



School community acceptance as a determinant of inclusive education sustainability: A qualitative study in a rural Indonesian elementary school

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Abstract

Despite Indonesia's expanding inclusive education regulations, little is known about how school community acceptance affects inclusive education's successful implementation and long-term viability, especially in rural elementary schools. This study aims to understand how the school community at SDN 018 Sangkulirang views the implementation of inclusive education by analyzing the relationship between stakeholders' acceptability and inclusive teaching practices. The research design used was descriptive qualitative. Twelve teachers, three educational staff members, and fifteen normal students participated in interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to gather data. The results show that inclusive education has been put into practice by integrating children with special needs into regular classrooms in spite of constraints on specialized support services, educational facilities, and teacher competency. Cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of school community acceptance were generally favorable, as evidenced by teachers' readiness to modify their lesson plans, students' desire to help classmates with special needs, and the development of a welcoming learning environment. By offering actual data on the significance of school community acceptability in maintaining inclusive education in rural elementary schools, this study advances the area of inclusive education. According to the findings, maintaining the long-term viability and caliber of inclusive education practices requires boosting teacher capacity, enhancing institutional support, increasing access to specialist services, and encouraging cooperation among stakeholders.

Keywords: Inclusive education; School community acceptance; Elementary school; Special need students; Qualitative study

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a fundamental approach to ensuring equitable and quality education for all learners, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or individual characteristics. As emphasized in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, every child has the right to access inclusive, equitable, and quality education without discrimination (UNESCO, 2020). Inclusive education goes beyond merely placing students with special needs in regular classrooms; it



requires schools to transform their cultures, policies, and instructional practices to accommodate learner diversity and ensure meaningful participation for every student (Ainscow, 2020; Haug, 2020). Consequently, the successful implementation of inclusive education depends not only on educational policies but also on the school community's willingness to embrace diversity and create a supportive learning environment (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2021; Slee, 2021).

Previous research has largely focused on the structural and instructional aspects of inclusive education, including teacher competence, differentiated instruction, curriculum adaptation, educational facilities, and government policies. Various studies report that inadequate teacher readiness, limited professional development, insufficient learning resources, and a lack of specialized support services remain major obstacles to the effective implementation of inclusive education (Pujaningsih & Alfi, 2022; Y. Yuliana & Pujaningsih, 2025; Zagona et al., 2020). Other studies highlight the importance of school leadership, stakeholder collaboration, and policy support in strengthening inclusive education practices (D. Yuliana & Ernawati, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021).

While these various contributions are highly valuable, relatively little attention has been paid to the social and cultural dimensions of inclusive education, specifically, the school community's acceptance of students with special needs. School community acceptance encompasses teacher attitudes, the perceptions of educational staff, the willingness of general education students to interact with peers who have disabilities, and an overall school culture that values diversity and inclusion. Positive acceptance is considered a crucial factor in the success of inclusive education, as it fosters meaningful participation, reduces discrimination, and enhances positive social interactions among students (Göransson & Nilholm, 2020; Nilholm, 2021). Conversely, limited acceptance can create barriers that prevent students with special needs from fully participating in educational activities, regardless of the existence of inclusive policies (Rahmawati & Pujaningsih, 2025; Slee, 2021).

Research examining school community acceptance remains very limited, particularly in rural and remote areas of Indonesia. Most existing studies have been conducted in urban schools that possess relatively adequate educational facilities and stronger institutional support (Suwarlis et al., 2025). Consequently, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding how inclusive education is experienced and implemented in rural primary schools, where educational resources, teacher professional development, and specialized services are often limited (Wati et al., 2023). This lack of contextual evidence creates a significant gap in understanding how school community acceptance contributes to inclusive education across diverse educational settings.

SDN 018 Sangkulirang, located in East Kutai Regency, East Kalimantan, represents a unique context for examining this issue. The school serves students from diverse social, cultural, and educational backgrounds, including several students with special educational needs who learn together with their peers in regular classrooms. Although the school has implemented inclusive education by accepting students with special needs, it continues to face numerous challenges, including the absence of permanent special education teachers, limited teacher training on inclusive instructional practices, inadequate learning facilities, and insufficient educational support services. Nevertheless, preliminary observations indicate that teachers, educational staff, and regular students generally demonstrate positive attitudes toward diversity and inclusion, suggesting that social acceptance may compensate for some structural limitations.

Understanding how school community acceptance influences the implementation of inclusive education is therefore essential for strengthening inclusive educational practices in similar contexts. Acceptance should not be viewed merely as a personal attitude but as a multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that shape school culture and educational interactions (Retnasari et al., 2024). Positive acceptance can encourage collaborative learning, improve peer relationships, reduce stigma toward students with special educational needs, and foster sustainable inclusive educational

environments.

