

Inclusive learning strategies for students with intellectual disabilities in East Kalimantan: A case study in primary education

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Abstract

This study investigates the implementation of inclusive learning strategies for students with intellectual disabilities at SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang East Kalimantan, Indonesia, using a qualitative descriptive approach. Data collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis reveals that teachers' readiness for inclusive education is limited, necessitating further training and support. Key challenges include insufficient resources, professional development, and time for designing effective strategies. Multisensory and individualized instructional methods are found to be more effective compared to traditional approaches. Additionally, visual aids and educational technology enhance student participation. Although the school has made efforts to provide supportive facilities, these are not yet optimal. It is vital to strengthen parental and community involvement to create more inclusive environment. The study underscores the need for clear school policies supporting inclusive education, ongoing teacher training, and adequate resource allocation. The curriculum should be flexible to accommodate the needs of students with intellectual disabilities while upholding educational standards. Recommended strategic initiatives include developing teacher training modules, fostering collaboration with inclusive education experts, and optimizing the use of technology and adaptive learning tools.

Keywords: Intellectual disabilities; inclusive education; learning strategies; case study

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an educational approach that accommodates all children, including those with special needs, to learn together in one school environment without discrimination. The goal is to provide equal access to learning, appreciate individual differences, and create an environment that supports the active participation of all students. Inclusive education emphasizes acceptance, collaboration, and adjustments to the curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of diverse learners. It is designed to serve all students, including children with special needs, within the same educational system (Alfikri et al., 2022). This approach provides opportunities for students of various backgrounds and abilities to learn together in regular classes, including at the elementary school level.

Primary schools are essential for delivering quality inclusive education to all children, including those with special needs. Inclusive learning models enhance the educational

experience for all students by fostering an appreciation for diversity, empathy, and collaboration among peers from varied backgrounds and abilities, as emphasized by [Ningrum \(2022\)](#). Achieving effective inclusive education necessitates multiple strategies, including educator training, curriculum modifications, diverse teaching methods, and sufficient facilities and resources. These strategies ensure equal learning opportunities within a shared environment for all students, particularly those with special needs. Teachers can tailor their teaching approaches and assessments to meet individual student needs, thereby promoting their academic and social development while cultivating a school culture that embraces diversity, tolerance, and teamwork. Creating an inclusive and nurturing learning atmosphere requires strong support from families, the community, and government resources, as highlighted by [Juntak et al. \(2023\)](#).

Students with intellectual disabilities in Indonesia hold the same rights to quality education as their peers, fundamentally aimed at enhancing their quality of life. Intellectual disability is characterized by significantly reduced cognitive abilities, which impede these students' efficiency and rate of acquiring, retaining, and applying knowledge, as established by [Abha and Shukla \(2016\)](#). This means that intellectual disability is a condition in which cognitive functioning is significantly lower than average; because of this, students with intellectual disabilities require specialized support to develop themselves. Educators and schools must design learning strategies that help these students overcome the challenges they face and maximize their potential.

According to the [American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities \(2025\)](#), intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, impacting social, practical, and conceptual skills. This condition affects students who may struggle with understanding information, problem-solving, and meeting social and academic expectations, particularly during their developmental period, which extends up to around 22 years of age. As a result, students with intellectual disabilities require specialized educational support distinct from their peers. Typically, these students demonstrate below-average intellectual abilities alongside limitations in at least two adaptive functioning areas, which may include conceptual, practical, and social skills. Educational interventions for these students must be tailored to their unique needs, emphasizing simplified and repeated instruction, individualized teaching approaches, and support in daily living skills. Moreover, creating a supportive, non-discriminatory environment, along with providing extra guidance and motivation, is essential for fostering their self-confidence. Consequently, implementing flexible and inclusive teaching strategies is vital to help these students reach their full potential.

