

Uncovering Barriers and Opportunities in Implementing Inclusive Education in Papua: Insights from a Qualitative Needs Assessment

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Abstract: Inclusive education remains a persistent challenge in remote and underserved areas, where structural limitations, sociocultural complexities, and limited professional capacity intersect. This study explores the barriers and enabling factors shaping inclusive education practices in Papua, Indonesia, a region characterized by high geographic isolation and rich cultural diversity. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving 24 participants, comprising principals, classroom teachers, special education staff, school supervisors, and parents, across four schools (two early childhood centers and two primary schools) in Jayapura. Findings reveal four major constraints: limited teacher competence in identifying and supporting learners with disabilities, absence of systematic assessment procedures, insufficient infrastructure and learning resources, and weak cross-sector collaboration. Nevertheless, the study also identifies significant opportunities, including strong cultural values that encourage communal responsibility, educators' openness to professional learning, and emergent adaptive practices within classrooms. These insights highlight the importance of context-responsive teacher training and inclusive school development, particularly through sustained professional learning models that combine theory, practice, and ongoing coaching. The study offers concrete policy recommendations, including the institutionalization of school-level inclusive education guidelines, structured professional development cycles, and intersectoral collaboration protocols, for policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen inclusive education in remote and indigenous contexts.

Keywords: inclusive education; Papua; special needs; remote areas; inclusion index; teacher competencies; qualitative needs assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is widely recognized as a fundamental right and a global commitment to ensuring that every child, regardless of disability, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or geographic location, has access to quality learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2020). Over the past two decades, inclusive education has evolved from a marginal initiative into a systemic reform agenda, with governments acknowledging its role in advancing educational equity and social justice (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian, 2008). Indonesia has adopted this commitment through national regulations, yet its implementation remains uneven, especially in remote, frontier, and disadvantaged regions (3T).

Papua represents one of the most challenging contexts for inclusive education implementation. Its unique geographical landscape (characterized by mountainous terrain, isolated villages, and limited transportation) creates inherent barriers to equitable access. These geographical constraints are compounded by sociocultural diversity: the province is home to hundreds of indigenous ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, knowledge systems, and cultural values (Astuti, 2019). While such cultural richness presents opportunities, it also introduces complexities that require educators to adopt more responsive and localized pedagogies.

Existing studies in Indonesia highlight several recurring constraints that impede inclusive education in remote and marginalized areas. These include limited teacher skills in special education (Sudrajat et al., 2020), insufficient infrastructure (Kustawan, 2021), scarcity of learning materials (Widiati & Hayati, 2020), and prevalent misconceptions regarding disability. In many cases, teachers rely on uniform instructional approaches, and

schools seldom implement systematic assessments to understand students' diverse learning needs. These issues mirror global findings documenting how remote and indigenous communities often face additional layers of exclusion due to intersecting structural disadvantages (Miles & Singal, 2010; Mitchell, 2015; McDonald et al., 2017).

Despite these challenges, research also suggests that inclusive education can thrive in remote areas when local cultural strengths, community participation, and context-responsive school leadership are leveraged effectively (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Engelbrecht & Green, 2018). Papua's communal values, emphasizing togetherness, shared responsibility, and respect, can serve as powerful foundations for inclusive practices when integrated into teaching and learning. However, empirical evidence documenting these opportunities in Indonesian remote contexts remains limited.

This study addresses the gap by examining how inclusive education is currently implemented in early childhood and primary settings in Jayapura, Papua. Rather than focusing solely on deficiencies, the research adopts a needs-assessment lens to identify both barriers and promising practices. Such an approach is crucial to avoid top-down, non-contextual policy initiatives that often fail in remote settings (Lindsay, 2007). By understanding school realities from multiple stakeholder perspectives, this study aims to provide actionable insights for developing more responsive and sustainable inclusive education programs. Specifically, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are the primary barriers to implementing inclusive education in early childhood and primary schools in Jayapura, Papua?
- 2) What enabling factors and cultural opportunities can support inclusive education practices in these contexts?
- 3) What practical recommendations can be derived to inform context-responsive professional development and school policy for inclusive education in remote Papua?

