

Sociological Inquiry into Inclusion, Identity, and Educational Practices for Children with Disabilities in a Special Needs Foundation in Indonesia

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Abstract: This study explores how inclusive policies, identity formation, and adapted teaching practices interact to shape educational experiences for children with disabilities at Bhakti Luhur Foundation Malang, a special-needs foundation in Indonesia that provides residential care and educational services for orphaned children with disabilities. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with three key informants: a principal, a classroom teacher, and a shadow teacher, supported by observations and document analysis. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative analysis. The findings indicate that inclusion is understood and enacted differently across institutional roles. While the principal emphasizes systemic adaptation, the classroom teacher focuses on equitable participation, and the shadow teacher prioritizes individualized support and sensory responsiveness. Identity development is fostered through recognition of children's strengths, non-verbal forms of self-expression, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Adapted pedagogical practices, including differentiated instruction, multimodal learning activities, and individualized communication strategies, enable children with diverse needs to engage in educational activities. The study also highlights the importance of peer relationships and supportive social interactions in strengthening participation, confidence, motivation, and school engagement. This study contributes to disability and inclusive education scholarship by demonstrating how policy, identity, and pedagogy operate as interconnected processes rather than separate dimensions of inclusion. Findings provide insight into inclusive practice within a non-Western, resource-constrained institutional setting and expand understanding of inclusion beyond mainstream school contexts.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Children with Disabilities; Identity Formation; Differentiated Instruction; Socio-pedagogical Practice.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as one of the most significant educational reforms over the past three decades. However, translating this concept from global policy discourse into everyday classroom practice remains complex, contested, and highly context-dependent (Ainscow, 2020; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Slee, n.d.). Although international frameworks strongly promote the inclusion of all learners in mainstream educational settings, their implementation continues to vary considerably, particularly in developing countries such as Indonesia (Srivastava et al., 2015; Sunardi et al., 2011; Tomlinson, 2017). In practice, inclusion is often understood narrowly (as merely placing children with disabilities in regular schools) rather than as a broader effort to transform educational systems, teaching practices, and social relationships (Allan, 2010; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024).

This gap between policy and practice reflects what Hardy and Woodcock (2015) describe as a “discourse of deficit,” where inclusion is formally acknowledged but not fully realized in practice. In such situations, inclusive policies tend to remain symbolic, with insufficient attention given to essential factors such as resource allocation, teacher preparation, and cultural transformation (Shutaleva et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2017). As a result, inclusion may exist at the level of policy documents but not yet in the lived experiences of students and teachers in schools.

In Indonesia, inclusive education has expanded considerably over the last two decades through national policies promoting educational access for children with disabilities. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. Research has identified barriers related to limited teacher preparation, inadequate educational resources, insufficient infrastructure, and persistent social stigma toward disability (Firman et al., 2025; Srivastava et al., 2015; Sunardi et al., 2011). As a result, the realities of inclusion often differ substantially from policy aspirations. Understanding how inclusion is interpreted and enacted within specific educational contexts therefore remains an important area of inquiry.

From a theoretical perspective, the Social Model of Disability provides an important lens for understanding inclusion. This model argues that disability should not be seen solely as an individual medical condition but rather as the result of interactions between individuals and their social environments (Shakespeare, 2007). It distinguishes between impairment, which refers to functional limitations, and disability, which refers to social barriers and exclusion (C. Thomas, 2004). In this view, individuals are not disabled by their impairments alone, but by inaccessible environments, negative attitudes, and exclusionary practices. Consequently, the focus of inclusion shifts from “fixing” the individual child to transforming educational systems and practices to accommodate diversity (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2019; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017).

However, applying this perspective in real educational settings is not straightforward. Schools must deal with multiple challenges, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and varying levels of teacher preparedness (Donath et al., 2023; Firman et al., 2025; Shutaleva et al., 2023). At the same time, broader sociocultural factors also play an important role, including stigma toward disability, parental concerns, and peer interactions (Azizah et al., 2026; Mueller, 2021; Tsatsou, 2020). Previous studies indicate that teachers’ beliefs, emotional responses, and sense of self-efficacy significantly influence the implementation of inclusive practices (Dignath et al., 2022; Supriyanto et al., 2025). Teachers who demonstrate positive attitudes and strong self-efficacy are more likely to apply differentiated strategies and create supportive learning environments (Supriyanto et al., 2025; C. Thomas, 2004). Nevertheless, research also shows that while professional development can improve teachers’ knowledge and skills, it has only limited impact on their beliefs, suggesting that bigger changes in mindset are more difficult to achieve (Dignath et al., 2022; Donath et al., 2023).

In addition to structural and pedagogical aspects, inclusion is closely related to identity formation. For children with disabilities, identity is not fixed but continuously shaped through interaction, recognition, and participation in social contexts such as schools and communities (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Supriyanto et al., 2025). Disability identity involves how individuals understand themselves in relation to their disability and their connection to others (Mueller, 2021). Therefore, schools play an important role in this process, as they provide opportunities or limitations for representation, participation, and recognition.

