

Innovation and Quality of Teacher Training in the Transformation of Special Education Toward Inclusive Learning in the SDGs Era

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Abstract: To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable education, the transformation of special education into high-quality inclusive learning is crucial. One key aspect of this transformation is teacher training and the quality of teaching services. Although inclusive education policies have been implemented in many schools, challenges remain regarding teacher preparedness and the contextual relevance of training. This study investigates how teachers and school leaders in special schools (SLB) understand and implement inclusive education transformation within a changing socio-cultural context. This research uses a qualitative case study approach, involving participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis in several SLBs in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, focusing on teachers and principals actively involved in inclusive practices. Data were analyzed thematically using the Miles and Huberman model, with triangulation and member checking to ensure validity. The study reveals three main themes: (1) Limited resources and facilities in SLBs, such as hearing aids and accessibility technologies; (2) Low teacher readiness and non-contextual training; and (3) Low community acceptance and participation in inclusive education, where parents still question the effectiveness of the inclusion system. This research emphasizes that teacher innovation and context-based training are key to successful inclusive education. Systemic changes are needed through affirmative policies, increased community literacy, and professional development based on local needs. The novelty of this research lies in its contextual approach, identifying gaps between national training programs and actual needs, and highlighting teacher experiences as a foundation for inclusive innovation.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Teacher Training; Teacher Innovation; Special Education Transformation; SDG 4.

INTRODUCTION

The world development agenda pays close attention to inclusive education, especially since the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) included education-related goals. One of the goals of the SDGs is to ensure inclusive and quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities for all. Inclusive policies have been implemented in many countries, but there are still many difficulties in implementing them, especially in developing countries. Inclusive education has been regulated by Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System and Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020, but its practice is still limited. This is especially seen in special education that focuses on children with various special educational needs (ABK), such as children with autism, hearing impairments, and visual impairments (Sudarma, 2023).

This phenomenon is not only happening in the United States but also reflects the inequality of access and education for children with disabilities around the world. Data from UNESCO (2022) shows that many children with disabilities are neglected in the general education system, despite progress in inclusive education. This is due to inadequate resources, teacher training that focuses on inclusion, and policies that do not support diversity of abilities in the classroom. The development of special education to support inclusive learning still faces many challenges in Indonesia. Some of these include the lack of facilities that are friendly to children with disabilities and a sufficient number of teachers to handle children with disabilities (Yusuf & Sari, 2021).

In addition, similar findings were also found in other developing countries such as Kenya and the Philippines, where major challenges in implementing inclusive education include limited teacher training and inadequate infrastructure (Mutua & Dimitrov, 2020; Santos & Padilla, 2021). This study strengthens the argument that local and contextual approaches are essential in adapting inclusive policies effectively.

Inclusive education is considered not only as a basic right of every child, but also as a strategy to build a just and sustainable society. Quality and inclusive education allows children with special needs to access learning that is in accordance with their abilities. In addition, it increases understanding and acceptance of diversity. In such a situation, the transformation of special education is very important to resolve the gap between inclusive theory and practice in the field. Initial results of interviews with teachers in special schools (SLB) indicate that many of them are not ready to implement inclusive teaching strategies because they have limited knowledge and limited resources.

Previous studies have focused on policy aspects or only viewed inclusivity as an effort to fulfill the rights of children with special needs without considering the transformation that occurs in special education itself. In addition, the existing literature discusses more about the structural and systemic aspects of inclusive education, but not many have studied in depth how the transformation of special education can produce high-quality inclusive learning. Marlina (2023) stated that the success of inclusive education is highly dependent on the success of support systems such as appropriate evaluation, differentiated learning approaches, and the readiness of higher education institutions to provide disability-friendly services. This shows that research has not focused much on the experiences of teachers and students in facing the current difficulties and opportunities to implement inclusive education (Rahmawati, 2022; Marlina, 2023).

The purpose of this study is to observe and study the transformation that occurs in special education towards quality inclusive learning in the SDGs era. The main focus of this study is to understand the processes, experiences, and difficulties faced by teachers and schools in implementing holistic and effective inclusive education. This study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the theory of inclusive education and practical suggestions to improve the quality of special education in Indonesia. This study will be conducted using a qualitative approach. This study is expected to provide new understanding of this phenomenon to help policy makers, educators, and practitioners in the field optimize inclusive learning based on diversity.