This study addresses the existing research gap by examining school community acceptance as a central factor influencing the implementation of inclusive education in a rural Indonesian elementary school. Unlike previous studies that predominantly emphasize institutional readiness and instructional strategies, this research investigates how teachers, educational staff, and regular students perceive and respond to learner diversity and how these perceptions influence classroom practices and the sustainability of inclusive education. By focusing on the social dimension of inclusion, this study contributes additional empirical evidence to the growing literature on inclusive education within developing countries and rural educational contexts. Specifically, this study aims to (1) describe the implementation of inclusive education at SDN 018 Sangkulirang, (2) analyze the acceptance of teachers, educational staff, and regular students toward learner diversity, (3) examine how school community acceptance influences inclusive teaching and learning practices, and (4) identify challenges affecting the sustainability of inclusive education. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically by providing evidence that may support policymakers, school leaders, and educators in strengthening inclusive educational practices through enhanced school community engagement and collaborative institutional support.

METHODS

Research Design and Context

This study employed an interpretivist research paradigm using a qualitative case study design. The interpretivist paradigm was selected because the research sought to understand the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of school community members regarding the implementation of inclusive education within their natural setting. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of a contemporary educational phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study was conducted at SDN 018 Sangkulirang, an inclusive public elementary school located in East Kutai Regency, East Kalimantan Province, Indonesia. The school was purposively selected because it has implemented inclusive education by admitting students with special educational needs into regular classrooms while facing limited educational resources and professional support. Data collection was carried out from March to May 2026, allowing sufficient time to observe classroom activities, conduct interviews, and verify research findings. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the research was obtained from the school principal and the local education authority. Ethical principles for educational research were observed throughout the study.

Participants and Sampling

Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the research was obtained from the school principal and the local education authority. Ethical principles for educational research were observed throughout the study. The participants consisted of (1) the school principal; (2) classroom teachers; (3) educational staff; (4) regular students; and (5) parents of students with special educational needs. These participants were selected because they represent the primary stakeholders involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating inclusive education at the school.

Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new information emerged from subsequent interviews and observations. In total, 15 participants were involved in the study, consisting of one principal, six classroom teachers, two educational staff members, four regular students, and two parents. Participants met the following inclusion criteria: (1) actively involved in the implementation of inclusive education; (2) willing to participate voluntarily; and (3) able to provide informed consent. Individuals with

limited involvement in inclusive educational activities or those unwilling to participate were excluded from the study. To protect privacy, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, and no personally identifiable information is reported.

Instruments and Materials

Three primary data collection instruments were employed. Semi-Structured Interview Guide, Observation Protocol and Document Analysis. Semi-structured interviews were developed based on the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) and previous studies concerning school acceptance of inclusive education. The interview guide explored participants' understanding of inclusive education, attitudes toward students with special educational needs, implementation challenges, institutional support, and recommendations for improving inclusive practices. Content validity was established through expert review involving three specialists in inclusive education and qualitative research. Feedback from the reviewers was incorporated before field implementation.

A structured classroom observation protocol was designed to examine: (1) classroom interaction; (2) teacher instructional practices; (3) student participation; (4) peer interaction; (5) differentiated learning strategies; and (6) accessibility of learning environments. Observations were conducted repeatedly during teaching and learning activities to increase data credibility.

Supporting documents were collected, including: (1) school policies; (2) inclusive education programs; (3) lesson plans; (4) student learning records; (5) school regulations; and (6) photographs of learning facilities. Document analysis served as triangulation to verify findings obtained from interviews and classroom observations. To ensure methodological rigor, credibility was enhanced through triangulation of multiple data sources and methods. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining detailed field notes and an audit trail throughout the research process.

Procedure and Data Collection

Data collection followed several systematic stages:

Phase 1: Preparation:

The researcher obtained research permission from relevant authorities, prepared research instruments, conducted expert validation, and established communication with the school administration

Phase 2: Field Observation:

Initial observations were conducted to understand the school environment, classroom culture, and implementation of inclusive education. These observations also helped establish rapport with participants.

Phase 3: Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Follow-up interviews were conducted when clarification was required.

Phase 4: Document Collection

Relevant institutional documents were collected and analyzed to complement interview and observation findings.

Phase 5: Verification

Member checking was conducted by returning interview summaries to participants for confirmation. Peer debriefing with fellow researchers was also undertaken to minimize researcher bias and improve the credibility of interpretations.