Existing research has generated important insights into inclusive education from policy, pedagogical, identity, and social participation perspectives. However, relatively little research has examined how these dimensions interact within a single institutional setting, particularly in non-Western and resource-constrained contexts. Moreover, studies in Indonesia have largely focused on policy implementation, teacher readiness, and access to education, while fewer investigations have explored how educators understand and negotiate inclusion in everyday practice within disability-serving institutions. As a result, important questions remain regarding how institutional policies, identity processes, and adapted pedagogical practices collectively shape the educational experiences of children with disabilities.

Drawing on Bourdieu's perspective in Supriyanto et al. (2025), identity formation can also be understood in relation to access to cultural and symbolic capital. Students who receive support and opportunities to develop valued skills are more likely to gain recognition and confidence, while those who are primarily labeled based on deficits may struggle to build positive identities (Allan, 2010; Richardson & Powell, 2011). Thus, identity formation is not merely an individual process but is shaped by social relationships and institutional contexts.

Alongside identity, pedagogical adaptation is a key component of inclusive education. Approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emphasize the importance of flexible teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learners by offering multiple ways of engagement, representation, and expression (Rogahang et al., 2023; Navas-Bonilla et al., 2025). Research shows that differentiated instruction can lead to positive outcomes when teachers adapt materials, methods, and assessments to meet students' needs (Donath et al., 2023; Lindner & Schwab, 2025). However, in practice, teachers often rely on their own strategies to manage diverse classrooms, such as grouping, tiered assignments, and individualized support (Avramidis et al., 2018; Dignath et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2012). These practices are shaped by contextual factors, including class size, available resources, and institutional expectations.

Furthermore, social relationships within schools significantly influence educational outcomes. Interactions between students, teachers, and parents play a crucial role in shaping participation and engagement (Adams et al., 2025; Supriyanto et al., 2025; Zurbriggen et al., 2025; et al., 2023). Research shows that students with supportive peer relationships tend to be more confident and motivated, while those who experience isolation are more likely to disengage (Koster et al., 2010; Schwab et al., 2022). Strategies such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning can enhance inclusion, but these require intentional effort from educators (Avramidis et al., 2018; Radford et al., 2015). Without such efforts, the social benefits of inclusion may not be fully achieved (Bossaert et al., 2013; de Leeuw et al., 2020; Nepi et al., 2015).

Despite the extensive literature, there is still a need for studies that integrate multiple dimensions of inclusion. Many previous studies examine policy, identity, or pedagogy separately, without exploring how these aspects interact in real educational settings (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2022; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017; Van Miegheem et al., 2020). Moreover, most research is conducted in Western contexts, with limited attention to non-Western settings such as Indonesia (Firman et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2026; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Existing studies in Indonesia tend to focus on policy implementation and teacher readiness (Adams et al., 2025; Sunardi et al., 2011; Supianto et al., 2024), while fewer studies explore the lived experiences of educators and students in inclusive environments.

This study makes three contributions. First, it integrates policy, identity, and pedagogical perspectives within a single analytical framework. Second, it extends inclusive education research beyond mainstream school settings by examining a special-needs foundation that provides educational and residential support to orphaned children with disabilities. Third, it contributes evidence from Indonesia, a context that remains underrepresented in international scholarship on inclusive education.

More importantly, this study investigates how these dimensions interact to shape educational outcomes, including participation, confidence, motivation, and attendance. The research is guided by the question: How do inclusive policies, identity formation, and adapted teaching practices collectively influence educational outcomes for children with disabilities? By addressing this question, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of inclusion as a dynamic and relational process.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to conduct an in-depth investigation of how inclusive policies, identity formation, and adapted teaching practices collectively influence educational outcomes for children with disabilities (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). The research was carried out in February 2026 at the Bhakti Luhur Foundation Malang, a special needs foundation in East Java, Indonesia, that provides residential care and inclusive educational services for orphaned children with disabilities. This site was selected purposively because it represents an institutional setting where children with disabilities receive both daily care and formal education.

Research Site

The study was conducted at Bhakti Luhur Foundation Malang, East Java, Indonesia. The foundation was selected purposively because it provides both residential care and educational services for orphaned children with disabilities, creating a distinctive context in which educational, social, and caregiving functions intersect. Unlike conventional inclusive schools, the foundation serves children with diverse disabilities while simultaneously addressing their daily living and developmental needs. This setting offered an opportunity to examine inclusion beyond classroom placement and to explore how it is enacted through everyday institutional practices and relationships.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in educational decision-making and daily interaction with children with disabilities. Three key informants participated in the study: the principal (coded KS-01), one classroom teacher (coded G-01), and one shadow teacher (coded PSK-01). These participants were chosen because they represent different levels of responsibility within the institution and therefore provide complementary perspectives on inclusive education.