In the era of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), inclusive education is a crucial pillar in realizing equitable and quality access to education for all students, including those with special needs. The paradigm shift from special education to inclusive education demands transformation in various aspects, one of which is improving innovation and the quality of teacher training. Teachers are required not only to understand the characteristics of students with special needs but also to be able to integrate learning approaches, strategies, and technologies that support diversity in inclusive classrooms. Therefore, this research focuses on how innovation and the quality of teacher training can contribute to the transformation from special education to inclusive learning, in line with the SDGs, particularly goal four, namely quality and inclusive education for all.

Based on this context, this research seeks to answer several important questions. First, what forms of innovation are being developed in teacher training to improve their competencies in facing the transformation from special education to inclusive learning? This question aims to identify new approaches, methods, and training models designed to better prepare teachers to manage diversity in the classroom. Second, to what extent does the

quality of teacher training influence teachers' readiness to apply inclusive learning principles in the field? This research aims to explore the relationship between the quality of training programs and teachers' practical skills in creating a welcoming learning environment for all students. Furthermore, this research also aims to explore the factors that support and hinder innovation in teacher training in the context of special education undergoing an inclusive transformation. These factors can stem from educational policies, resource availability, and school culture. Furthermore, another question that needs to be answered is how teacher training innovation contributes to achieving the SDGs targets, particularly in the context of equitable access and improving the quality of education for students with special needs.

Thus, the overall research questions are aimed at understanding the relationship between innovation, the quality of teacher training, and the success of the transformation of special education toward inclusive learning within the framework of sustainable development. The results of this research are expected to provide new insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and teacher training institutions in designing training strategies that are innovative, responsive, and relevant to the needs of inclusive education in the SDG era.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to understand the subjective experiences of teachers, principals, and parents in the context of inclusive education in Indonesia. The case study approach was chosen because this study focuses on understanding the processes that occur in a particular context, namely the implementation of inclusive education in schools with special education programs in Indonesia. Case studies allow researchers to collect rich and detailed data about the real experiences of teachers, principals, and students in facing challenges and opportunities in inclusive education (Creswell & Poth, 2021). In addition, this design allows researchers to explore various perspectives related to policies, practices, and perceptions that develop in the special education community. This study was conducted in several special schools (SLB) in the province of West Sumatra, Indonesia, which have inclusive education programs. The research locations were selected because of the many characteristics of the schools and various special education needs. The study was conducted from January to June 2025, and data collection lasted for four months. The purpose of selecting these locations was to obtain a representative picture of the dynamics that occur in implementing inclusive education in areas that have different challenges with resources and facilities.

This study involved school principals, teachers who teach at SLB, and parents of students whose children attend inclusive schools. The selection of informants was based on their involvement in the transformation of special education in schools and their experience in the management and implementation of inclusive education. To select informants, a purposive sampling method was used, which considered the qualifications and relevance of each informant's experience to the research objectives. In this case, the researcher selected informants who had direct experience in implementing inclusive education and changing special education policies in their educational institutions. Purposive sampling allows researchers to identify informants who can provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon being studied (Flick, 2020). Yusuf (2020) emphasized that the purposive sampling approach is very relevant for inclusive education research because it allows the exploration of the experiences of people who have contextual knowledge about the dynamics of inclusion in general and special education units.

Several methods were used to collect research data, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were used to determine how well informants understood and felt the changes taking place in special education, as well as the difficulties and solutions they faced. Interview questions were designed in such a way that they allowed informants to speak openly about their experiences. In addition, the questions in this interview. Participant observation was conducted to track interactions and dynamics in inclusive classes and how inclusive education policies were implemented in the field. In addition, documentation was also examined, including school policy records, activity reports, and curricula, to provide further context on how each school implemented inclusive education. To increase the credibility of the data, triangulation combined information from various sources and data collection techniques (Denzin, 2021).

Several verification methods, such as audit trail, source triangulation, and member checking, are used to ensure the validity of the data. Source triangulation is done by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation to ensure that the information obtained is consistent and reliable. Member checking is done by returning the initial findings of the informant to ensure that the interpretation of the data made by the researcher is correct and relevant. Audit trails are also used to record a clear research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This allows other researchers to replicate their work (Lincoln & Guba, 2021).

The thematic analysis model developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data. This model involves determining the main themes from the observation and interview data. This method requires the data to be coded and grouped into categories or themes related to the research objectives. To understand the phenomenon being studied, each emerging theme is examined thoroughly. To gain a better understanding of the transformation of special education in Indonesia, the researcher will link the findings of the analysis to existing theories on inclusive education. Thus, this analysis not only provides an in-depth understanding of the problem but also provides theoretical contributions that can enrich the literature on inclusive education.