Throughout the study, the researcher acted as the primary research instrument while maintaining reflexivity by recording analytical memos and reflecting on potential personal biases.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-stage framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis consisted of: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for emerging themes; (4) reviewing and refining themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final analytical report.

To enhance analytical trustworthiness, two researchers independently coded a subset of interview transcripts. Coding differences were discussed until consensus was achieved, thereby improving coding consistency. Findings from interviews, observations, and document analysis were continuously compared through methodological triangulation to strengthen credibility and confirm emerging themes.

Ethical Considerations

This research complied with internationally accepted ethical standards for educational research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants. For student participants, written parental consent and child assent were obtained before data collection.

Participants were informed of the study objectives, research procedures, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All identifying information was removed during transcription and reporting to ensure anonymity.

Digital interview recordings, transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documents were stored in encrypted password-protected files accessible only to the research team. The research data will be retained securely for five years following publication before being permanently destroyed in accordance with institutional data management policies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study explored the implementation of inclusive education and the acceptance of the school community toward students with special educational needs at SDN 018 Sangkulirang. The findings were generated through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Four major themes emerged from the data: (1) implementation of inclusive education, (2) teachers' acceptance, (3) school community acceptance, and (4) challenges in implementing inclusive education.



Figure 1. Conceptual Relationship between School Community Acceptance and the Implementation of Inclusive Education

Implementation of Inclusive Education

The findings indicate that SDN 018 Sangkulirang has implemented inclusive education by enrolling students with special educational needs in regular classrooms. Learning activities are generally conducted using the same curriculum as that for regular students, while teachers make limited instructional adjustments based on students' individual learning needs. Classroom observations showed that students with special educational needs actively participated in classroom activities and interacted positively with their classmates. Teachers attempted to provide additional assistance whenever students experienced learning difficulties, although individualized learning programs were not consistently available due to limited professional resources.

Document analysis further confirmed that the school had adopted inclusive education policies aligned with national educational regulations. However, the implementation remained constrained by the absence of permanent special education teachers and limited accessibility facilities.

Table 1. Summary of Inclusive Education Implementation

Aspect	Findings
Student placement	Students with special educational needs learn in regular classrooms
Curriculum	National curriculum with limited instructional adaptation.
Teaching strategy	Teachers apply differentiated instruction informally according to students' needs.
Learning environment	Positive classroom interaction with minimal discrimination observed.
Institutional support	Inclusive policy exists, but resources remain limited.

The findings demonstrate that inclusive education has been implemented despite institutional constraints, reflecting the school's commitment to providing equal educational opportunities.

Teachers' Acceptance toward Inclusive Education

Interview data revealed that teachers generally expressed positive attitudes toward inclusive education. They recognized that every child has the right to receive equal educational opportunities regardless of disability or learning differences. Teachers demonstrated acceptance through several instructional practices, including providing additional explanations, simplifying learning materials, encouraging peer assistance, and offering emotional support during classroom activities. Nevertheless, teachers acknowledged several professional challenges. Most participants reported limited formal training in inclusive education, insufficient knowledge regarding differentiated instruction, and difficulties in addressing diverse learning needs within large classrooms.

School Community Acceptance

The study found that school community acceptance was reflected across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. From the cognitive perspective, teachers, educational staff, and regular students demonstrated a good understanding of the principles of inclusive education and recognized the importance of respecting learner diversity. The affective dimension was characterized by empathy, positive attitudes, and willingness to accept students with special educational needs as equal members of the school community.

Behaviorally, regular students frequently assisted their peers with special educational needs during classroom activities and school events. Teachers consistently encouraged collaborative learning and discouraged discriminatory behavior.

Table 2. Dimensions of School Community Acceptance

Dimension	Evidence from Findings
Cognitive	Understanding of inclusive education principles and learner diversity.
Affective	Positive attitudes, empathy, and respect toward students with special educational needs.
Behavioral	Active peer support, collaborative learning, and inclusive classroom participation.

Observational findings supported interview data, indicating that students with special educational needs were socially accepted and actively involved in classroom interactions.

Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Although school community acceptance was generally positive, several challenges were identified. The most frequently reported challenge concerned the limited competence of teachers in inclusive instructional practices. Participants also highlighted the absence of permanent special education teachers, inadequate teaching materials specifically designed for students with special educational needs, and insufficient educational facilities.

Furthermore, participants emphasized the need for continuous professional development and stronger collaboration among schools, parents, and educational authorities.

Table 3. Challenges Identified during Inclusive Education Implementation

Challenge	Description
Teacher competence	Limited training in inclusive pedagogy and differentiated instruction.
Human resources	Absence of permanent special education teachers.
Learning facilities	Limited accessibility and specialized instructional materials.
Institutional support	Need for stronger collaboration with parents and education authorities.