The principal was included because of responsibility for institutional policy and program implementation. The classroom teacher was selected because of direct responsibility for planning and delivering instruction in inclusive learning environments. The shadow teacher was included due to extensive involvement in individualized support and daily interactions with children with disabilities. Collectively, these participants provided insights into inclusion from administrative, pedagogical, and individualized-support perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected during February 2026 through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document review. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data source because they enabled participants to describe their experiences, beliefs, and practices in detail while allowing the researcher flexibility to pursue emerging issues.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian. Interview questions explored participants' understandings of inclusion, perceptions of disability and identity, teaching strategies, challenges encountered in practice, and factors influencing educational participation and outcomes. Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings and obtain concrete examples from participants' experiences.

Observations were conducted to gain contextual understanding of daily educational activities, interactions between educators and children, classroom arrangements, and inclusive practices within the foundation. Field notes were recorded throughout the observation process. In addition, relevant institutional documents, including educational guidelines, learning plans, and supporting materials, were reviewed to provide contextual information and support data triangulation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2008) framework. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. The analysis proceeded through six stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of potential themes, (4) review and refinement of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) preparation of the final report.

Coding was conducted inductively to allow themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being imposed from predetermined categories. Codes that reflected similar meanings were grouped into broader thematic categories. Through iterative comparison across interviews, observations, and documents, three major themes were identified: understandings of inclusion, identity formation and recognition, and adapted teaching practices. Additional subthemes relating to barriers, social relationships, and educational outcomes were subsequently developed.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. First, methodological triangulation was achieved through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Second, data source triangulation was employed by gathering perspectives from participants occupying different institutional roles. Third, member checking was conducted by sharing summaries of key findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Finally, an audit trail comprising interview transcripts, field notes, coding records, and analytic memos was maintained throughout the research process to enhance transparency and reliability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection. Participants received information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms and participant codes are used throughout the study, and identifying information has been removed from all reports and publications.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding(s)

This section presents findings from in-depth interviews with the principal (KS-01), classroom teacher (G-01), and shadow teacher (PSK-01) at a special needs foundation in Indonesia.

Inclusive Policies

Inclusion is understood as systemic adaptation, not merely physical placement

All three informants rejected the notion that inclusion means simply placing children with disabilities in regular classrooms. The principal (KS-01) stated:

"We adjust the system, not force children to adjust to the system."

The teacher (G-01) added that inclusion means fair distribution of attention:

"Inclusion also means that I as a teacher do not only focus on children who grasp lessons quickly, but also on those who are slower."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) concluded with a rejection of uniformity:

"Inclusion does not mean all children must be the same and do the same thing at the same time."

This finding indicates that the foundation has moved beyond "integration" (placing disabled children in mainstream spaces) toward genuine "inclusion" (transforming systems to accommodate diversity). However, each role emphasizes different aspects: the principal focuses on institutional transformation, the teacher on equitable attention distribution, and the shadow teacher on rejecting uniformity. This role-based variation suggests that "inclusion" is actively constructed differently according to one's position within the institutional hierarchy.

The primary challenges to inclusion operate at three levels; institutional, pedagogical, and individual

The principal (KS-01) identified institutional barriers related to human resources and teacher mindset:

"Not all teachers have the same understanding of inclusion. Some still think that children with special needs should be separated. Additionally, the ideal teacher-student ratio is difficult to achieve due to limited funding."

The teacher (G-01) focused on pedagogical challenges and mental exhaustion:

"Managing a heterogeneous classroom is mentally exhausting. At the same time, I must pay attention to hyperactive children so they do not disturb others, while ensuring that slow learners do not fall behind, and also ensuring that regular children receive material according to the standard."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) identified individual sensory barriers that neither the principal nor the teacher mentioned:

"The most difficult challenge is when children experience sensory overload. For example, when the recess bell rings loudly, children with autism can panic and cover their ears. Sometimes children throw things or even hit. I must be quick to calm them without making other children afraid."

These three levels of challenges are not independent; they compound one another. A teacher without adequate training experiences mental exhaustion (institutional) when responding to sensory overload (pedagogical) (individual). The school's sensory environment (loud bells, crowded spaces) is a barrier that the principal and teacher overlooked, suggesting that physical infrastructure is an often-neglected dimension of inclusion in Indonesian educational discourse.

Children with disabilities are involved in all activities through graduated accommodations and alternative roles.

The principal (KS-01) described systematic involvement across all school activities:

"We involve them in all activities, from flag ceremonies, arts activities, sports, to religious activities. For example, children with autism still join the ceremony, only they are given more space and accompaniment."

The teacher (G-01) provided concrete examples of modified participation:

"Children with fine motor difficulties still join drawing activities, but their tools are modified with larger grips. During sports activities, children with Down syndrome still join jogging but with a shorter distance."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) demonstrated creative problem-solving when direct participation is impossible:

"If their physical ability truly does not allow it, we find an alternative role, for example being the referee or scorekeeper."

The foundation practices "partial participation", a recognized principle in special education where children are included in authentic activities at a level appropriate to their abilities. The use of alternative roles (referee, scorekeeper) prevents the binary of "fully participates versus completely excluded" and creates a continuum of meaningful involvement. The principal's mention of "flag ceremonies" is culturally significant in the Indonesian context, as excluding children from this national ritual would signal their partial membership in the national community.

