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Beyond Inclusion: Surakarta Special Education Teachers' Perspectives on Humanistic Pedagogy in the Era of Standardization

Nimas Ayu Nawal Maulida[1*], M. Thoyibi[2], Abdillah Nugroho[3]

[1,2,3] Faculty of English Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how special education teachers (SLB) in Surakarta negotiate humanistic and personalized pedagogical approaches within increasingly standardized educational systems. Drawing on critical pedagogy theory and inclusive education frameworks, this research examines the tensions between transformative, student-centered pedagogical ideals (such as those popularized in cultural narratives like Freedom Writers) and the structural, administrative, and resource constraints faced by SLB teachers working with students with diverse disabilities. Through semi-structured interviews with five special education teachers from public SLB institutions in Surakarta, this study investigates how educators conceptualize authentic connection, individualized attention, and transformative learning for students with intellectual, sensory, and physical disabilities who often face compounded marginalization due to poverty and social stigma. The findings reveal significant gaps between pedagogical ideals and practical realities, including excessive administrative burdens, inadequate funding for adaptive materials, high student-teacher ratios, outcome-driven assessment pressures, and limited emotional support systems for teachers. This study argues that while humanistic education promises to transform marginalized students' lives, systemic barriers in Indonesian special education prevent teachers from fully realizing this vision. This research contributes to ongoing debates about inclusive education in developing contexts and offers implications for reimagining special education policy that prioritises teacher capacity, student dignity, and authentic learning over bureaucratic compliance.
Keywords: special education, humanistic pedagogy, inclusive education, teacher perspectives, Freedom Writers, administrative burden, Surakarta, Indonesia

Introduction Section

For special education teachers in Indonesia, particularly those working in Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB) for students with disabilities, the Freedom Writers model presents both inspiration and profound challenges. Indonesian special education has undergone significant policy shifts toward inclusive education since the ratification of Undang-Undang No. 8 Tahun 2016 on persons with disabilities, which mandates equal access to quality education (Sunardi et al., 2017). However, implementation gaps remain substantial, particularly in resource allocation, teacher training, and systemic support for individualized instruction (Poernomo, 2016; Rakhmawati et al., 2021). Special education teachers in cities like Surakarta, known as a center of Javanese culture and education, face unique challenges working with students experiencing intellectual disabilities (tunagrahita), hearing impairments (tunarungu), visual impairments (tunanetra), physical disabilities (tunadaksa), and autism spectrum conditions, many of whom also come from economically disadvantaged families and encounter double marginalization based on disability and poverty (Tarsidi, 2012; Mangunsong, 2014).

The integration of humanistic and transformative pedagogical approaches in special education contexts represents one of the most challenging frontiers in contemporary Indonesian education. The film Freedom Writers (2007), based on Erin Gruwell's experiences teaching at-risk youth in Long Beach, California, has become a global cultural touchstone for educators seeking to inspire hope, agency, and critical consciousness in marginalized students (Gruwell, 1999). The narrative depicts how a novice teacher transforms a classroom of students labeled "unteachable" students from gang-involved, economically disadvantaged, and racially divided backgrounds through personalized attention, meaningful literacy activities (particularly journaling), exposure to literature reflecting their lived experiences, and field trips that expand their worldviews (Brass, 2008; Michie, 2009). Central to Gruwell's success was her refusal to accept deficit narratives about her students, her willingness to invest emotional labor and personal resources, and her creation of a classroom community grounded in mutual respect and shared humanity (Duncan-Andrade, 2007).

The gap between the transformative vision of humanistic pedagogy and the daily realities of SLB teaching in Indonesia has received limited scholarly attention. While international research has examined inclusive education

* Corresponding author:q100240027@student.ums.ac.id

implementation challenges (Artiles et al., 2006; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013), special education teacher burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014), and the emotional labor of teaching marginalized students (Valenzuela, 1999; Aultman et al., 2009), few studies have explored how Indonesian SLB teachers specifically conceptualize and navigate tensions between personalized, relationship-centered pedagogy and the bureaucratic, standardization-driven structures of contemporary schooling. This gap is particularly significant given Indonesia's cultural emphasis on pendidikan karakter (character education) and moral formation alongside academic instruction (Kemendikbud, 2017), which theoretically aligns with humanistic approaches but often conflicts with efficiency-driven educational reforms.