This study involved a number of participants who were purposively selected, considering their involvement in the transformation process from special education to inclusive education. The participants included special education teachers, regular school teachers teaching in inclusive schools, and managers of teacher training institutions with direct experience implementing training programs related to innovation and improving the quality of inclusive learning. In total, there were 30 participants in this study, divided into three main categories. First, 10 special education teachers working in Special Needs Schools (SLB) or special institutions adapting to an inclusive system. Second, 15 regular school teachers who had participated in inclusive education training and had experience teaching students with special needs in regular classes. Third, 5 managers or facilitators of teacher training from higher education institutions and teacher training centers involved in developing innovation- and inclusion-based training curricula.

The selection of these participants was based on the principle of information-rich cases, not simply on numbers. Each participant was selected for their experience and perspective relevant to the research focus. This approach allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of how innovation is implemented in teacher training and how training quality influences inclusive learning practices in the field. Furthermore, the distribution of participants from various educational backgrounds and institutions is intended to provide diverse perspectives on the special education transformation process. Special education teachers provide perspectives on student needs and challenges in the field, regular

school teachers provide insights into the application of inclusive practices in diverse classrooms, while training facilitators provide insights into the design and implementation of teacher competency development programs.

Participants in this study were also selected from various representative areas, for example, from inclusive schools in urban and rural areas, to examine variations in the implementation of training and educational innovation. Thus, the data obtained is expected to provide a more holistic picture of the actual state of teacher training in supporting the transformation of special education towards an inclusive and sustainable system. Regarding research ethics, each participant will be provided with an informed consent form explaining the research objectives, benefits, and guarantees of data confidentiality. Participation is voluntary, and participants have the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. This approach ensures that the entire research process is conducted ethically, transparently, and respects the rights of each individual. With a total of 30 participants and diverse backgrounds, this study is expected to produce in-depth and reflective findings on how innovation and the quality of teacher training play a crucial role in accelerating the transformation of special education towards inclusive learning that aligns with the principles of the SDGs.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding(s)

This study produced a number of important findings related to the transformation of special education towards quality inclusive learning in the SDGs era. Based on interview data, observations, and documentation, three main themes were found as follows:

1. Limited Resources and Facilities

Most SLBs still lack assistive devices and supporting infrastructure, such as hearing aids and access technology. The principal stated, "We still lack hearing aids and do not have enough technology devices." This reinforces the findings of Ainscow & Miles (2022) that resources are a major barrier to inclusive education, especially in developing countries.

2. Strengthening Teacher Competence in Inclusive Education

Additional findings relate to improving teacher skills, which are critical to the success of inclusive education. In inclusive classrooms, many teachers are not prepared to deal with the diversity of student abilities. Most teachers feel unprepared to deal with the diversity of students in inclusive classrooms. Despite having received training, many consider the training content to be less contextual and applicable. One teacher admitted, "I have difficulty compiling materials that can be understood by all students, especially children on the autism spectrum." (Interview with Teacher, 2025). Although they have received inclusive training, some teachers believe that it is not in-depth and not always relevant to local situations. This is in line with Yusuf (2021), who stated that teacher training must integrate aspects of psychology, pedagogy, and social understanding of children with special needs to create a truly inclusive learning environment. In line with Marlina (2020), effective teacher training must include differentiation teaching strategies and alternative communication.

3. Community Acceptance and Participation in Inclusive Education

The challenges faced by the community to support inclusive education are also important elements found. It was found that some parents still doubt the effectiveness of the inclusion system. One parent said, "I am worried that my child will not get optimal learning support in an inclusive class.." (Interview with Parents, 2025). This condition shows the importance of community education programs and increasing inclusive literacy (Peters, 2022).

Illustration of Thematic Codes from Field Data**Theme 1** : Limited Resources and Facilities**Code** : lack of assistive devices, limited technology**Quote** : “We still lack hearing aids and do not have special technology for autistic children.” (Principal, SLB 1)**Theme 2** : Strengthening Teacher Competence in Inclusive Education**Code** : difficulty in compiling materials, non-contextual training**Quote** : “I am often confused when creating materials for very diverse students. The training I attended was also more general, not appropriate to the conditions in our school.” (Teacher, SLB 2)**Theme 3** : Community Acceptance and Participation**Code** : parental doubts, lack of inclusion information**Quote** : “I am worried that my child will not get optimal learning support in an inclusive class.” (Parent, SLB 3)**Discussion**

The results of this study indicate that in order to achieve the SDG goal, namely quality education for all, there are several gaps that need to be addressed immediately. The first focus, Limited Resources and Facilities, is in line with previous research results which show that lack of resources and facilities is still a major barrier to educational inclusion (Ainscow & Miles, 2022). This is very relevant to the problems faced by SLB in Indonesia. Although there are policies that support inclusion, many schools do not have adequate facilities to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Therefore, a larger budget must be allocated to purchase adequate learning aids to follow inclusive education policies.