Identity Formation

Children with disabilities express identity through multiple non-verbal modalities, and staff have developed informal interpretive frameworks to understand these expressions

The teacher (G-01) provided specific examples from her classroom:

"F, a student with autism, expresses herself through drawing. When she is happy, she draws landscapes. When she is angry, her drawings are dark with rough scribbles. Meanwhile, B with ADHD expresses himself by constantly asking questions or moving around. If he is quiet for a long time, that is actually a sign that he is not feeling well."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) emphasized learning to read body language:

"I know each child's habits very well. For example, R, the child with autism I accompany, when he starts rocking back and forth, that means he is starting to feel anxious. That is body language. I never forbid him from expressing himself unless it endangers himself or others."

The principal (KS-01) articulated the institutional stance on diverse expression:

"We do not label their expressions as 'strange' or 'disruptive'."

Staff have developed "local knowledge" through sustained proximity to specific children, knowledge not taught in formal teacher training. The teacher's observation that a quiet ADHD child may be unwell (rather than "well-behaved") is particularly significant, as it challenges the normative assumption that quiet equals good. This finding suggests that inclusive education requires not just pedagogical skills but also interpretive competencies that develop only through experience and cannot be fully replaced by formal training.

Confidence and participation vary by disability type and past experiences, and both fluctuate daily rather than being stable traits

The principal (KS-01) observed how environmental supports mediate confidence:

"Children with hearing impairments are usually quieter, and their confidence is sometimes low because they feel difficulty communicating. But when they use hearing aids and are accompanied, they can become very confident."

The teacher (G-01) attributed confidence differences to accumulated experiences:

"(M) with Down syndrome is very confident and even likes to come to the front of the class to sing. But (D) with hearing impairment is very shy and rarely raises his hand because he is afraid of speaking incorrectly. This difference in confidence is greatly influenced by how often they have had positive experiences in this environment."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) added a crucial temporal dimension:

"Participation also depends on their mood and sensory condition. One day they are enthusiastic, the next day they might be completely unmotivated. I have to be flexible. The most important thing is that I do not force them when they are truly not ready."

This finding supports the social model of disability: confidence is not an inherent trait of a disability category but is mediated by environmental supports (hearing aids, accompaniment) and past experiences (success or failure). The observation of daily fluctuations challenges standard educational assessment practices, which assume that a single observation produces valid data about a child's capabilities. For children with disabilities, especially those with sensory regulation differences, participation can vary dramatically day-to-day based on factors such as sleep quality, medication effects, and sensory load.

Identity support strategies focus on strengths and personhood rather than deficits and labels, operating at institutional, pedagogical, and individual levels

The principal (KS-01) described institutional policies against labeling:

"We encourage teachers to call children by their names, not by their condition labels. Never say 'the autistic' or 'the Down'. We also have an 'I am special' program where each child is asked to tell the class about their strengths and hobbies."

The teacher (G-01) described daily classroom practices that celebrate incremental achievements:

"I made a 'star board' in the classroom that lists each child's strengths, without mentioning their weaknesses. Every time a child succeeds in doing something new, I write it in the class diary and read it in front of all the children."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) focused on building individual agency through choice-making:

"I made an 'all about me' book containing photos of the child, their family, their likes, and dislikes. I share this book with teachers so they know what makes the child comfortable or uncomfortable. I also support the child to make small decisions, for example 'do you want to use the blue pencil or the red pencil?' or 'who do you want to sit next to today?'"

All three levels of identity support share a common principle: focusing on what children can do rather than what they cannot do. The "star board" and class diary are low-cost interventions requiring only intentionality and relational commitment. The "all about me" book serves multiple functions: providing teachers with critical sensory information, creating a tangible artifact of the child's identity, and signaling to the child that their preferences matter. The focus on "small decisions" (pencil color, seating partner) is a form of agency-building that is often overlooked in disability contexts where adults routinely make all decisions for children.

Adapted Teaching Practices

Teaching strategies form a continuum from whole-class multimodal approaches to individual prompting systems

The principal (KS-01) described the institutional pedagogical framework:

"We use differentiated instruction and universal design for learning informally. This means teachers prepare several ways to deliver material: through visuals, audio, and movement. We also apply structured teaching especially for children with autism, with clear routines and visual schedules."

The teacher (G-01) provided a concrete example of multimodal teaching:

"When teaching about fruits, I do not only show pictures, but also bring real fruit, cut it, and let children touch and smell it."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) described a systematic prompting hierarchy for individual support:

"I use an individual approach with prompting techniques. Starting from full prompt (holding the child's hand), partial physical prompt (touching the elbow), gesture (pointing), to verbal prompt (reminding). I also use first-then boards: 'First we finish question number one, then you can play puzzle.'"

The teacher's "real fruit" example demonstrates embodied, multi-sensory learning that benefits all children, not just those with disabilities, this is the essence of Universal Design for Learning. The shadow teacher's prompting hierarchy (full physical → partial physical → gesture → verbal) is an evidence-based practice for teaching children with significant support needs. The shadow teacher demonstrates more technical vocabulary than the teacher or principal, indicating that specialized training for shadow teachers may be more systematic than for general classroom teachers, creating a potential knowledge asymmetry.