[Stiggins et al. \(2014\)](#) highlights that students with intellectual disabilities face cognitive limitations arising from various environmental factors, genetic conditions, and neurodevelopmental disorders, which obstruct cognitive development. To support effective learning, it is crucial to implement adjustments in education, including modifications to teaching methods, educational materials, and the learning environment, allowing these students to learn alongside their peers in inclusive classrooms. The educational support aims to maximize development tailored to the students' individual abilities, interests, and needs through curriculum modifications and individualized teaching strategies, while establishing realistic achievement goals. Emphasis is placed on basic skills training in vital areas such as reading, writing, arithmetic, social skills, and self-care. These efforts foster greater independence for students in their daily activities. Educators are urged to adopt concrete, step-by-step instructional techniques and provide extensive material repetition to enhance comprehension and retention.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework developed to enhance and optimize teaching for all learners based on learning science and individual variability. UDL has three main principles: (1) Multiple means of representation, i.e. providing various ways of presenting information to students; (2) Multiple means of action and expression, i.e. offering options for students to express what they have learned; and (3) Multiple means of engagement, i.e.

motivating and engaging students through various approaches relevant to their interests (CAST, 2018). The application of UDL is highly relevant in an inclusive education context, as it allows for flexible, adaptive, and responsive instructional design that caters to a wide range of student needs.

Curriculum adaptation is a critical process aimed at modifying multiple aspects of the educational experience to effectively cater to students with disabilities. This includes adjusting content, processes, products, and the overall learning environment to align with the diverse abilities and needs of these students (Shabir et al., 2025). Key strategies for curriculum adaptation encompass simplifying educational material, modifying teaching methodologies, altering assessment techniques, and providing additional support where necessary. According to UNESCO (2017) these adaptations are vital to ensure that all students can engage meaningfully in learning activities without facing discrimination or marginalization. Moreover, the creation of a supportive and inclusive learning environment is equally important. Effective collaboration among teachers, parents, and various support personnel, such as psychologists and therapists, is essential for addressing the special requirements of students. The school should foster a welcoming atmosphere that is non-discriminatory and promotes positive social interactions. It is beneficial to offer vocational training or life-skills programs tailored for students with moderate to mild intellectual disabilities, equipping them with essential skills for independent living within their communities. With the right educational support structures in place, students with intellectual disabilities can continue to grow and actively engage in their social lives.

SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang is a public elementary school that has implemented inclusive education by accepting students with special needs, including students with intellectual disabilities, but in practice still faces various challenges. These challenges include the limited competence of teachers in the field of inclusion, as not all teachers have adequate training and understanding of learning strategies for students with intellectual disabilities, limited facilities and supporting resources such as learning aids and assistive technology that are not yet optimally available, suboptimal curriculum adaptation because the regular curriculum has not been fully tailored to the individual needs of students with special needs, and the need to improve the understanding and attitudes of the entire school community towards inclusive education in order to create a more accepting and friendly learning environment for all students.

SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang was selected as the research site because it exemplifies the real-world implementation of inclusive education in a resource-limited setting by admitting students with special needs, including those with intellectual disabilities. This school represents the challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive learning in a region with limited resources. SDN 009 Sangkulirang faces challenges in inclusive teaching due to insufficient specialized training for teachers and a curriculum that is not fully tailored for special needs students. Nonetheless, the school is dedicated to inclusive learning, positioning it as a valuable case study for transformative educational practices. Its circumstances are emblematic of many elementary schools in Indonesia's remote or semi-urban areas, indicating that insights from this study could be broadly applicable. There is an urgent need for capacity building at SDN 009 Sangkulirang to develop effective differentiated instruction strategies and adaptive assessments in inclusive education.

Implementation of inclusive learning at SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang exemplifies efforts to support students with intellectual disabilities. Preliminary observations identified nine such students; however, the school encounters challenges including staff's limited understanding of inclusive concepts, insufficient differentiated instruction, and inadequate resources. There are difficulties in integrating these students into regular classes, alongside a lack of tailored assessment tools and teacher training. Despite initiatives towards inclusive education, significant improvements are needed in teacher capacity, facilities, and collaboration among the school, families, and government to ensure equitable learning for all students.

