acts (Hafidah & Indrawan, 2023). This foundation demonstrates that education is a comprehensive field accessible to everyone. However, even though the legal framework has been established, ensuring the implementation of inclusive education still faces challenges and requires greater attention.

Although inclusive education has been widely recognized, the challenges of inclusive learning still require attention, given the wide range of needs among students. In the context of inclusive education, social studies is a key subject aimed at helping students become responsible citizens equipped with critical thinking skills, collaboration, effective communication, creativity, and an appreciation for diversity (Pirchio et al., 2022; Seludo & Murillo, 2023). However, social studies is one of the subjects that requires extra effort to teach to children with special needs. In the context of social studies, the teaching approach often seems to overlook inclusivity, given that the subject presents a framework that addresses social issues; therefore, when teaching children with special needs, various effective strategies must be employed. (Hidayat & Haryati, 2023; Rinawati & Purwantiningsih, 2021)

Unlike subjects involving more concrete or procedural knowledge, the social sciences require an understanding of abstract concepts, nuanced interpretations of historical events, and an understanding of complex social dynamics all of which can be particularly challenging for students with cognitive or learning differences (Kurniawan, 2022). It is precisely this abstract nature of social studies that poses a challenge for teachers, especially when they are teaching social studies to students with special needs (Wafiana & Fatimah, 2020). Social studies instruction that does not prioritize inclusivity gives the impression that the subject is exclusive to certain students, making it necessary to implement innovative approaches to create an inclusive social studies learning environment.

However, when it comes to the inclusivity of social studies education, the implementation of inclusive social studies instruction must also take into account the challenges that disproportionately affect students with disabilities; for instance, instructional methods, curriculum design, and assessment strategies often pose barriers for students with disabilities (Aprizal, 2025; Leahy, 2023). The use of conventional teaching methods (reading, writing, and memorization) risks preventing students with disabilities from finding social studies lessons meaningful (Savira et al., 2023). These obstacles prevent

a social studies teacher from creating pedagogically inclusive learning experiences that meet the needs of every student (Caballero, 2024; Canuto, 2022).

Research on social studies instruction for students with special needs in junior high school indicates progress. However, existing studies remain fragmented and tend to address specific aspects in isolation, such as character, competencies, the use of strategies, and curriculum implementation. This hinders a comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical challenges of inclusive social studies instruction. The absence of this structured mapping makes it difficult to identify general patterns, relationships between factors, and the direction for developing social studies instruction that is more adaptive and responsive to the needs of students with special needs.

Given this gap, this study offers a systematic mapping and classification of pedagogical challenges in social studies learning for students with special needs. The organization of findings that are synthesized and integrated can provide a more comprehensive picture of the dynamics of social studies learning within the context of inclusive education. This approach provides a conceptual framework that can help in systematically understanding the complexity of pedagogical challenges. Therefore, the results of this study can serve as a foundation for further research in the context of social studies learning for students with special needs.

As a subject that teaches about social justice, Social Studies should provide an inclusive learning experience that welcomes students with disabilities (Kart & Kart, 2021). Stigma and discrimination against children with special needs in school settings are common, and these children often lack the support needed to receive an appropriate education. This creates the impression that social studies instruction tends to be rigid and overlooks the abilities of children with special needs. Therefore, the curriculum and the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies must be emphasized to improve social studies instruction. The objectives of this study are to (1) analyze the state of inclusive education in Indonesia; and (2) analyze the challenges in social studies education for children with special needs.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical method to examine the implementation of inclusive education in Social Studies (SS) instruction. This approach was chosen to gain a deep understanding through the analysis and synthesis of various relevant prior research findings. The method used in this study is a literature review, which aims to identify, analyze, and synthesize scientific findings related to SS learning for students with special needs in the context of inclusive education (Dalkin et al., 2021; Efuntade et al., 2024). The data sources in this study consist of scientific articles published

in indexed national and international journals. The literature search was conducted using the Google Scholar database, covering publications from 2020 to 2026. The search process was assisted by the Publish or Perish application using the keywords “inclusion,” “students with special needs,” “social studies learning,” and “junior high school.”