Individualized adjustments include content modification, process modification, and environmental modification

The principal (KS-01) described content modification through IEPs:

"For children with dyslexia, exam questions are not long reading passages, but more pictures or simple multiple choice."

The teacher (G-01) explained her three-tiered worksheet system as a form of content and process modification:

"I always make three versions of worksheets for the same topic. Version A for regular children with story questions, version B for children with dyslexia with more pictures and multiple choice, version C for children with Down syndrome or cognitive limitations with tasks of sticking stickers or coloring. I also give extra time for slow learners."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) described environmental modifications:

"For children with autism, I prepare visual schedules and transition objects. For children with ADHD, I give movement every 10 minutes. For children with Down syndrome, I repeat instructions slowly and use concrete aids."

The teacher's three-tiered system is a sophisticated, homegrown solution to heterogeneous classrooms. Rather than excluding children who cannot complete standard worksheets, she created parallel tasks that are developmentally appropriate while maintaining thematic coherence. The shadow teacher's diagnosis-specific modifications (visual schedules for autism, movement breaks for ADHD) indicate categorical knowledge about different disabilities. The absence of environmental modifications at the school level (e.g., a sensory room) suggests that individual staff members are compensating for gaps in the institutional infrastructure.

Communication adaptations include augmentative systems, simplified verbal instructions, and positive phrasing

The principal (KS-01) emphasized the need for literal, concrete language:

"For non-verbal children, we use PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) or simple sign language. Teachers are trained to use short, clear, concrete sentences. Avoid sarcasm or figurative language because children with special needs generally think literally."

The teacher (G-01) described sequential instruction delivery and help cards:

"I give instructions one at a time, not all at once. I also teach children to use 'help cards' if they are struggling."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) provided the most sophisticated communication strategy: shifting from negative to positive commands.

"Avoid the words 'don't' or 'not allowed' because children are usually confused. Better to say 'hands on the table' than 'don't play with toys'."

The shadow teacher's correction is linguistically significant: negative commands ("don't play with toys") require the child to simultaneously inhibit one action (playing) and initiate another (placing hands on the table). Positive commands ("hands on the table") only require initiation. For children with executive function difficulties, positive commands are easier to process. This sophisticated adaptation likely comes from specialized training and represents a level of communication competence that should be standard for all inclusive educators.

Social Factors Affecting Educational Outcomes

Barriers to inclusion operate at cultural, parental, peer, and institutional levels

The principal (KS-01) identified cultural stigma specific to the Indonesian context:

"The general public still sometimes views children with special needs as a 'disgrace' or 'impolite'."

The teacher (G-01) identified resistance from parents of regular students:

"Several times there have been complaints that their child's concentration is disturbed because there is a child with autism who screams loudly. In the end we had to hold special parenting classes to explain inclusion."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) added peer rejection and facility inadequacy:

"Sometimes regular children are afraid of or mock the child I accompany because their behavior is different. Another barrier is from the parents of the child themselves. Some parents are overprotective, not allowing their child to try new things for fear of injury or failure. An institutional barrier is the absence of a special room to calm children when they are overloaded. So I have to take the child to the office or a corner of the classroom."

The principal's use of the word "disgrace" (aib) reflects a specific Indonesian cultural stigma where disability may be perceived as family shame or punishment. This cultural barrier may be more intense than in Western contexts where disability is more medicalized. The foundation's response to parental complaints (parenting classes) is dialogical rather than enforcement-based, recognizing that inclusion requires community consent. The absence of a sensory room is particularly significant: when children become overloaded, there is no designated safe space for regulation, so they are managed in office spaces or classroom corners that may be equally overstimulating.



Figure 1. Participation of children with disabilities and educators in inclusive school activities within a special needs foundation

Positive peer relationships directly improve educational outcomes through increased confidence, attendance, and motivation

The principal (KS-01) described the intentional "peer tutor" strategy:

"We intentionally place 'peer tutors'—regular children who help their special needs friends. Not to teach them, but to accompany them and invite interaction."

The teacher (G-01) provided contrasting cases demonstrating the causal link:

"M, a student with Down syndrome, has a friend named A who always accompanies her. Since then, M has become more confident, and her motivation to learn has increased. On the other hand, a child who is avoided or teased, like R with cerebral palsy, once refused to come to school for a whole week."

The shadow teacher (PSK-01) illustrated the process of facilitated friendship:

"A, a child with autism who previously had no friends, was just silent and no one wanted to approach him. After I introduced him to a regular child who was patient and kind, A slowly started to smile. Now they often play together during breaks. A is more enthusiastic about coming to school."

The principal's distinction between "teaching" (an adult responsibility) and "accompanying" (a peer role) preserves the egalitarian nature of friendship. The teacher's two contrasting cases provide causal evidence for the social-educational connection: peer support increases confidence and motivation; peer rejection leads to school refusal. The shadow teacher's narrative arc (isolation → introduction → smiling → playing → enthusiastic attendance) illustrates that social relationships for children with disabilities often require active facilitation by adults; they do not form naturally.