This study aims to examine the implementation of inclusive learning strategies for students with intellectual disabilities at SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang. It focuses on the adaptation of the curriculum, appropriate teaching methods, and the fostering of collaboration among stakeholders to create an inclusive environment. The expected results intend to contribute to the development of more effective inclusive learning strategies, benefiting not only SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang but also other Indonesian schools facing similar challenges.

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a single case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of inclusive learning strategies for students with intellectual disabilities at SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang. The case study method was selected for its flexibility to explore holistically within its natural context, focusing on experiences, social interactions, and actual practices in the school (Yin, 2018).

The study initiated a preliminary observation phase from October 18–26, 2024, aimed at understanding the context, classroom activities, and potential research subjects. The primary data collection occurred from October 2024 to January 2025 at SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang, located in East Kutai Regency, East Kalimantan. Data sources included regular classroom teachers, a special education support teacher (GPK), the school principal, parents of students with special needs, and, when feasible, students with intellectual disabilities.

Data collection employed multiple techniques and instruments, focusing on inclusive education. In-depth interviews were conducted with classroom teachers, the GPK (special needs coordinator), the principal, and parents of students with special needs, utilizing a structured interview guide. This guide addressed themes like understanding inclusive education, teaching-learning processes, support from the school, and challenges faced. Direct observations in classrooms documented behaviors of students with intellectual disabilities, such as communication abilities and social interactions, alongside teachers' instructional practices and curriculum adaptations. A systematic log captured classroom activities and social dynamics to track changes in student participation over time. Additionally, various documents were analyzed, including Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), student assessment results, and inclusive lesson plans. These documents aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of educational strategies and triangulate findings from both interviews and observations, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the inclusive education environment.

To ensure data validity, triangulation of sources and techniques was utilized, incorporating information from interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checks were conducted, allowing participants to review and verify the findings, while detailed descriptive field notes provided context and depth, thereby enhancing the credibility of interpretations. The analysis process comprised three stages: data reduction involved filtering and selecting data pertinent to the research focus; data display involved organizing and presenting data narratively, including relevant quotes or tables; and conclusion drawing/verification incorporated iterative reflection to ensure that conclusions accurately reflected the data. These phases were revisited to refine findings and confirm their validity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The implementation of inclusive learning strategies at SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang reflects the school's commitment to serving students with intellectual disabilities in regular classrooms. Key strategies include identifying individual student needs and creating an Individual Learning Program (ILP) tailored to each student. Teachers adapt the curriculum, teaching methods, and learning media, collaborating closely with the special education support teacher (GPK) to provide adaptive learning services. Classroom practices employ various methods such as demonstrations, peer tutoring, concrete visual aids, and educational games to engage these students. While the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and

Differentiated Instruction (DI) have not been systematically implemented, their fundamental elements are visible in everyday teaching practices.

The integration of students with intellectual disabilities into inclusive learning environments has yielded positive outcomes. With the implementation of personalized teaching methods, these students exhibited increased enthusiasm, engagement, and confidence. Key strategies included the use of appropriate learning media, material repetition, and extended time for task completion. Additionally, social interaction between students with and without disabilities has been enhanced through targeted guidance from teachers. While regular students are beginning to collaborate effectively with their peers with special needs, some challenges persist, such as varying levels of understanding and occasional reluctance from a few classmates. The assessment of students with intellectual disabilities is conducted flexibly, with teachers tailoring evaluation methods to individual abilities, focusing on both academic progress and socio-emotional development in a personalized manner.

