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DISPARITIES IN ACCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

The present research explores the efforts of Indonesian schools to respond to the realities of inclusive education. Based on a qualitative case study design, data were drawn from interviews, observations, and document analysis in urban, suburban, and rural contexts. The study establishes inclusive education policies, but their operationalization within the schools is a significant issue.

Accessibility provisions such as ramps and adjustable classrooms are found to be desirable. In many locations, inadequate teacher preparation often obstructs the effective implementation of assistive technologies. Moreover, most buildings are poorly maintained and experience a rapid quality decline. Teachers tend to acquire inclusive practice through experience and not formal training programs. Although parental involvement is increasing in urban settings, it remains shallow in rural settings. In some areas, schools are forced to get along with the hardships of inclusion on their own, frequently without much assistance from neighboring authorities.

Lastly, this study stresses that real inclusion requires effort beyond the simple enactment of policies; it requires ongoing effort in teacher professionalization, well-thought-out infrastructure, more active community participation, and adaptive governance structures. The findings of this study provide valuable lessons on crafting more inclusive and supportive learning environments in Indonesia and elsewher

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a core pillar of the global movement to develop equitable and just educational institutions that value learner diversity (Oranga et al., 2024). Inclusive education, in essence, ensures that all children, especially children with disabilities, enjoy equal access to quality education within an integrated and non-discriminatory setting (Karim & Hue, 2022). Following international guidelines such as the Salamanca Statement (1994), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and the Education 2030 Framework for Action, various nations, including Indonesia, have begun adopting the integration of principles of inclusivity into their national education systems (Nteropoulou-Nterou & Slee, 2019).

Indonesia's dedication to inclusive education lies in Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. Ministerial Regulation No. 70 of 2009, which focuses on inclusive education for children with disabilities or exceptional abilities/intelligence, supplements it (Suhendri, 2021). Despite a legislative system, implementation at the school level is confronted with various impediments, from technical and human resource limitations to structural and policy-related issues (Doğan & Gürgür, 2016). These demonstrate the shortfall between formal policy and implementation, which shows that educational practices are predominantly standardized and weakly attuned to learner variety (Guerrero et al., 2022).

One of the notable concerns in implementing inclusive education in Indonesia is the absence of accessible and inclusive school facilities (Ackah-Jnr & Danso, 2019). The majority of the so-called 'inclusive' schools lack basic amenities such as ramps, toilets for children with disabilities, adapted classrooms, and secure transportation for children with special needs (Guliya et al., 2023). As evidenced by Roy, this is reflective of a symbolic rather than a transformative interpretation of inclusive education infrastructure, where the term 'inclusive' is used without the necessary infrastructure and support (Roy, 2024).

Sustainability is another issue. Most inclusive education centers are set up through short-term programs—typically underwritten by government programs or donor agencies—with no full-scale plans for prolonged upkeep and sustainability (Adipat & Chotikapanich, 2022). Over the long term, most centers are in disrepair or disused, primarily due to insufficient maintenance funds and institutional follow-through (Agbabiaka et al., 2024). Kuroda Nakasato (2023) suggests that long-term educational planning and government policy do not effectively incorporate inclusive education (Kuroda & Nakasato, 2023).

Poor application of assistive technology is an issue in inclusive education practice, even though it could significantly enhance learning for disabled children (VANDerpuye & Okai, 2023). Screen readers, hearing aids, and virtual interactive forums are not commonly used in regular classrooms. The only reasons for such little use are small budgets, the professional incompetence of teachers, and the low level of teacher digital illiteracy (Botha & Mihai, 2023). However, these technologies have the potential to shatter barriers that are daunting, physical, sensory, and intellectual demands of learning environments. It focuses on the need for transformation and change in technology deployment in inclusive education (Zilz & Pang, 2021).