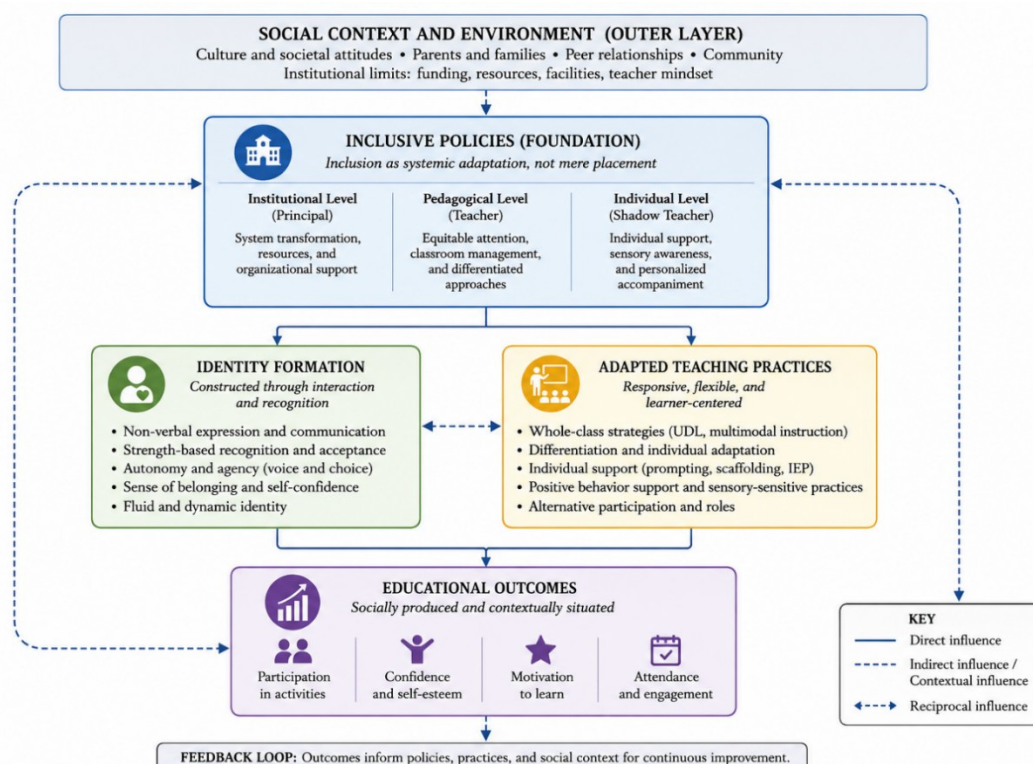


Figure 2. A Multi-Level Socio-Pedagogical Model of Inclusion, Identity, and Teaching Practices

Discussion

This study examined how inclusive policies, identity formation, and adapted teaching practices collectively influence educational outcomes for children with disabilities at a special needs foundation in Indonesia. The findings from interviews with the principal, classroom teacher, and shadow teacher reveal a complex picture of inclusion as it is understood and enacted in a resource-constrained, non-Western context (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Tomlinson, 2017). Three main themes emerged from the analysis: the multi-level understanding of inclusion across institutional roles, the primacy of non-verbal identity expression and interpretive competence, and the continuum of adapted teaching

practices from whole-class to individual support. These findings both align with and extend existing international research on inclusive education.

Multi-Level Understandings of Inclusion

The finding that the principal, teacher, and shadow teacher each emphasized different aspects of inclusion institutional transformation, equitable attention distribution, and rejection of uniformity, respectively supports the theoretical position that inclusion is not a monolithic concept but is actively constructed according to one's position within the institutional hierarchy (Allan, 2010; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). This role-based variation has been observed in other international studies. For example, Adams et al. (2025) found that principals who commit to promoting equity and fairness are essential for building school communities that value diversity, while teachers focus more on the practical challenges of managing heterogeneous classrooms. Similarly, Supriyanto et al. (2025), drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social practice, demonstrated that students with disabilities who accumulate cultural and symbolic capital through recognition and skill development are better positioned within the school's social field. In this study, the shadow teacher's emphasis on rejecting uniformity and accommodating individual sensory needs reflects a grounded, child-specific understanding of inclusion that neither the principal nor the classroom teacher articulated. This suggests that shadow teachers, often the most undervalued members of the school workforce, possess specialized knowledge that is essential for genuine inclusion but is rarely incorporated into institutional policy or pedagogical planning (Radford et al., 2015).