To ensure the relevance and quality of the data, this study applied the following inclusion criteria: (1) articles discussing inclusive education at the secondary education level, (2) research related to social studies learning or relevant pedagogical practices, and (3) studies examining challenges or strategies in inclusive learning. Meanwhile, articles that did not align with the study’s focus, were not available in full text, or fell outside the specified timeframe were excluded from the analysis. The collected data was then analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis techniques through the stages of identification, categorization, and synthesis of the main themes emerging from each study. The analysis process focused on mapping and grouping various pedagogical challenges in inclusive social studies learning, thereby yielding a more systematic and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of inclusive education implementation at the secondary school level.

Result and Discussion

This study focuses on the discussion of inclusive education in social studies, aiming to analyze the state of inclusivity in Indonesia, challenges in social studies learning for students with special needs, and government policies or solutions offered to address issues in inclusive education. Essentially, the state of inclusivity in Indonesia is still far from optimal. In the 2024 Pocket Guide to Priority Indicators for Minimum Service Standards, there is an indicator that reflects the standard for implementing formal education, namely the presence of at least one special education teacher in every school (PSKP Kemdikbud, 2024). However, the availability of special education teachers remains minimal, so inclusivity in schools is still not optimal. This is because, as of December 2023, only 14.83 percent of formal educational institutions out of a total of 40,164 had special education teachers. (Habibah A. F., 2024). The implementation of inclusive education must also take into account various factors, particularly regarding adequate facilities, resources, and infrastructure for students with special needs, so that they can receive a quality and optimal education. To assess the implementation of inclusive education, it is necessary to conduct a study analyzing data related to the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia.

Regarding the challenges faced by students with disabilities, students with disabilities encounter difficulties in social studies classes. According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), students with disabilities face distinct challenges in social studies, including complex concepts, extensive vocabulary, and the need for a broad background of knowledge (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023). These issues indicate challenges in the implementation of social studies instruction for students with disabilities. In the context of education in Indonesia, these challenges can take various

forms, ranging from limited facilities and teacher skills to constraints in classroom instruction. The following are several findings from the literature that illustrate the challenges in the social studies learning process for students with special needs.

Table 1.

Literature Synthesis of issues in inclusive education in social studies instruction.

Title	Author	Years	Finding
Pengimplementasian Pendidikan Karakter Dalam Pembelajaran IPS di Kelas Inklusi SMP Negeri 39 Semarang	Winda Nur Azizah & Puji Lestari	2021	Research has shown that social studies instruction at SMP Negeri 39 Semarang still focuses on the integration of character values (normative) and has not yet explicitly developed differentiated or innovative teaching strategies specifically designed to accommodate the needs of students with special needs.
A Systematic Review of Evidence-Based Practices for Students with Learning Disabilities in Social Studies Classrooms	Marryy D. Curtis & Ambra L. Green	2021	The study found that several strategies are employed to support inclusivity in social studies education. These strategies include the use of explicit instruction, scaffolding, graphic organizers, and structured, step-by-step teaching approaches. However, this article also highlights that the implementation of these evidence-based practices still faces challenges, particularly regarding teacher readiness and consistency in classroom application
Analisis Kompetensi Pedagogik Guru IPS Dalam Pengembangan Keterampilan Sosial Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus (Studi Kasus Smp N 12 Semarang)	(Muslichah & Nisa, 2020)	2020	Critically, this article emphasizes that teachers play a central role in the success of inclusive social studies instruction at SMPN 12 Semarang, particularly through their pedagogical competencies. However, the study's focus remains on teacher competence rather than on innovations in social studies instructional design itself. In other words, instruction still depends on individual teachers' abilities and has not yet evolved into a systematic and replicable model of instructional innovation.
Studi Dinamika Lingkungan Sekolah sebagai Faktor Pendukung Kemandirian Belajar IPS pada siswa kelas VIII di SMP	Aleyda Putri Sabina	2025	A study conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 18 Surabaya shows that facilities and infrastructure can support effective social studies instruction, which is further enhanced by positive social relationships among students,