The preparedness of teachers is a top priority. Most teachers in regular education classrooms lack proper training in inclusive pedagogical practices and are only well-versed in differentiated instruction strategies (Nyemba, 2023). As a result, classes do not make significant pedagogical changes in the presence of special needs children (Inman & Roberts, 2022). It contributes to divergent learning outcomes and manifests the urgent call for capacity-building activities that make teachers major players in inclusive education (Graham et al., 2023).

Community involvement is not just an enriching element but a necessity in ensuring that inclusive education is effective (Somerton et al., 2021). Schools implementing inclusive measures effectively can benefit from extensive collaboration with parents, local community leaders, and mass organizations (van der Graaf & Siarova, 2025). This instance underscores the fact that inclusive education is not just a technical or administrative matter but also a sociocultural one demanding multisectoral solutions. Your involvement is central to the success of inclusive education (Guerra & Leitão, 2019).

Besides, there is a vast geographical inequality in the quality and availability of inclusive education services (Schnabel, 2025). Regional autonomy holds promise for local innovation, but also leads to unequal access (Subban et al., 2022). Regions with greater financial resources and visionary leadership are typically best placed to institute inclusive practices, with under-resourced areas still hampered by their constraints (Cura Della Redazione, 2024). This inequality emphasizes the importance of policies at the national level that encourage equity and actively assist inclusive education throughout all regions (Mbon et al., 2023).

Most importantly, Yenduri (2023) found that little empirical research focuses on implementing inclusive school infrastructure (Yenduri et al., 2023). Contemporary research is predominantly about broad issues or ideas, not exploring classroom dynamics, the application of assistive technology, and local stakeholders (Kaur et al., 2022). However, school-level research is vital to comprehending actual realities and discovering effective methods that can be scaled up or replicated elsewhere (Bilbokaitė et al., 2024).

Research examines how schools adopt an inclusive education infrastructure against such challenges. Research seeks to explore the most significant challenges that schools face and to discuss how they adopt adaptive means and innovative practices. The anticipated outcomes will provide both theoretical insights and practical contributions, supporting policy formulation and guiding the development of responsive and contextually relevant implementation frameworks (White et al., 2025). In essence, the research emphasizes that

inclusive education must go beyond administrative compliance and become an enduring, meaningful practice that upholds the educational rights of every child without exception (Oranga et al., 2024).

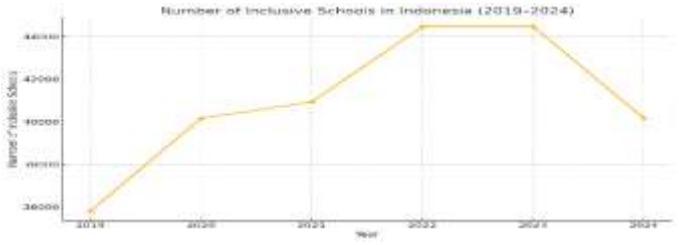

Chart 1.Number of Inclusive Schools in Indonesia

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with an exploratory case study approach to systematically investigate Indonesia's condition, limitations, and sustainable practices in maintaining inclusive education infrastructure (Mukhalalati & Awaisu, 2019). We employed the case study approach because it enables us to evaluate intricate issues within real-life environments critically. It is proficient in describing the intricate process of applying inclusive education practices and policies (Stake & Visse, 2022).

Research sites were carefully selected based on different regional types that show a variety of geographical and social backgrounds: urban (busy cities with good infrastructure), suburban (areas on the edge of cities that are developing education), and rural (thinly populated areas with limited access to education and public services). This selection method aimed to capture a broad and representative spectrum of inclusive education practices in diverse local settings in Indonesia.

The stakeholders included school administrators, inclusive education teachers, parents of students with disabilities, and administrators of the local education office, engaged in planning, implementing, and monitoring inclusive programs. Data was collected through triangulated methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis (Sciberras & Dingli, 2025). We also conducted interviews to understand stakeholders' perceptions, individual experiences, and coping strategies for promoting inclusive practice. We conducted in situ observations of the inclusive learning context to gather primary data on the state and operational condition of the physical environment. We reviewed documents on institutional policy, implementation reports, and official technical guidelines produced by respective governments.