This study addresses three critical research questions. First, how do SLB teachers in Surakarta conceptualize humanistic, transformative pedagogy for students with disabilities, particularly in relation to cultural narratives like Freedom Writers? Second, what structural, pedagogical, and emotional barriers prevent teachers from fully implementing personalized, relationship-centered approaches? Third, how do teachers negotiate between their pedagogical ideals and institutional constraints in their daily practice? By centering the voices and practical wisdom of five experienced SLB teachers, this research seeks to illuminate the often-invisible labor, compromises, and resilience required to teach students with disabilities in under-resourced contexts. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more equitable, sustainable, and culturally responsive special education policies in Indonesia and similar developing contexts..

Theoretical Review

Humanistic pedagogy, rooted in the work of Rogers (1969), Freire (1970), and hooks (1994), positions education as fundamentally about recognizing and nurturing the full humanity of each student. Rogers' concept of student-centered learning emphasized empathy, unconditional positive regard, and authenticity as essential teacher qualities, arguing that genuine learning occurs when students feel emotionally safe and valued (Cornelius-White, 2007). Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed extended humanistic principles into explicitly political territory, arguing that education must enable marginalized students to critically analyze and transform oppressive social structures, what he termed conscientization, or critical consciousness. For Freire, authentic education involves dialogue, problem-posing rather than banking models of knowledge transmission, and the affirmation of students' experiential knowledge as valid and generative (Darder, 2017). hooks (1994) synthesized these traditions in her concept of engaged pedagogy, which requires teachers to be emotionally present, vulnerable, and committed to students' holistic growth intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. She argued that teaching is an act of love and resistance, particularly when working with students whom society has written off as unworthy of investment (hooks, 2003). Duncan-Andrade (2009) applied these principles specifically to urban education, documenting how critical hope, the combination of material critique of injustice and faith in collective transformation, sustains both teachers and students in under-resourced schools.

In special education contexts, humanistic pedagogy intersects with debates about the social model of disability, which locates disability not in individual impairment but in social barriers, attitudes, and exclusionary structures (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). Inclusive education theory, formalized in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), asserts that all students, regardless of ability, have the right to learn in mainstream environments with appropriate support. However, scholars have critiqued the gap between inclusive rhetoric and implementation, noting that inclusion often means physical placement without genuine pedagogical transformation, adequate resources, or teacher preparation (Slee, 2011; Florian, 2015). For teachers working with students with significant cognitive, communication, or sensory differences, humanistic pedagogy poses unique challenges. How does one facilitate critical consciousness with students who are nonverbal or have intellectual disabilities? How does a signature pedagogical practice like expressive journaling translate for students who cannot write independently? How does one build authentic relationships across profound communication differences? These questions require adaptations that honor both humanistic principles and the realities of embodied difference (Kliewer et al., 2006; Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008).

The concept of emotional labor, introduced by Hochschild (1983) and applied to teaching by Hargreaves (1998), recognizes that teaching, especially in marginalized contexts, requires intensive emotional work managing one's own feelings, responding to students' emotional needs, and performing care even when institutional structures provide little reciprocal support (Zembylas, 2005). Valenzuela's (1999) study of Mexican-American students identified authentic caring as requiring reciprocal relationships and cultural responsiveness, in contrast to aesthetic caring that prioritises compliance and appearances. Special education teachers experience particularly high rates of burnout and attrition due to role ambiguity, administrative burden, lack of resources, and the emotional intensity of supporting students with complex needs (Brunsting et al., 2014; Gilmour, 2018). In Indonesian contexts, additional factors include low salaries, limited professional development, social stigma associated with disability, and cultural expectations that teachers should sacrifice themselves without complaint (Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; Poernomo, 2016).

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of special education teachers in Surakarta, Indonesia. Qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate for investigating complex, context-dependent phenomena where participants' subjective understandings are central to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to ensure inclusion of diverse disability specializations and teaching contexts. Five teachers participated in this study, representing specializations in intellectual disability, hearing impairment, visual impairment, and autism. All participants held undergraduate degrees in special education from recognized Indonesian universities, and teaching experience ranged from six to eighteen years. Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews conducted between August and September 2025, following ethical approval from the university's research ethics committee. Each participant completed one in-depth interview lasting sixty to ninety minutes, conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comfort and depth of expression. The interview protocol explored teachers' visions of ideal teaching, experiences attempting personalized approaches, and use of a visual prompt from Freedom Writers to stimulate reflection on transformative pedagogy. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process, with initial coding conducted inductively and deductively using sensitizing concepts from critical pedagogy and inclusive education theory. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checking, thick description, audit trail documentation, and reflexive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research and finding discussion