Muhammadiyah 18 Surabaya			students with special needs, and teachers. However, there are challenges to be addressed, including a lack of variety in teaching methods and difficulties in adapting methods and materials to meet the needs of all students.
Analisis Implementasi Pendidikan Inklusif pada Pembelajaran IPS di Kelas VII SMP Negeri 10 Semarang	Rizal & Himmatul Ulya	2025	Research has shown that inclusive education in social studies has been implemented by integrating students with special needs and regular students into the same classroom; however, teachers still struggle to determine appropriate teaching methods. Instruction tends not to be differentiated and continues to face challenges related to resources, policies, and teacher competencies, resulting in a failure to achieve adaptive inclusive education.
Potret Implementasi dan Praktik Pendidikan Inklusif Pada SMP Lazuardi Athaillah Makassar	Elsa Ochtavia Wuabundjo, Ahlun Ansar, Nurfadillah Zahran Ns, Aris Munandar, Nopi Yanti	2025	This study shows that inclusive education has been implemented through the integration of students with special needs, supported by curriculum adaptations and support teachers. However, its implementation has revealed challenges related to human resources, a lack of training, and insufficient learning innovations.
Analisis Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka pada Sekolah Inklusi di Sekolah Menengah Pertama Kota Tangerang	Listiawati Oktaviani, Dwi Gunarsih, Jundi Awaludin, dan Supriyatin	2024	The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in inclusive schools provides flexibility in learning and opportunities for differentiation tailored to students' needs. However, limited teacher understanding and insufficient readiness for implementation have resulted in learning innovations that are not yet fully realized and remain at the policy level, rather than being incorporated into systematic instructional practices.
Enhancing Social Skills in Physically Disabled Students through Inclusive Social Studies Curriculum in Secondary Schools	Linda Lidia Falukas & Maria Magdalena Beatrice Sogen	2025	Research shows that social studies education plays a role in fostering the development of social skills. However, the innovations proposed so far are limited to the curriculum and learning objectives and have not yet led to systematic instructional models and designs.

Inclusive education is a strategic initiative aimed at bridging the gap and ensuring that every child, regardless of background, ability, or physical condition, has access to a quality education (Ayeni et al., 2024; Cruz et al., 2023; Muafiah et al., 2021)(Ayeni et al., 2024; Cruz et al., 2023; Muafiah et al., 2021). In inclusive education, students are supported

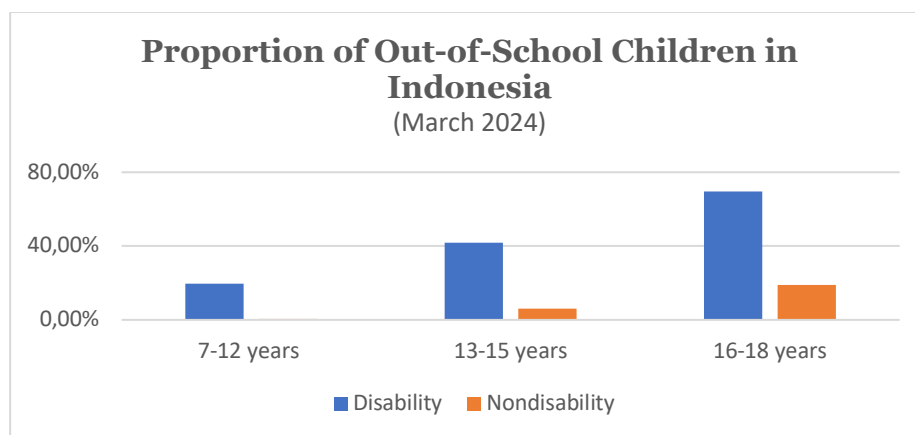
in exercising their right to equal access to education, regardless of their background, culture, or physical characteristics. Essentially, inclusive education in Indonesia is legally guaranteed through UU No. 8 Tahun 2016 tentang Penyandang Disabilitas dan Permendikbud No. 32 Tahun 2018. These regulations serve as the foundation for the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia, ensuring that every child has access to a quality education. However, in practice, there are many challenges to overcome, as inclusive education in Indonesia is still far from optimal. (Kusmaryono, 2023; Pinky, 2023).

Regarding the state of inclusivity in Indonesia, the Indonesian government has demonstrated a commitment to facilitating access to quality education for students, particularly those with disabilities, through inclusive education. This commitment is evidenced by regulations and legal frameworks that underscore the government's seriousness in addressing issues of inclusion in Indonesia. On the other hand, the establishment of disability service units, training and provision of special support teachers, and the provision of inclusive facilities in the field of education are some of the efforts undertaken by the government.