The three levels of challenges identified by informants; institutional (human resources and teacher mindset), pedagogical (mental exhaustion and classroom management), and individual (sensory overload) mirror the multi-level barriers documented in international systematic reviews (Donath et al., 2023; Van Mieghem et al., 2020). The compounding nature of these challenges is particularly significant: a teacher who lacks adequate training (institutional) experiences mental exhaustion (pedagogical) when responding to a child's sensory overload (individual). This finding reinforces the argument that inclusion cannot be achieved through policy mandates alone; it requires simultaneous investment in teacher preparation, resource allocation, and environmental adaptation (Ainscow, 2020; Shutaleva et al., 2023). The principal and teacher's overlooking of sensory barriers while the shadow teacher identified them as the most difficult challenge indicates a critical gap in how inclusive education is conceptualized in Indonesian educational discourse. Physical infrastructure, including noise levels, lighting, and crowding, remains an often-neglected dimension of inclusion (Navas-Bonilla et al., 2025; Whitburn, 2014). Without attention to sensory environments, even the most well-intentioned inclusive policies may fail to produce meaningful participation for children with autism or sensory processing differences.

Identity Formation and Interpretive Competence

A particularly novel finding of this study concerns how children with disabilities express identity through non-verbal modalities and the corresponding interpretive frameworks that staff have developed. The teacher's observation that a child with ADHD who is unusually quiet may be unwell rather than well-behaved challenges the normative assumption that quiet equals good and compliance equals learning (Mueller, 2021; Whitburn, 2014). This interpretive competence is what the teacher (G-01) and shadow teacher (PSK-01) described as knowing each child's habits "very well" through sustained daily interaction. This finding aligns with research by Florian, L. (2019) and Allan, J. (2010), who emphasized that understanding the perspectives of children with profound intellectual

and multiple disabilities requires intimate, daily interactions rather than formal assessments. The development of "local knowledge" through sustained proximity to specific children is a form of practical wisdom that is not taught in formal teacher training programs (Dignath et al., 2022; Tomlinson, 2017). This raises important questions about how teacher preparation can better cultivate interpretive competencies alongside technical pedagogical skills.

The observation that confidence and participation fluctuate daily rather than being stable traits challenges standard educational assessment practices, which assume that a single observation produces valid data about a child's capabilities (Dignath et al., 2022; Donath et al., 2023). As the shadow teacher noted, a child may be enthusiastic one day and completely unmotivated the next, depending on sleep quality, medication effects, and sensory load. This finding supports the social model of disability, which holds that disability-related limitations are not inherent to the individual but are mediated by environmental and contextual factors (Shakespeare, 2007). For children with sensory regulation differences, participation varies not because of fixed deficits but because of dynamic interactions between the child and the environment. This has practical implications for assessment: rather than relying on isolated observations, educators should collect data across multiple days and contexts to obtain an accurate picture of a child's capabilities and needs (Ainscow, 2020; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024).

The identity support strategies identified in this study the "star board," the class diary, the "all about me" book, and the focus on small choices such as pencil color or seating partner share a common principle: focusing on what children can do rather than what they cannot do. This strengths-based approach is consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning and positive psychology in special education (Rogahang et al., 2023). However, what is notable about these strategies is that they are low-cost and require only intentionality and relational commitment. In a resource-constrained context such as Indonesia, where many schools lack specialized facilities and trained personnel, these low-cost, high-impact strategies may be more sustainable than expensive technological interventions (Firman et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2026). The shadow teacher's "all about me" book serves multiple functions: providing teachers with critical sensory information, creating a tangible artifact of the child's identity, and signaling to the child that their preferences matter. The focus on "small decisions" is a form of agency-building that is often overlooked in disability contexts where adults routinely make all decisions for children (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017).

Continuum of Adapted Teaching Practices

The finding that teaching strategies form a continuum from whole-class multimodal approaches to individual prompting systems reflects the reality of heterogeneous classrooms where teachers must simultaneously address the needs of children with and without disabilities (Donath et al., 2023; Lindner & Schwab, 2025). The teacher's "real fruit" example, bringing real fruit for children to touch and smell rather than only showing pictures, demonstrates embodied, multi-sensory learning that benefits all children, not just those with disabilities. This is the essence of Universal Design for Learning: designing instruction from the outset to be accessible to the widest possible range of learners (Navas-Bonilla et al., 2025; Rogahang et al., 2023). The shadow teacher's prompting hierarchy (full physical → partial physical → gesture → verbal) is an evidence-based practice for teaching children with significant support needs (Radford et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2012). However, the finding that the shadow teacher demonstrates more technical vocabulary than the teacher or principal indicates a potential knowledge asymmetry. Specialized training for shadow teachers may be more systematic than for general classroom teachers, yet shadow teachers are often the lowest-paid and least-respected members of the school workforce (Radford et

al., 2015). This disconnect between expertise and institutional status is a significant barrier to sustainable inclusive education.

The teacher's three-tiered worksheet system version A for regular children, version B for children with dyslexia, and version C for children with Down syndrome or cognitive limitations is a sophisticated, homegrown solution to heterogeneous classrooms. Rather than excluding children who cannot complete standard worksheets, the teacher created parallel tasks that are developmentally appropriate while maintaining thematic coherence. This finding aligns with research on differentiated instruction, which emphasizes that effective inclusion does not mean all children do the same thing at the same time, but rather that all children have access to meaningful learning at their own level (Lindner & Schwab, 2025). However, the shadow teacher's diagnosis-specific modifications (visual schedules for autism, movement breaks for ADHD, concrete aids for Down syndrome) indicate categorical knowledge about different disabilities. While this categorical approach has practical utility, it risks reinforcing deficit-based labeling if not implemented carefully (R. Thomas & Hardy, 2011; Tomlinson, 2017). The principal's institutional policy against labeling children by their condition ("Never say 'the autistic' or 'the Down'") represents an attempt to mitigate this risk.