Thematic analysis of the data involved interview transcriptions, open coding, categorization, and the development of themes based on empirical data (Cernasev & Axon, 2023). Multiple sources and methods were employed for data verification, and researchers requested permission from key stakeholders to see whether the research findings made sense and were correct (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024).

This study design is highly beneficial in decomposing the complex nature of inclusive education in different contexts (Carvalho, 2021). It also allows for recognizing personal experiences and subjective perceptions of directly related individuals. Thus, the findings of this study are anticipated to reveal the actual things that occurred in the field, along with providing pertinent recommendations and policy implications for enhancing inclusive education in Indonesia (González, 2021).

RESULTS

Findings

The results of this study were grouped into six main themes, identified using NVivo software: (1) the condition of facilities for inclusive education, (2) the use and availability of assistive technology, (3) the upkeep of infrastructure, (4) the training and skills of teachers, (5)

involvement from parents and the community, and (6) the rules and guidelines for putting inclusive education into practice. We provide a comprehensive description of each theme below:

The condition of facilities for inclusive education

Evidence indicates that infrastructure provision in inclusive schools is uneven, especially regarding physical accessibility (Agbabiaka et al., 2024). Urban schools have begun to integrate basic amenities like ramps and accessible toilets, yet their implementation is not consistent throughout the entire building. Therefore, mobility-impaired students have barriers that interfere with their active participation and full engagement in learning.

"*Many classrooms remain inaccessible to wheelchair users because of narrow doorways and rigid desk configurations*."
(Urban-1, School Principal)

This statement implies that accessibility arrangements remain unfinished and not fully incorporated into school spatial design (Julius et al., 2024). The initial building architecture sometimes forgets the variance in students' needs, leading to inaccessible areas despite the institution's inclusivity (Wolf et al., 2021).

"*We need to push our child's wheelchair to the second floor since there is no ramp or elevator*."
(Urban-2, parent)

This issue shows that the absence of vertical accessibility facilities directly impacts parents and teachers. Depending on human support is risky and shows that the right of students to access educational areas independently is not realized (Williamson et al., 2022). These findings emphasize the necessity for enforceable technical standards requiring significant physical changes in accessible schools (Sugawara, 2022). Having ramps at the doors is insufficient; accessibility must extend to classrooms, laboratories, and activity areas. These measures are required to ensure equal participation for all students (Ackah-Jnr & Danso, 2019).

The use and availability of assistive technology

Survey results indicated that assistive technology in mainstream classrooms is not always utilized to its full potential. Although computerized learning devices exist in most city schools, the technical inability of teachers constrains their practical use.

"*We have a screen reader program, but no one knows how to use it*."
(Urban-3, Teacher)

This study indicates that simply having assistive learning tools around does not always improve the instruction quality for special needs students. If they lack appropriate training, they become ineffective and serve only as symbolic tools for administrative action (Ahmad Kusaini et al., 2024).

"*I learned about the assistive devices for deaf children only through a community training event, not from school*."
(Rural-4, Teacher)

It indicates low levels of inclusive technological literacy among teachers, especially in rural areas. Limited access to information and organized outreach programs restricts teachers from determining and effectively employing assistive technologies (VANDerpuye & Okai, 2023). Therefore, we must focus on procurement, emphasize systematic training, and provide ongoing technical support. Involving instructors in practice-based training will make them more prepared to apply technology to suit students' individual needs (Pursan et al., 2023).

The upkeep of infrastructure

The outcomes reveal that existing inclusive infrastructure commonly suffers from poor maintenance programs. Several physical facilities, such as assistive devices and accessible elements, have become defunct due to a lack of sustainable maintenance systems.

"*We have lacked a budget to repair certain supporting infrastructure for over a year*."
(Urban-2, Principal)

It demonstrates poor post-construction facility management, with no incorporation of infrastructure sustainability in the planning process. It neglects disability-friendly services maintained by the school (Soraya et al., 2024).