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore barriers and opportunities in implementing inclusive education in Papua. This approach was chosen because the aim was not merely to evaluate compliance with policy but to understand how inclusive education unfolds within authentic, lived contexts, something best captured through rich, qualitative data.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in four schools in Jayapura: two early childhood education centers (Taman Kanak-Kanak/TK) and two primary schools (Sekolah Dasar/SD). These schools were selected purposively based on three criteria: (1) they enrolled students with special needs, (2) they had initiated some form of inclusive practice, and (3) they demonstrated willingness to participate in the study. The selection of both early childhood and primary levels reflects findings by Rahmawati and Purwanta (2021) that barriers to inclusive education emerge as early as the TK level in Indonesian remote settings, and is consistent with Wahyuni and Dewantoro's (2023) recommendation that inclusive school culture studies capture multiple school levels within the same community.

A total of 24 participants were involved: 4 school principals, 10 classroom teachers, 2 special education staff members (where available), 4 school supervisors, and 4 parents of children with special needs. Participants were selected purposively to ensure representation of key stakeholder groups with direct experience of inclusive education in the school context.

All participants provided voluntary consent to participate and were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained prior to data collection. All participants received written information sheets explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all individuals. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing school and participant identities throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. Participants were informed that their data would be used solely for academic research purposes and stored securely.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered through:

- ***In-depth Interviews:*** Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share experiences, concerns, and reflections. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and provided insights into teachers' understanding of disability, existing school policies, and perceptions regarding inclusion.
- ***Classroom Observations:*** Non-participant observations focused on instructional practices, peer interactions, classroom management, and accessibility. Observation guidelines were adapted from Booth & Ainscow's (2006) Inclusion Index, which has been validated as a practical school improvement tool in multiple international contexts (Sandoval et al., 2019).
- ***Document Analysis:*** Documents such as lesson plans, assessment records, student profiles, and school policies were examined to compare stated policies with real practice.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Initial coding was conducted independently by two researchers, followed by collaborative theme development and review to strengthen consistency and reduce individual bias.

Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents enhanced the credibility of findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To address researcher positionality, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the process. As researchers with professional backgrounds in special and inclusive education, the team was conscious of the potential influence of their perspectives on data interpretation. Reflexive memos were maintained to document analytical decisions and to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than preconceived frameworks.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding(s)

The analysis of data gathered from interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews resulted in four overarching themes. Although each school had its own specific context, a number of recurring patterns emerged, reflecting the realities of inclusive education implementation in Papua's remote settings.

Theme 1: Limited Teacher Competence in Supporting Learners with Disabilities

Across the participating schools, teachers expressed uncertainty about how to recognize and respond to the varied needs of children with disabilities. Observations also revealed that instruction was generally delivered in a uniform manner, without differentiation or adaptations. None of the teachers conducted baseline assessments to identify individual learning needs or developmental profiles.

These challenges were expressed vividly by participants themselves. One classroom teacher explained

"I want to help these children, but honestly I don't know where to start. I was never trained for this. I just try my best and hope it is enough."

A principal echoed this sentiment, noting that without specialized guidance or referral systems, teachers were left to improvise:

"We know some children have difficulties, but we have no system to identify them properly or to get them support from outside the school."

These findings echo the concerns noted in international literature, which highlights that teachers in remote or marginalized communities often lack access to specialized training and ongoing professional development (Sharma et al., 2012; Engelbrecht & Green, 2018; Lisdiyanti, 2019). This gap becomes particularly evident when teachers encounter students with communication delays, ADHD, or other learning difficulties, conditions requiring specialized instructional strategies.

Theme 2: Absence of Clear Policy and Weak Institutional Support

None of the participating schools possessed written policies or guidelines related to inclusive education. When asked about formal procedures, principals typically referred only to the regular curriculum, without mention of accommodations or modified assessment procedures.

A school supervisor candidly observed:

"There is no checklist, no guide, no standard for us to use when visiting schools about inclusion. We can see things are not working, but we have no tool to measure it or improve it systematically."

Supervisors also reported that they lacked specific tools or frameworks to evaluate inclusive practices within schools. Consequently, implementation tends to be fragmented and relies heavily on individual initiative rather than institution-wide commitments. This absence of policy aligns with global studies indicating that unclear governance and vague procedural guidelines often weaken inclusive practice at the school level (Lindsay, 2007; Operti & Belalcázar, 2008).