The success of inclusive education at the school is significantly bolstered by effective collaboration among classroom teachers, the GPK, the principal, and parents. Regular meetings and informal communication are utilized to discuss student progress and strategize improvements. These include periodic meetings between teachers and the principal to assess the efficacy of adaptations and supports and to identify additional needs. Parental engagement is also emphasized through discussions regarding their children's development. However, various challenges remain, such as inconsistent levels of understanding and commitment to inclusive practices among stakeholders. Not all teachers and parents possess the same depth of knowledge regarding inclusive education. The school also grapples with limitations in teaching media and learning aids, facing a shortage of specialized materials and assistive tools necessary for students with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, the scarcity of training opportunities in inclusive education means many teachers lack adequate professional development. The principal's support is essential in addressing these issues, as they can implement inclusive-friendly policies and facilitate collaboration with local education authorities to secure additional resources and training.

Despite significant efforts, the implementation of inclusive education at SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang faces obstacles such as limited teacher training in differentiated instruction, inadequate facilities and tools, and poor communication with parents of students with special needs. Furthermore, local educational policies often do not explicitly support inclusive education, restricting external assistance. To improve sustainability and effectiveness, there is a need for stronger inclusive education policies, ongoing teacher training, better facilities, and heightened awareness within the school community.

One significant outcome of this study is the identification of specific adaptation strategies that the teachers and school implemented to accommodate students with intellectual disabilities. These adaptations were observed in several key areas as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Implementation Stages

Description of Implementation (Data Reduction and Data Presentation)			
Class Observation	Interview	Activity & Social Dynamics Log	Data Analysis & Presentation
1. Identify the learning methods or approaches used by teachers.	Conduct interviews with the principal, classroom teachers, parents, and, if necessary, experts (psychologists or special education teachers).	1. Systematically record various activities carried out as well as interactions, changes, and developments in social patterns that occur in individuals or groups within a certain period.	Data presentation must be systematic, logical, and relevant to the research objectives.
2. Record the use of learning media and supporting technology.			
3. Observe how teachers design inclusive and adaptive learning for all students.			
4. Analyze the suitability between the Lesson Plan (RPP) and its implementation in the field.		2. This log helps monitor engagement, participation, and the quality of social relationships within an environment.	

Source: Processed primary data, 2024

Based on Table 1, teachers adapted their curriculum and materials to better serve students with intellectual disabilities. They simplified lesson content by lowering the complexity of concepts and language, transforming abstract mathematical problems into tangible forms using real objects like buttons and flashcards. This hands-on approach leverages visual media and learning aids, facilitating understanding through manipulation and visual representation, core principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Teachers also allowed flexible time allocations, enabling students to learn at their own pace, ensuring no one felt rushed during classwork or tests. Furthermore, assessment methods focused on individualized, informal evaluations, prioritizing personal growth over peer comparisons through means such as direct observations and portfolios. This formative assessment model aims to highlight each student's strengths and areas for improvement, fostering a more supportive learning environment.

The researchers also interviewed teachers at the school. The following are the teachers' statements.

"I have a student with a mild intellectual disability in my class. During math lessons, this student struggles to grasp multiplication concepts. I decided to use a concrete method—I asked the student to count some buttons I had brought to class, grouping them into piles of two or three, and then we counted them together. The process did take more time, but the child was happy and could follow along, even if not at the same pace as the others. I also gave the student extra time and did not include them in the regular daily quizzes. Instead, I assess based on the effort shown and the progress the student makes each week." (Interview with Class III teacher, 19 October 2024)