Overall, the findings indicate that successful implementation of inclusive education at SDN 018 Sangkulirang is strongly supported by positive school community acceptance. However, improving teacher competence, educational resources, and institutional support remains essential for enhancing the quality and sustainability of inclusive educational practices.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of inclusive education at SDN 018 Sangkulirang reflects the Indonesian government's commitment to providing equitable educational opportunities for all learners. Although the school has integrated students with special educational needs into regular classrooms, the implementation remains constrained by limited teacher competence, insufficient educational resources, and the absence of specialized support personnel (Retnasari et al., 2023). These findings suggest that policy implementation alone is insufficient to achieve high-quality inclusive education without adequate institutional capacity and professional support.

The positive acceptance demonstrated by teachers, educational staff, and regular students emerged as one of the most significant factors supporting inclusive education. Across the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, members of the school community showed an understanding of inclusive education principles, empathy toward students with special educational needs, and inclusive behaviors that encouraged participation and social interaction (Akhmetova et al., 2020; Borhan, 2025). This finding supports the argument that inclusive education extends beyond physical placement in regular classrooms and depends heavily on the creation of a supportive school culture characterized by respect, collaboration, and equal participation.

Teachers played a central role in fostering inclusive learning despite limited professional preparation. Participants reported adapting instructional strategies by simplifying learning materials, providing additional explanations, encouraging peer support, and offering emotional assistance to students with special educational needs (Pradana & Sundawa, 2023; Shukla et al., 2023). Although these practices indicate positive teacher commitment, they were largely based on personal initiative rather than systematic implementation of evidence-based inclusive pedagogy. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that teachers' positive attitudes contribute substantially to inclusive classroom practices but require continuous professional development to effectively address diverse learning needs.

The findings also highlight the importance of peer acceptance in promoting social inclusion. Regular students demonstrated willingness to collaborate, assist classmates with special educational needs, and participate in inclusive classroom activities without significant discrimination (Gunadi, 2026; Nanggala & Suryadi, 2024). Positive peer relationships are essential because they enhance students' sense of belonging, improve social participation, and contribute to positive learning experiences. The supportive interactions observed during

classroom activities indicate that school culture can become a protective factor that facilitates both academic engagement and social development for students with special educational needs.

Despite these encouraging findings, several barriers continue to limit the effectiveness of inclusive education implementation. Teachers consistently identified insufficient training in inclusive instructional strategies, limited understanding of differentiated instruction, and the absence of permanent special education teachers as major challenges. In addition, inadequate learning facilities and limited access to specialized educational resources reduce teachers' ability to provide individualized support (Gunadi, 2026; Resch & Schritteser, 2023). These institutional limitations demonstrate that sustainable inclusive education requires comprehensive support systems involving school leadership, educational authorities, parents, and professional service providers.

From a theoretical perspective, the results reinforce the multidimensional concept of school community acceptance, in which cognitive understanding, positive emotional attitudes, and inclusive behaviors interact to create an educational environment that supports diversity. Positive acceptance not only encourages meaningful participation of students with special educational needs but also strengthens the sustainability of inclusive education through collaborative relationships among stakeholders (Haditsa, 2024; Muhalim et al., 2025).

Overall, this study contributes empirical evidence that successful implementation of inclusive education in rural elementary schools depends not only on inclusive policies but also on the quality of school community acceptance and institutional support. Strengthening teacher competence through continuous professional development, increasing the availability of special education personnel, improving educational facilities, and fostering stronger collaboration among schools, families, and government agencies are essential strategies for enhancing the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of inclusive education in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of inclusive education at SDN 018 Sangkulirang has generally been supported by positive acceptance from the school community, including teachers, educational staff, school leaders, and regular students. The findings indicate that school community acceptance, reflected in cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, contributes significantly to creating an inclusive learning environment where students with special educational needs are able to participate in classroom activities and social interactions alongside their peers. Despite these positive attitudes, the implementation of inclusive education continues to face challenges, particularly in relation to limited teacher competence in inclusive pedagogy, the absence of permanent special education teachers, insufficient learning facilities, and restricted institutional support.

This study contributes to the field of inclusive education by providing empirical evidence that social acceptance within the school community is a critical factor supporting the sustainability of inclusive education, particularly in rural elementary school contexts. The findings suggest that strengthening teachers' professional competencies, improving school resources, and fostering collaboration among schools, parents, and educational authorities are essential for enhancing the quality of inclusive education. Future research is recommended to involve a larger number of schools from different geographical settings and to employ mixed methods approaches to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing successful implementation of inclusive education.

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