Theme 3: Limited Infrastructure and Learning Resources

The physical environment of the schools rarely supported the needs of learners with disabilities. None of the schools had dedicated spaces for counselling, sensory breaks, or individualized instruction. Assistive learning tools such as visual aids, manipulatives, or communication boards were largely unavailable.

One teacher described the situation as follows:

"I have a child who needs pictures to understand instructions, but I don't have those materials. I have to draw everything by hand, and I can't do that for every lesson every day."

As documented by UNICEF (2017) and McDonald et al. (2017), insufficient infrastructure in remote settings significantly restricts the participation and learning opportunities of students with disabilities. The situation in Papua reflects this broader global challenge, where geographic isolation and limited funding hinder school development

Theme 4: Cultural Strengths and Strong Community Relationships

Despite structural challenges, the study found encouraging signs in terms of cultural values and interpersonal relationships within the school community. Teachers described strong emotional bonds with their students and expressed a genuine willingness to support learners with special needs. Peer relationships were also generally positive; children tended to help and accept their classmates with difficulties.

One parent of a child with a developmental delay shared:

"In our community, we take care of each other. The children here, they look after my son. He is never left out. Even the teachers treat him like their own child."

A teacher similarly reflected:

"In Papua, we don't leave anyone behind. This is our way. If one child struggles, we all help. I think this is something special about how we teach here."

These findings highlight the potential of local cultural values, particularly communal responsibility, cooperation, and social harmony, as catalysts for inclusive education (Miles & Singal, 2010; Dyson & Millward, 2000). Such values can serve as a foundation for building inclusive school cultures if leveraged strategically.

Table 1. Summary of Key Barriers Identified in Participating Schools

No.	Barrier Category	Description of Findings
1.	Limited Teacher Competence	Teachers lacked skills in identifying and supporting learners with disabilities; no baseline assessments or differentiated instruction observed; teachers relied on improvised responses.
2.	Absence of Clear Policies	Schools had no written inclusive education guidelines; practices relied on individual initiative rather than systemic frameworks; supervisors lacked evaluation tools.
3.	Insufficient Infrastructure & Resources	Classrooms lacked assistive tools, accessible spaces, and learning materials for children with special needs; teachers resorted to hand-made materials.
4.	Weak Intersectoral Collaboration	Limited coordination among schools, health services, and social agencies; no referral pathways for students requiring external specialist support.

Table 2. Summary of Opportunities and Enabling Factors Supporting Inclusive Education

No.	Enabling Factor	Description of Findings
1.	Strong Cultural Values	Communal responsibility, cooperation, and harmony support acceptance of children with diverse needs; deeply embedded in local social fabric.
2.	Positive Teacher Attitudes	Teachers expressed genuine empathy, emotional bonding, and willingness to support learners with special needs despite limited formal training.
3.	Peer Support	Classmates often assisted and accepted peers with difficulties, creating a naturally inclusive environment consistent with local communal values.

4.	Openness to Professional Learning	Educators showed strong readiness to engage in practical training, including reflective practice-based models such as IN-ON-IN-ON.
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Discussion

The findings illustrate the complex interplay of structural, cultural, and pedagogical factors that shape inclusive education in Papua. Interpreted through Booth and Ainscow's (2011) three-dimensional framework of inclusive cultures, policies, and practices, the data reveal a significant imbalance: while the cultural dimension shows genuine strength, both the policy and practice dimensions are critically underdeveloped.

Teacher Competence as a Critical Barrier

The prominent competence gap identified in this study aligns with international evidence that teacher capacity, particularly in differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and individualized planning is a prerequisite for effective inclusive practice (Florian, 2014; Forlin, 2010). Viewed through the lens of Ainscow's (2006) framework for developing inclusive schools, the teachers in this study are operating in what he terms a 'welcoming but unequipped' environment: they possess the values and willingness to include, but lack the pedagogical tools and knowledge to do so effectively.