This narrative from a classroom teacher exemplifies the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles through inclusive strategies. The teacher employed multiple means of engagement by utilizing an interactive approach to motivate students, and multiple means of representation by using concrete objects to explain mathematical concepts. Differentiated instruction was also evident, with adjustments to the teaching process, provision of extra time, and modifications to assessment formats tailored to individual student abilities. The assistance of a special assistant teacher (GPK) was noted as beneficial for one-on-one student support, though the collaboration between the classroom teacher and GPK required improvement due to time constraints and a lack of structured planning. Furthermore, the teacher faced challenges in engaging parents of students with intellectual disabilities, as some were hesitant to participate in their child's education. The teacher proactively visited families to foster discussions, promoting the idea that with the right support, students can make developmental progress. Such outreach is vital for enhancing parental trust and involvement in the inclusive education process.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study show that the implementation of inclusive learning strategies for students with intellectual disabilities at SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang involves a combination of curriculum adjustments, adaptive teaching methods, and collaborative efforts among teachers, school leaders, and parents. These efforts indicate a clear commitment by the school to provide an inclusive learning environment, yet the implementation is still hampered by various challenges such as limited teacher understanding of inclusive practices, minimal training, insufficient facilities, and suboptimal collaboration among stakeholders. From a theoretical perspective, the adaptive strategies identified in this study strongly reflect the principles of Differentiated Instruction and Universal Design for Learning. The flexible adjustments made to the content (what is taught), process (how it is taught), and assessment (how learning is evaluated) align with Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction framework, which emphasizes tailoring these elements to meet diverse student needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Likewise, the use of multiple media and methods, as well as varied ways for students to engage with content and demonstrate their learning, embodies the core of the UDL approach (CAST, 2018). In practice, even though these frameworks were not formally named by the practitioners at the school, the teachers' initiatives, such as simplifying materials, using multisensory tools, providing extra time, and focusing on individual progress, show these inclusive principles in action.

The research findings align with previous studies on inclusive education in primary schools, notably reinforcing challenges highlighted by Lastini et al. (2024) concerning insufficient teacher qualifications and limited facilities, observed similarly at SDN 009 Sangkulirang. It was noted that active parental participation is crucial for successful outcomes in inclusive education, which resonates with the current need for increased parent involvement at SDN 009 Sangkulirang. Furthermore, Taufiq and Harsiwi (2024) underscored the importance of individualized learning programs, teacher training in inclusive strategies, and adequate facilities. SDN 009 is actively working to enhance these areas, with teachers initiating the development of individualized lesson plans and acknowledging the necessity for further training, while also seeking facility improvements despite existing challenges. The parallel between these findings and those cited by Taufiq and Harsiwi (2024) illustrates that the challenges faced at SDN 009 are reflective of broader issues within the inclusive elementary education framework.

In the context of instructional strategies, the findings align with Bintang et al. (2024) indicating that inclusive learning strategies effectively accommodate students with special needs by modifying teaching methods, media, and timings. At SDN 009 Sangkulirang, teachers attempted to implement these strategies by utilizing differentiated methods and straightforward media to enhance comprehension, reflecting Bintang's best practice descriptions. However, the study also indicates challenges consistent with Handayani et al. (2023) which pointed out that many inclusive education efforts are not optimally executed, especially regarding the early identification of student needs and customization of assessments and curricula for special needs students. Specifically, it was noted that while some curricular adjustments were made at SDN 009 Sangkulirang, they tended to be generalized rather than tailored to the individual requirements of students, and formal assessments were scarce, suggesting significant areas for improvement in those critical factors.

Furthermore, the adaptive strategies implemented at SDN 009 Sangkulirang align with the research of Wafiqni et al. (2023) emphasizing the effectiveness of an adaptive curriculum, alternative support services, appropriate learning media, and the simplification of instructional materials for students experiencing learning difficulties. Evidence from SDN 009 Sangkulirang shows the curriculum being adjusted in fundamental ways, utilizing various instructional methods and support, such as peer tutoring and additional guidance from a GPK. The extensive use of visual and concrete media, along with the breakdown of materials into simpler components, exemplifies these strategies. These findings support the broader effectiveness of

such methods for assisting learners with cognitive challenges. Furthermore, the results echo [Agustin \(2017\)](#) conclusions, which highlight the necessity of a modified curriculum and flexible teaching practices in fostering inclusive education. Although the implementation of these strategies at SDN 009 is currently limited by resources and training, their partial adoption underscores their practical significance and the urgent need for institutionalization.