Previous research shows that the success of inclusive education is highly dependent on teachers' abilities and knowledge in dealing with student diversity. The second theme, Strengthening Teacher Competence, is also in line (Winzer, 2021). The argument that teacher training should be more structured and relevant to needs in the field is reinforced by the results of interviews with teachers who feel less prepared to teach students with different needs. Training that emphasizes more practical and applicable teaching strategies, for example, can help teachers become better prepared to face the challenges of inclusive education.

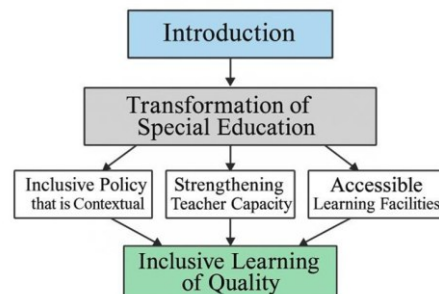


Figure 1. Systemic Transformation Model of Special Education Towards Inclusion in the SDGs Era

Figure 1 illustrates the transformation process from special education to quality inclusive education in the SDGs era. This transformation is not linear, but is influenced by the interaction between resource readiness (input), teacher and institutional adaptation processes (process), and community support (external environment). The expected final output is the creation of an inclusive education system that is equal, adaptive, and sustainable. This model shows that transformation requires a systemic and collaborative approach involving various stakeholders.

Community Acceptance and Participation, the third theme, shows that the community is still less supportive of inclusive education, even though the government and educational institutions support it. This is in line with the finding that changing social and cultural attitudes is important for the success of inclusive education (Peters, 2022). Therefore, more intensive socialization and education programs are needed so that the community, especially parents, better understand the importance of inclusive education for all children.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study has practical consequences that mean that inclusive education policies in Indonesia should be strengthened by more efficient resource allocation and improving the quality of training for educators. In addition, there is a need to increase support for special education infrastructure and teacher training, as well as expanding outreach programs for the community. In addition, this study provides a theoretical contribution to broaden the understanding of the difficulties and opportunities associated with inclusive education. In addition, this contribution also helps expand the literature related to special education transformation.

Further research should delve deeper into the social and cultural components that influence community acceptance of inclusive education. Long-term research is also needed to see the long-term development of inclusive education implementation in Indonesia, especially in more remote areas or those with more limited resources.

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings from Interviews and Observations

Theme	Key Findings	Example Quote
Resource and Facility Limitations	Lack of assistive tools and accessibility technologies	"We still lack hearing aids."
Teacher Competency Enhancement	Non-contextual training and difficulty in preparing materials	"The training felt too general for our school."
Community Acceptance	Parental concerns about the effectiveness of inclusive education	"I worry my child won't get sufficient support."

Table 1 summarizes three major themes that emerged from the interviews and field observations. Each theme is accompanied by direct quotes from informants to demonstrate the strength of the qualitative data used. These themes represent the main factors that hinder the transformation of special education towards inclusion, namely the lack of supporting facilities, minimal teacher competence in inclusive practices, and the still weak acceptance of the community towards an equal education system for all children.

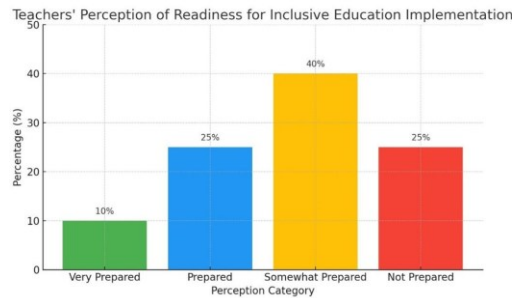


Figure 2. Distribution of Teacher Readiness in Implementing Inclusion in SLBs

Figure 2 shows that most teachers are in the prepared category with notes, meaning they understand the importance of inclusion but still face limitations in training, experience in managing heterogeneous classes, and access to resources. Only a small number of teachers feel fully prepared, while the rest feel unprepared. This finding emphasizes the importance of ongoing, contextual and needs-based training in schools.

The transformation from special education to inclusive education in the SDGs era demonstrates different dynamics between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, teacher training tends to be more innovative due to the availability of human resources, technological facilities, and access to broader competency-building programs. Conversely, in rural areas, teachers often face limited access to quality training, digital infrastructure, and adequate professional support. These differences in context impact the quality of inclusive education implementation and teacher readiness to adopt diversity-based learning approaches.