However, the government's efforts have yet to yield significant improvements in the quality of inclusive education in Indonesia. This reality is particularly felt by students with special needs, who face limitations in accessing education on par with their peers. Evidence of this disparity in access can be seen in school enrollment rates, as reflected in the proportion of out-of-school children in Indonesia. Data on the proportion of out-of-school children is shown in the following graph.

Figure 1. *Proportion of Out-of-School Children in Indonesia in 2024*

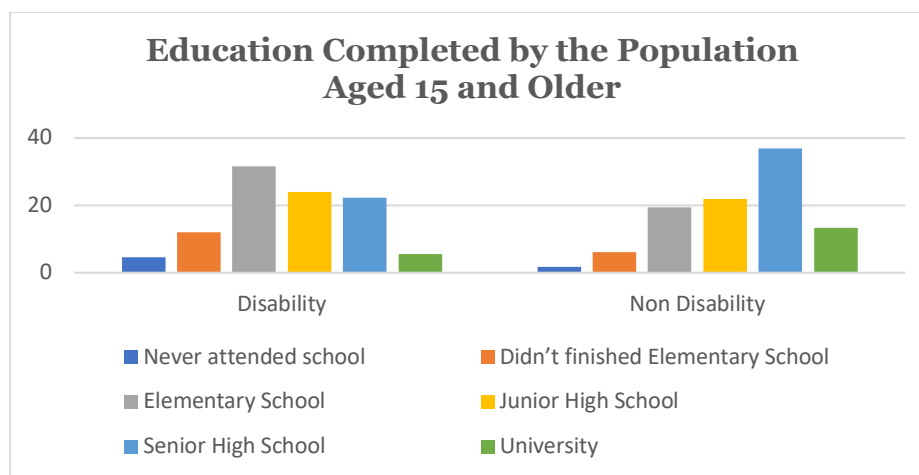
Source: Badan Pusat Statistik (2024)



Based on the graph, a clear disparity can be seen among children aged 7–12 years old, 13–15 years old, and 16–18 years old. The disparity shown in the graph is extremely pronounced, with children with disabilities accounting for a significantly higher percentage

of out-of-school children than their non-disabled peers. This situation is quite alarming and indicates that the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia is still inadequate. This disparity is also linked to graduation rates among students with special needs, where a significant gap exists because the graduation rate for students with special needs is notably lower. The following figure illustrates the disparity in the highest level of education completed by the population aged 15 and older, categorized by demographic characteristics for the year 2024.

Figure 2. Highest Level of Education Completed by the Population Aged 15 and Older by Demographic Characteristics 2024 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024).



Based on Figure 2, it can be seen that there is a fairly significant disparity in the highest level of education completed. This disparity is evident in the fact that students with disabilities have a lower level of education compared to those without disabilities. For example, at the elementary school level and equivalent, the student body is dominated by students with disabilities. However, as the educational level increases—from high school to higher education—the disparity becomes more pronounced. This disparity indicates that graduates are still predominantly non-disabled students. This suggests that educational equity in terms of inclusivity has not yet been optimized.

On the other hand, challenges in implementing inclusive education are also influenced by the facilities provided by schools. One such facility is the presence of special support teachers tasked with assisting students in formal learning while ensuring the implementation of inclusive education. Based on available data (see Table 1), there are 40,164 inclusive schools in Indonesia, but only 14.83% of these schools have special support teachers. This indicates that students are not yet fully supported, as special support teachers play a strategic role in assisting students with special needs during the learning process.

The gap between regulations and the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia is clearly evident. In the section 10 UU No. 8 Tahun 2016 states that people with disabilities can participate in regular education through an inclusive system. However, as

noted earlier, many schools that are labeled as “inclusive” are not yet fully prepared to function as truly inclusive schools. This situation means that these schools are not equipped to provide education and instruction to children with special needs.

Challenges in Social Studies Learning for Students with Special Needs

Teaching children with special needs requires a tailored approach with effective strategies to ensure that the material is accessible and understandable to them. One of the challenges faced is teaching social studies to children with special needs, as much of the subject matter is abstract, making it difficult for teachers to effectively teach social studies to these students (Kurniawan, 2022). This is because Social Studies is a subject that teaches material about the relationship between humans and the environment, whether at the individual, group, or social institutional level (Saloviita, 2022). To understand this material, students must integrate their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills. Mastering these skills presents a challenge for students with special needs, as limitations in one or more of these areas can hinder their ability to effectively understand and apply social studies concepts. Therefore, it is essential to design inclusive social studies instruction that provides a meaningful learning experience for everyone (Rodriguez, 2021; Rönn-Liljenfeldt et al., 2024).