By comparing the findings of the single-case study at SDN 009 Sangkulirang with existing literature, it becomes clear that many of the experiences at SDN 009 Sangkulirang are reflective of nationwide trends and challenges in inclusive education. This study not only reinforces existing theoretical frameworks and prior research, but also introduces novel perspectives derived from a rural, resource-constrained learning environment. The study makes a substantial contribution to the comprehension of inclusive education practices at the primary school level by outlining the strategies implemented, the challenges faced, and the context of SDN 009 Sangkulirang. These insights offer a significant case study for educators, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to advancing inclusive education. The findings shed light on the practical realities encountered in the implementation of inclusive practices, highlighting both achievements and obstacles, and thereby providing essential insights to inform future efforts aimed at establishing better and more contextually appropriate models of inclusive education in comparable environments.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the inclusive learning strategies implemented for students with intellectual disabilities at SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang. It highlights the adaptations made in the school's inclusive education practices, such as curriculum modifications, adaptive teaching methods, appropriate media use, tailored assessment techniques, and collaborative efforts involving teachers, support staff, and parents. Instructional content has been simplified, with a focus on concrete and visual methods along with adjusted evaluation strategies to meet the needs of students with special needs. While these practices are not yet fully realized, they indicate a promising commitment towards fostering a welcoming and participative learning environment for all students.

Despite progress, SDN 009 Sangkulirang faces significant challenges in implementing inclusive education. Teachers lack a full understanding of inclusive learning strategies, partly due to limited access to professional training and mentoring. Facilities and learning aids for students with intellectual disabilities are insufficient, reducing the range of teaching interventions. Additionally, low parental involvement in supporting home learning restricts students' progress. Systematic processes for initial assessments and individualized curriculum planning are also absent. These factors suggest that the implementation of inclusive education is still incomplete and not yet established as a coherent system.

From a theoretical perspective, the study's outcomes highlight the importance of educational frameworks like differentiated instruction and universal design for learning, advocating for adaptable content, processes, and assessments tailored to diverse learner needs. Practices at SDN 009 Sangkulirang exemplify these principles through multisensory teaching methods, individualized support, and material modifications. However, the current implementation of these principles largely depends on teachers' individual initiatives and lacks structured internal policies or systematic programs. This indicates that while educators strive to promote inclusive practices, there is a necessity for more formal support mechanisms to ensure consistency.

The findings presented align with previous research, emphasizing that the success of inclusive education is significantly impacted by various factors, including teacher competency, availability of resources, parental participation, and curriculum flexibility. SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang has made commendable initial efforts in these areas. Notably, teachers are exploring new strategies, the school's leadership demonstrates receptiveness to inclusive policies, and parental involvement is gradually increasing. However, the school requires further

support and development to enhance its inclusive education initiatives. This entails implementing regular and extensive training programs for teachers focused on inclusive strategies, reinforcing institutional frameworks by possibly establishing a dedicated inclusion team or creating clear guidelines for inclusive practices within the school. Additionally, supportive policies must be formulated at both school and district levels to promote and sustain inclusive education effectively. Therefore, creating a systematic adaptive learning model that is grounded in practical experience and customized to address the specific needs and limitations of schools such as SD Negeri 009 Sangkulirang is an urgent priority.

In conclusion, this research, despite being limited to a single school and a specific timeframe, provides valuable insights into inclusive education at the primary level, particularly in resource-constrained environments. The findings from SDN 009 Sangkulirang are significant for policymakers, educators, and researchers, as they reflect the practical realities of implementing inclusive learning within an Indonesian school context. They emphasize the necessity of targeted support to address common challenges, thereby informing the development of educational policies and systems that are equitable and empower all students, including those with intellectual disabilities. Ultimately, these results contribute to the broader objective of achieving truly inclusive education.

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