According to UNESCO (2021), one of the main challenges in realizing inclusive education globally is the disparity in the quality of training and facilities between regions. Teachers in urban areas more often receive innovation-based training, such as the use of educational technology and differentiated learning approaches, while teachers in rural areas rely more on empirical experience and community-based learning. This creates a gap in pedagogical competency between the two groups of teachers. Ainscow and Miles (2020) emphasize that the success of inclusive education depends heavily on teachers' ability to adapt learning strategies to suit individual students' needs—a skill that can only be developed through continuous and contextualized training. In urban contexts, teacher training is often integrated with digital learning programs, online seminars, and professional networks that broaden pedagogical horizons. Teachers in cities have greater opportunities to collaborate with higher education institutions or training institutions focused on learning innovation. This aligns with findings by Sharma & Loreman (2019), who stated that a resource-rich educational environment makes it easier for teachers to adopt inclusive practices based on technology and the latest research.

In contrast, teachers in rural areas often face structural and geographical challenges. Access to professional training is limited by distance, cost, and the lack of supporting facilities such as a stable internet connection or the availability of skilled personnel. Booth and Ainscow (2016) explain that the challenges of inclusive education in rural areas are not only technical but also cultural; many teachers still adhere to outdated paradigms that separate children with special needs from regular education. As a result, teacher training in rural areas focuses more on administrative aspects than on developing adaptive pedagogical capacity. Furthermore, in rural areas, there are still limitations in the use of media and learning technology that support students with special needs. Boyle & Anderson (2020) emphasized that access to technology is a significant differentiating factor between urban and rural schools in terms of the quality of inclusive education. While teachers in cities can

utilize digital tools to create interactive learning for students with special needs, teachers in rural areas often rely solely on traditional methods that are less responsive to individual student needs. However, rural teachers' advantage lies in their social closeness and community values. In rural communities, social interactions between teachers, students, and families are more intense, creating strong patterns of social support for the inclusion process. Forlin & Chambers (2017) stated that the success of inclusive education depends not only on facilities but also on the social attitudes and collaboration of the school community. Teachers in rural areas often have a better understanding of students' social and emotional well-being due to deeper personal relationships, even though they lack technical support for differentiated learning. From this comparison, it is clear that the transformation of special education toward inclusive learning in the SDG era requires adaptive and contextualized training strategies. Training in urban areas needs to focus on strengthening reflective practice and utilizing evidence-based learning technologies, while training in rural areas needs to be directed at developing realistic, inclusive core competencies based on local resources. Slee (2018) emphasized that true inclusion can only be achieved if teacher training policies bridge the gap between theory and practice and take into account diverse social, economic, and geographic contexts. Therefore, the success of implementing inclusive education within the SDGs framework is determined not only by the availability of innovative teacher training in urban areas, but also by efforts to ensure equitable quality and access to training in rural areas. The development of a collaborative training system, one that connects teachers from various regions is crucial.

CONCLUSION

In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study emphasizes the importance of transforming special education towards inclusive and high-quality learning. In particular, SDG goal 4, which is related to inclusive and equitable education, is the focus of this study. The results show that, although educational institutions have committed to supporting inclusion, implementation in the field still faces major problems, especially related to teacher readiness, curriculum modification, and limited supporting resources. There are differences in teachers' views and understandings of the meaning of inclusion, as well as differences between policies and practices, according to empirical data collected through observation and interviews. In this situation, teacher readiness is the main measure of the success of the transformation. Theoretically, this study strengthens the constructivist approach in inclusive education, where teaching practices depend on formal policies and individual meanings of their professional experiences. This study provides a systemic mapping of the transformation of special education in Indonesia and offers practical recommendations and policies based on teachers' experiences in the field. Practically, the findings of this study emphasize that ongoing training that focuses on field and contextual needs is needed to improve teacher capacity. To achieve inclusive education, there needs to be cross-sector collaboration, participatory planning, and adequate facilities. Policy makers and educational institutions must create a monitoring and evaluation system that takes into account administrative aspects as well as the subjective experiences of implementers in the field.

From a policy perspective, these results suggest that the shift from special education to inclusion requires a revision of policies that emphasize a rights-based and social justice approach. Governments should encourage flexible regulatory frameworks, support differentiation of education services, and ensure that budgets are available for the sustainability of inclusion programs. Further research is needed to study the experiences of principals, parents, and learners with special needs in the inclusion process. To understand

how changes in inclusive perspectives and practices occur in the long term, longitudinal studies are needed. Therefore, the findings of this study not only enrich academic discussions but also provide strategic directions for improving a more equitable and inclusive education system in the future. By prioritizing reflective practices and participatory approaches across stakeholders, educational inclusion becomes not only a policy, but a just reality.

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