"*A gaping hole in the floor of a corridor, which has been there since the beginning of the year, has damaged my son's electric wheelchair*."
(Rural-3, Parent)

This example demonstrates that a lack of infrastructure maintenance causes inconvenience and presents serious safety threats. Reliance on human action or people power for maintenance significantly compromises the system's integrity (Farmer & Marshall, 2004). These conditions require the inclusive education system to possess standardized asset management procedures with routine inspections, maintenance at planned costs, and liaison with the technical departments of local governments. These measures are necessary for the long-term serviceability of inclusive infrastructure (Sánchez-Silva et al., 2024).

The training and skills of teachers

Teachers play a key role in creating inclusive classrooms. However, most requested teachers indicated they did not receive formal training on teaching special educational needs. Instead, they learned their competencies through practice and self-study.

"*I have not been taught how to teach autistic children; thus, I have learned through experience*."
(Rural-3, Teacher)

It reflects the absence of institutional investment in teachers' professional growth in rural areas. Due to the lack of procedural guidelines, teachers often rely on trial-and-error methods, resulting in uneven educational quality (Loughran & Hamil, 2016).

"*They provided a two-hour seminar based on general theory, without examples*."
(Urban-4, Teacher)

In urban environments, current training programs lack contextual content and tend to be mostly theoretical. Educators struggle with implementing inclusive classroom techniques without practical guidance (Karal et al., 2024). These results imply that teacher capacity development processes would be changed from passive information transmission to experiential learning (Oryngaliyeva et al., 2024). Capacity development activities would incorporate simulation, case studies, and field mentoring to improve teachers' confidence and competence levels regarding inclusion (Blegur et al., 2024).

Involvement from parents and the community

The organizational structure of the school determines parental involvement in inclusive education to a great extent (Ispas, 2020). Parental engagement in urban settings is more active, involving forum discussions and regular meetings. In contrast, engagement in rural areas tends to be more passive, consisting mainly of one-way notifications.

"*We receive an invitation to a monthly meeting where they request our input on our child's learning needs*."
(Urban-1, Parent)

This interaction proves that when schools provide participatory environments, parents can become critical collaborators in student development (Gamez et al., 2024). It promotes ownership of executed plans.

"*Sometimes, we learn about programs only after the school has made its decisions*."
(Rural-2, Parent)

The lack of parental involvement in decision-making within rural areas explains the gap between education policy and household circumstances (Mwangi et al., 2022). Excluding families often leads to education policies that are less responsive and less appropriate for children's environments. Schools must establish formal and informal mechanisms of bidirectional connections to deepen community engagement. Improving parents' understanding of inclusive education will enhance their engagement, making it more meaningful and strategic rather than merely administrative (López et al., 2023).

The rules and guidelines for putting inclusive education into practice

The success of applying inclusive programs relies on cooperative governance systems (Mwangi et al., 2022). Urban schools receive support and technical assistance from education authorities, while rural schools often struggle due to a lack of operational assistance.

"*An inclusion monitoring team makes regular school visits, looks at buildings, and addresses priorities*."
(Urban, Official)

The presence of these surveillance teams ensures effective implementation. It helps schools identify problems and build culturally relevant solutions.

"*We are not sure to whom we should report when new needs arise; we deal with everything independently*."
(Rural-1, Principal)

The absence of systems of institutional support forces school administrators to labor alone, undermining program quality and continuity (Francis et al., 2025). Relying on solo leadership seriously threatens the sustainable practice of policies. Enhancing administrative capacity at the school level and fostering inter-agency collaboration, particularly with local authorities, is critical in decentralized education systems. A governance system that is efficient, collaborative, and responsive is essential for optimal functioning and sustainable growth (Mosia & Lephoto, 2023).