The absence of environmental modifications at the school level, such as a sensory room, suggests that individual staff are compensating for institutional infrastructure gaps. This finding is consistent with research from other low- and middle-income countries, where schools often lack the resources to make structural adaptations and instead rely on the goodwill and creativity of individual teachers and shadow teachers (Srivastava et al., 2015; Sunardi et al., 2011). The shadow teacher's communication adaptation—shifting from negative commands ("don't play with toys") to positive commands ("hands on the table")—is linguistically significant. Negative commands require the child to simultaneously inhibit one action and initiate another, whereas positive commands require only initiation. For children with executive function difficulties, positive commands are easier to process. This sophisticated adaptation likely comes from specialized training and represents a level of communication competence that should be standard for all inclusive educators.

Social Factors and Cultural Context

The cultural stigma identified by the principal, where disability may be perceived as a "disgrace" (aib) or family shame, reflects specific Indonesian cultural dynamics that may be more intense than in Western contexts where disability is more medicalized (Srivastava et al., 2015; Tomlinson, 2017). The foundation's response to parental complaints, holding parenting classes rather than enforcing compliance, is dialogical and recognizes that inclusion requires community consent rather than top-down mandates (Ainscow, 2020; Allan, 2010). The shadow teacher's narrative of facilitated friendship (isolation → introduction → smiling → playing → enthusiastic attendance) illustrates that social relationships for children with disabilities often require active facilitation by adults; they do not form naturally (Koster et al., 2010; Schwab et al., 2022). The principal's distinction between "teaching" (an adult responsibility) and "accompanying" (a peer role) preserves the egalitarian nature of friendship while still providing structured support. This distinction is important because it prevents peer tutors from becoming de facto teachers and maintains the reciprocal, horizontal quality of genuine friendship (Avramidis et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on a single special needs foundation in Indonesia, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Second, the study relied primarily on adult informants (principal, teacher, shadow teacher), and while child-friendly techniques were used, the perspectives of children with more significant communication disabilities may not be fully represented. Third, the study was conducted over a three-week period in February 2026, capturing only a snapshot of inclusive practices. Longitudinal research would be needed to examine how inclusion practices evolve over time and how identity formation processes unfold across developmental stages. Future research should extend this work by comparing multiple inclusive schools across different regions of Indonesia, incorporating the perspectives of children with a wider range of disabilities, and examining the long-term educational and social outcomes for children who have experienced inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how inclusive policies, identity formation, and adapted teaching practices collectively influence educational outcomes for children with disabilities at the Bhakti Luhur Foundation Malang, a special needs foundation in East Java, Indonesia, that provides residential care and inclusive educational services for orphaned children with disabilities. Drawing on in-depth interviews with a principal, a classroom teacher, and a shadow teacher, the findings reveal that inclusion is understood differently across institutional roles: the principal focuses on systemic transformation, the teacher on equitable distribution of attention, and the shadow teacher on rejecting uniformity. These role-based variations suggest that inclusion is not a fixed concept but is actively constructed according to one's position within the institutional hierarchy.

The findings also demonstrate that children with disabilities express identity through non-verbal modalities such as drawing, body language, and changes in activity level. Staff at the foundation have developed informal interpretive frameworks to understand these expressions through sustained daily interaction, suggesting that inclusive education requires not only pedagogical skills but also interpretive competencies that develop through experience. Furthermore, identity support strategies that focus on strengths and personhood, such as the "star board," class diary, and "all about me" book, are low-cost, high-impact interventions that build agency and confidence.

In terms of adapted teaching practices, the study found that teaching strategies form a continuum from whole-class multimodal approaches to individual prompting systems. The teacher's three-tiered worksheets and the shadow teacher's prompting hierarchy represent homegrown solutions to heterogeneous classrooms. Communication adaptations, particularly shifting from negative to positive commands, demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of executive function difficulties.

Several barriers to inclusion at the Bhakti Luhur Foundation were identified at cultural, parental, peer, and institutional levels. Cultural stigma, parental resistance, peer rejection, and the absence of a sensory room all constrain inclusive practices. However, positive peer relationships, when actively facilitated by adults, directly improve educational outcomes including confidence, attendance, and motivation.

This study contributes to the international literature on inclusive education by providing a contextually grounded analysis from a non-Western, resource-constrained setting. The findings have practical implications for educators and policymakers: inclusion requires simultaneous attention to institutional policies, teacher preparation, identity-affirming practices, adapted teaching strategies, and the active facilitation of peer

relationships. Future research should extend this work to multiple schools across different regions of Indonesia and incorporate the perspectives of children with a wider range of disabilities.

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