This finding has direct implications for professional development design. As Sharma et al. (2012) and Lisdiyanti (2019) argue, teachers in remote Indonesian settings require not just knowledge transmission but sustained, practice-embedded coaching that connects new skills directly to classroom realities. The IN-ON-IN-ON model, which alternates between in-service training and on-site coaching cycles, is particularly well-suited to this context and was consistently endorsed by participants as a preferred mode of learning (Guskey, 2000; Mitchell, 2015).

Policy Gaps Lead to Unsystematic Implementation

The complete absence of school-level inclusive education policies in the participating schools is a critical structural vulnerability. Drawing on Skidmore's (2004) typology, the schools in this study are exhibiting what he calls 'inclusive rhetoric without inclusive practice, a condition arising when national policy mandates are not translated into operational school-level procedures. Slee (2011) similarly argues that inclusive education is frequently undermined not by lack of intent but by lack of institutional infrastructure, a pattern clearly evident in this study. Ainscow and Miles (2008) further contend that moving inclusion forward globally requires explicit attention to the policy layer at every level of the education system, from national to school.

As Booth and Ainscow (2011) emphasize, effective inclusion depends on harmony among inclusive culture, policies, and practices. The data show that while cultural receptiveness exists, the policy dimension is almost entirely absent, producing practices that are well-intentioned but unsystematic and unsustainable. The development of clear, school-level operational guidelines, covering identification, curriculum adaptation, referral, and collaboration is therefore a priority intervention (Florian & Rouse, 2009; Kasih, 2018).

Infrastructure Limitations Reinforce Inequality

The physical and material deficits documented in this study are consistent with broader findings on educational inequality in remote Indonesian regions (Kustawan, 2021; Widiati & Hayati, 2020). From a capabilities perspective (Nussbaum, 2011), the absence of accessible spaces and assistive learning materials represents a direct constraint on students'

educational capabilities, their real freedoms to participate in and benefit from learning. Without adequate tools, even highly motivated teachers cannot convert their inclusive intentions into equitable learning experiences.

Cultural Values as an Untapped Asset

A distinctive and theoretically significant contribution of this study is its documentation of cultural values as a functional asset for inclusive education, a perspective that is frequently overlooked in deficit-oriented research. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the communal practices observed in Papua's schools, peer support, shared responsibility, and collective care can be understood as naturally occurring 'zones of proximal development' in which more capable peers scaffold the learning of children with disabilities.

This finding supports Miles and Singal's (2010) argument that effective inclusive education in the Global South requires not the wholesale importation of Western models, but the strategic integration of local cultural assets with evidence-based pedagogical practices. Papua's communal values, if systematically integrated into teacher training and school culture programs, could become a sustainable foundation for inclusion that is both locally meaningful and globally informed.

Need for a Systematic Training Needs Analysis (TNA)

The convergent evidence from interviews, observations, and documents underscores the urgency of a systematic TNA as the foundation for any professional development intervention in this context. Without understanding teachers' specific skill gaps, prior knowledge, and contextual constraints, professional development risks being irrelevant or inaccessible. This is particularly critical in geographically isolated settings where training opportunities are scarce and costly (Mitchell, 2015).

Implications For Policy and Practice

The findings of this study generate several concrete implications for strengthening inclusive education in remote regions such as Papua.

First, the limited competencies of teachers underscore the urgent need for professional development that is practical, ongoing, and closely connected to classroom realities. Evidence from Indonesia and other Asian countries shows that training programs using practice-based and reflective cycles, such as the IN-ON-IN-ON model are more effective than one-time workshops (Guskey, 2000; Mitchell, 2015; Sunardi et al., 2011). The Ministry of Education should institutionalize this model as the standard professional development format for inclusive education in 3T regions.

Second, the absence of written school-level policies indicates that inclusive education cannot rely solely on national regulations. Schools need operational guidelines detailing identification procedures, curriculum adaptation strategies, referral systems, and collaboration mechanisms with external agencies (Booth & Ainscow, 2006; Kasih, 2018; UNESCO, 2009). Such clarity improves teachers' confidence and consistency in implementing inclusive practices (Florian & Rouse, 2009).

Third, Papua's strong communal culture, characterized by cooperation, shared responsibility, and respect can be harnessed to reinforce inclusive school culture. Research from indigenous contexts shows that cultural values play a decisive role in shaping attitudes and reducing stigma (Miles & Singal, 2010; Engelbrecht & Green, 2018). Schools in Papua can integrate these cultural strengths into classroom routines and parent engagement programs.