Table 1. Condition of Inclusive Education

THEME	URBAN	SUB-URBAN	RURAL
Facilities	Uneven Ramps, narrow doorways	Some improvement, narrow doorways remain	No ramps/ elevator, human help needed
Assistive Technology	Limited use due to lack of expertise	Constrained by insufficient training	Limited access/ training, learn via community
Upkeep Infrastructure	Poor maintenance, malfunctions	Better than urban, lack sustainability	Unsafe conditions, risk unaddressed

Teaching Training	Basic theoretical training	Training oportunities	Trial and error methods
Parental Involvement	Active through forums/ meetings	Informed, low active participation	Limited involvement, top-down communication
Educational Guidelines	Regular support from teams	Some irregular support	Minimal support, scchool on their own

DISCUSSION

Inequalities in Physical Facilities and Their Impact on Access to Education

The results show that physical infrastructure remains a significant impediment to the equitable realization of inclusive education (Mbon et al., 2023). Inadequately designed classrooms and a lack of accessibility features, including elevators and ramps, demonstrate that universal design principles were not effectively incorporated into inclusive education facility planning. Even though various urban schools have attempted to put in ramps and toilets for people with disabilities, the provision's coverage is limited to specific regions, hence hindering students with physical disabilities from full involvement in classroom activities.

These inequalities mean that the "inclusive school" label tends to have administrative significance but not the basic physical elements to support inclusive practice (Sumaryanti et al., 2018). Consequently, children's right to education in an equitable and disability-friendly environment is undermined. As such, the government needs to provide minimum physical standards for inclusive schools that guarantee the provision of general facilities and full access to all learning areas and supporting activities.

Assistive Technology: Between Availability and Actual Use

The presence of assistive devices, like screen readers and audio amplification tools, in schools does not automatically translate into their practical application within these educational institutions. Schools that have acquired such equipment tend not to use it to its full capabilities, primarily due to a deficiency in technical instructor training. Teachers lack adequate skills for using such devices or are unaware they exist and how to use them (Nyemba, 2023).

This gap between providing assistive devices and user skill development shows a lack of institutional coordination to create inclusive learning environments. A comprehensive policy that guarantees equipment provision and supports teacher capacity through continuous training, practice-based mentoring, and user-friendly, context-specific guidelines is needed (Asmare, 2025).

Infrastructure Without Maintenance Systems: Interim Solutions Without Long-Term Sustainability

Educational infrastructure to support inclusive practice tends to be poor or non-functional regarding physical buildings and educational resources (Srivastava, 2019). This situation primarily results from the absence of systematic maintenance mechanisms. Particularly in rural schools, there are generally no budget allocations or mechanisms for regular maintenance of inclusive facilities.

Without firm, long-term operational plans, dependence on project-based or short-term financing or short-term grants engenders systemic weaknesses in the sustainability of inclusive education services. Thus, infrastructure functioning needs to be underpinned by routine budgetary policy and active engagement of local governments to facilitate ongoing repair and maintenance of essential facilities as part of basic education services (Hota, 2023).

Teacher Competence as the Foundation of Inclusive Practice

Teachers are pivotal in implementing inclusive education (Blegur et al., 2024). However, according to the research, the majority of teachers have not received official training to address

the needs of students with disabilities. Inclusive teaching is often performed experimentally or from experience. Hence, there is a heavy reliance on individual effort, which results in inconsistency across different schools and regions.

This result highlights the pressing necessity for an inclusive, multi-level, and practice-based training model. Pre-service teacher training programs and in-service professional training programs must strongly incorporate adaptive teaching practices, instructional differentiation strategies, and assistive technologies according to the diverse needs of the students. It will enable teachers to go beyond the theoretical knowledge of inclusion to its long-term and practical application in the classroom (Bešić et al., 2017).

Dynamics of Community and Parental Engagement

Parental involvement is critical to the success of inclusive education (Masondo & Mabaso, 2025). The research highlights a significant contrast in involvement and communication strategies between urban and rural schools. Urban schools have established consultative platforms through which parents can express their aspirations and ambitions, while rural schools mainly demonstrate one-way communication strategies.