A common challenge faced in teaching social studies to students with special needs is that the curriculum is not yet adapted to accommodate them. This is because the current social studies curriculum is typically designed for regular students, assuming that all students possess strong abstract thinking skills, literacy, and social skills. However, this situation is the opposite of what is experienced by the majority of students with special needs, who do not fully master these skills due to challenges such as intellectual, visual, hearing, and behavioral impairments. Such conditions require a more concrete approach that can effectively accommodate students with special needs, thereby eliminating the gap between them and typical students.

A curriculum that fails to adequately accommodate inclusive education is further compounded by the lack of a specific master plan for implementing inclusive education in the classroom. This situation occurred at one of the junior high schools (SMP), State Junior High School 39 Semarang, where the social studies teacher did not know what to do when conducting inclusive social studies lessons. (Azizah & Lestari, 2021). The implementation of an inclusive social studies curriculum makes it easier for teachers to teach students, particularly those with special needs. In this design, adjustments to the learning process—such as the use of appropriate media, models, methods, and assessments—are necessary so that students with special needs can effectively participate in social studies lessons. Additionally, SMPN 39 Semarang faces challenges where the school lacks adequate

supervision and active participation in supporting inclusive learning, resulting in suboptimal implementation of the curriculum.

Problems in social studies instruction also arise due to teachers' limited ability to implement inclusive instruction, resulting in students with special needs failing to fully grasp the material. This situation occurs at SMPN 12 Semarang and SMPN 21 Semarang, where both schools face the same challenges in delivering social studies instruction tailored to the needs of students with special needs. (Muslichah & Nisa, 2020; Pratiwi & Lestari, 2020). This issue may be related to differentiated instruction, which is essential for students with special needs. Differentiated instruction involves adapting the materials, content, media, and learning environment to meet students' needs. All aspects of instruction must be accessible to students.

Teachers, as the core human resources in education, also play a vital role in delivering inclusive social studies instruction. However, human resource issues in the field of education are a critical problem because without qualified personnel, the quality of education will be compromised. Regarding human resources, the implementation of social studies instruction in an inclusive setting naturally requires teachers who are competent in teaching social studies to students with special needs. However, in reality, problems arise because teachers often lack the skills to address learning challenges for students with special needs (Ciullo et al., 2020; Curtis & Green, 2021). This situation indicates that social studies teachers are not yet fully prepared to handle students with special needs. When dealing with such cases, a teacher should have a basic understanding of teaching methods in order to provide effective instruction to students with special needs (Ayu Juniarti & Dedik Susila, 2021; Shofa & Watini, 2023). The implementation of this strategy also involves collaboration with special education teachers to ensure that the learning needs of students with special needs are adequately met.

Conclusion

The state of inclusive education in Indonesia still requires sufficient attention. This is because, although inclusive education has become a key focus in the field of education, the current state of inclusive education in Indonesia cannot yet be considered satisfactory in terms of quality, implementation, and human resources. The existence of laws and regulations governing inclusive schools serves as a sign of the government's commitment to the implementation of inclusive education. However, disparities persist between students with disabilities and those without in accessing education. This reality suggests that inclusive education in Indonesia is not yet truly inclusive and still contains elements of exclusion, meaning that students without disabilities are not adequately accommodated. Additionally, there is the reality that regulations are not implemented as stipulated in the laws that have been enacted. Such conditions require attention so that inclusive education can be effectively implemented.

On the other hand, inclusive education in Indonesia aligns with the challenges occurring within the learning environment. In Social Studies (IPS) instruction, teachers face various challenges in implementing inclusive learning. These challenges stem from teachers' capabilities regarding inclusive learning, limited strategies, the abstract nature of IPS materials, and the absence of a comprehensive instructional framework. Some of these problems occur during the learning process, making it difficult for both teachers and students to carry out social studies instruction. It should also be noted that social studies is a subject that examines social issues and social sciences within the scope of education. In this regard, it is clear that social studies is an abstract discipline, thus requiring optimal strategies to be provided to students with special needs.

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