Lastly, the findings highlight the need for strengthened collaboration between schools and health, social, and community institutions. In many remote Indonesian regions, intersectoral collaboration is minimal, yet such partnerships are essential for addressing complex learning and developmental needs (UNESCO, 2020; Widiati & Hayati, 2020; Hornby, 2015).

Limitations

This study has several important limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample was geographically restricted to four schools in Jayapura, a relatively urbanized district within Papua. This limits the representativeness of the findings across Papua's highly diverse districts, particularly highland and border regions where infrastructure, cultural dynamics, and school governance differ substantially. Findings should not be assumed to apply to those contexts without further investigation. Second, the participant pool (n=24), while appropriate for a descriptive qualitative design, was drawn exclusively from schools that had initiated inclusive practices and demonstrated willingness to participate. This introduces a selection bias: schools with more negative or passive stances toward inclusion were not represented, potentially resulting in a more optimistic picture of cultural receptiveness than may exist across the province. Third, the cross-sectional design captures inclusive education at a single point in time and cannot account for seasonal variation, policy transitions, or the cumulative effects of teacher experience. Longitudinal observation would be necessary to assess whether the adaptive practices identified are sustained over time. Fourth, despite the use of reflexive memos and inter-researcher coding checks, the research team's shared professional background in special and inclusive education may have influenced both data interpretation and the framing of cultural strengths as assets, a lens that, while theoretically grounded, carries its own assumptions. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings, but they underscore the importance of contextualizing the recommendations within their intended scope.

Future Research

Building on these findings and limitations, several specific future research directions are proposed. First, longitudinal intervention studies should be conducted to assess the effectiveness of the IN-ON-IN-ON professional development model in Papua, with measurable outcomes including changes in teachers' differentiated instruction practices, use of formative assessment, and observed participation levels of students with disabilities, tracked over a minimum of 12–24 months across at least two implementation cycles. Second, comparative studies across Papua's distinct geographic zones, highland, coastal, and border regions, are needed to identify how geographic isolation, indigenous governance structures, and resource availability differently shape inclusive education conditions. Such studies should employ stratified sampling to ensure representation of schools with no prior inclusive education experience, not only those already engaged in inclusive practices. Third, participatory action research (PAR) studies should be designed in collaboration with indigenous community leaders, Ondoafi (traditional leaders), and parents as co-researchers, with the explicit aim of co-designing culturally grounded inclusive school programs that reflect local epistemologies and community accountability structures. Fourth, feasibility

studies on the use of asynchronous digital coaching platforms and low-bandwidth mobile learning tools (such as WhatsApp-based peer learning networks and radio-supported teacher development programs) should be piloted in geographically isolated Papua districts where face-to-face training is logistically and financially prohibitive. Fifth, future research should specifically examine the experiences of children with disabilities and their parents in remote Papua schools, using child-friendly participatory methods, to ensure that student voice is integrated into the inclusive education evidence base in this context.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive education in Papua is shaped by both significant barriers and meaningful opportunities. Teachers face challenges arising from limited competencies, unclear policies, insufficient infrastructure, and weak interagency collaboration. Yet, the cultural environment within schools reflects genuine acceptance, empathy, and a collective commitment to support children's learning. These findings, while meaningful, must be interpreted within the scope of this study: a descriptive qualitative inquiry conducted in four schools in Jayapura, with a purposive sample of 24 participants drawn from a specific urban-adjacent context in Papua. As such, the findings are not intended to be generalizable but rather to offer transferable insights for similarly situated remote and indigenous school contexts.

For inclusive education to advance, stakeholders must prioritize: (1) structured, ongoing professional development through practice-based cycles; (2) the development of clear, school-level inclusive policies and operational procedures; (3) the provision of basic assistive materials and safe, accessible learning environments; and (4) strengthened collaboration between schools and health and social services.

Overall, the findings affirm that meaningful progress in remote and culturally diverse contexts requires approaches that are context-responsive and grounded in local strengths. By integrating Papua's rich cultural assets with evidence-based pedagogical strategies, schools have the potential to build inclusive learning environments that are both resilient and enduring.

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