The low participation of parents in rural areas indicates the lack of established mechanisms for family participation in educational activities. A two-way communication strategy, which must include consultative forums, parent education programs, and accessible literacy resources, is necessary to enable families to be effective collaborators in developing and assessing inclusive education strategies (Shcherbyna et al., 2024).

Governance Challenges: Between Supervision and Uncertainty

Effective implementation of inclusive education requires the development of organizational structures that ensure sustainability, accountability, and intersectoral coordination (Azoury & Yahchouchi, 2023). Schools in urban settings receive technical support from local education authorities, including regular supervision and infrastructure assessments. However, rural schools often implement inclusive programs independently, without formal guidance, resulting in disorganized approaches based solely on personal competencies.

This discrepancy represents an absence of engagement in policy initiatives and resource distribution. It is recommended that an inclusion unit be created in each region as a coordinating agency and liaison between education stakeholders (Subban et al., 2024). This support mechanism would facilitate the fair implementation of inclusive policies tailored to the unique contextual demands of each school community.

CONCLUSION

This research again attests that, despite Indonesia having made commendable progress in devising policies in favor of inclusive education, their implementation at the school level remains an intricate challenge. There remains a yawning gap between aspirations articulated in policy documents and their actual translation into action within schools. Inclusive education is still primarily perceived as an administrative necessity—a procedural issue—rather than acknowledging a fundamental transformation in pedagogy and school culture.

A serious impediment has been the issue of physical accessibility. Though there has been some advancement, especially in schools in urban areas, these have been fragmented and severely restricted in nature. Classrooms and laboratories, essential learning areas, remain inaccessible to disabled learners. It reveals the necessity for incorporating inclusive design values into the initial school infrastructure development, grounded in clearly delineated national standards and ongoing inspection to guarantee that accessibility is pragmatic rather than symbolic.

A second major challenge concerns assistive technology integration. Although numerous schools have acquired devices such as screen readers and hearing aids, these devices are not being utilized because the instructors have not received adequate training. This reality illustrates an important consideration: technology does not constitute a solution in and of itself. Without training and follow-up support, these devices amount to nothing more than unused resources and are not empowering tools, making a valuable contribution to increased student learning.

The research also draws attention to a long-neglected problem—maintenance. Inclusive schools often deteriorate because they lack mechanisms for ongoing maintenance. Without budget lines or well-defined plans for maintenance, even the most well-designed infrastructure initiatives cannot see long-term effects. Inclusive education is more than a one-time financial investment—it needs ongoing planning, attention, and care to remain effective over the long term.

Teachers are key to creating inclusive classroom contexts. However, most teachers do not receive formal preparation in inclusive pedagogy. Instead, they learn through informal exposure and cyclical learning processes. They must move beyond theoretical teaching to make teacher training programs more effective. Incorporating practical components, including actual classroom situations, pedagogical simulations, and mentoring experiences, is essential to establishing the applied competencies and professional self-assurance needed to work successfully with a heterogeneous student population.

Parent and community involvement is integral to effective inclusive education, yet the degree of involvement differs significantly from one geographic location to the next. In urban regions, families are more likely to be involved in school-level decision-making than in rural areas, where communication is one-way and intermittent. Therefore, there is a need to develop inclusive modes of communication that provide families with information and resources necessary to take significant roles in their children's education.

In addition, the findings of this study underscore the need for governance structures that are responsive and attuned to local conditions. Where schools, particularly those in underserved rural areas, are forced to implement inclusive practices independently, outcomes tend to be fragmented and non-sustainable in the long term. Establishing localized support units that extend technical support, promote inter-institutional collaboration, and monitor the sustained adoption of inclusive policies is a significant step toward system-wide improvement. Although this study is concentrated in the Indonesian context, its insights are replete with implications for other countries facing the same challenges in promoting inclusive education.

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