Authentic Connection vs. Administrative Overload

The most pervasive theme concerned aspirations for authentic connection being undermined by administrative overload. All five participants expressed deep commitment to building relationships with students and families, viewing connection as foundational to effective special education. This aspiration reflects the core of humanistic pedagogy (Rogers, 1969; hooks, 1994), where knowing students' lives enables educators to select meaningful curriculum and respond to individual needs. However, participants unanimously identified excessive administrative requirements as the primary barrier to realizing this vision. This frustration was articulated powerfully by one teacher:

"Honestly, we want to be 100% for the children. I want to have time to talk with parents, to find out why 'Student A' is always looking so sad. I want to create special learning materials just for him. But how? My time is spent filling out RPP [Lesson Plans], monthly reports, all sorts of things. We are drowning in paper, not drowning in the children's world." (Interview with Ibu D)

This sentiment of "drowning in paper, not in the child's world," directly illustrates the discussion point from international research. It confirms how neoliberal accountability regimes (Ball, 2003) and the "terrors of performativity" (Apple, 2006) colonize teachers' time and energy, transforming professional practice into an audit performance rather than authentic human connection. The tension between the demand for personalized pedagogy and the simultaneous demand for standardized accountability reflects a core contradiction in contemporary education.

Communication Barriers vs. Mainstream Pedagogical Tools

The second major theme concerned the fundamental mismatch between students' embodied abilities and conventional, text-based pedagogies. While practices like expressive journaling are often celebrated as tools for self-expression and empowerment in conventional education, four participants emphasized that this approach requires total, fundamental adaptation for students with intellectual disabilities, nonverbal students, or those with severe motor impairments :

"Journaling? Ma'am, my student [with moderate intellectual disability], just holding a pencil correctly is an enormous struggle. We cannot force these 'mainstream' methods onto them. We have to be creative using picture cards, pointing, whatever they can do." (Interview with Bapak A)

This finding sparks a crucial discussion about the ableist assumptions embedded in many celebrated pedagogical approaches (Annamma et al., 2013). Teachers' creative adaptations, such as using visual communication boards or facilitating dictation, are acts that honor humanistic principles of student voice (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). However, they also represent a form of invisible, unacknowledged intellectual labor required to translate pedagogical ideals across profound differences in embodiment and cognition (Kliewer et al., 2006).

Resource Limitations vs. Idealized Teacher Narratives

The third theme highlighted tensions around student-teacher ratios and resource limitations. All participants identified these as fundamental barriers. Official Indonesian policy specifies ratios (e.g., 5:1 for intellectual disabilities), but actual classroom practice often far exceeds this :

"In theory, it's one teacher to five children. In reality, in my class, I have twelve. Their ages are different, their abilities are different. Some need help in the toilet, some have tantrums. How am I supposed to give 'individualized attention'? My time is spent just making sure they are all safe." (Interview with Ibu C)

This ratio problem extends beyond mere numbers to encompass the intensity of support needs; unlike students in many mainstream settings who are independent in basic self-care, many SLB students require physical assistance and behavioral regulation. Resource scarcity further constrained teaching. This finding offers a critical discussion point to counter idealized, popular narratives where "hero teachers" secure private donations for books and field trips. In contrast, SLB teachers described chronic shortages of basic adaptive materials. This illustrates precisely what Slee (2011) argues: successful pedagogies cannot simply be borrowed from well-funded contexts because the material conditions enabling those pedagogies are absent.

Holistic Development vs. Standardized Outcome Pressures

The fourth theme captured tensions between outcome pressures and holistic development. Participants described conflicts between holistic, humanistic goals such as social skills, independence, confidence, and joy and the narrow academic outcomes imposed by standardized assessment systems. For teachers of students with intellectual disabilities, the pressure focused on demonstrating progress in literacy and numeracy:

"My student who is severely intellectually disabled], he will never be able to read fluently. But he can learn to put on his own clothes, feed himself, and greet people kindly. Those are the life skills that are far more important for him. But those 'abilities' are not on the report card; they are not considered 'achievement' by the system." (Interview with Bapak E)

This discussion aligns with broader, critical debates about assessment in special education (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020). It questions whose priorities should determine "progress" and how growth should be measured when development is non-linear and highly individualized a conflict that efficiency-driven, standardized systems are ill-equipped to handle.

Emotional Labor vs. Lack of Systemic Support

The fifth theme concerned the intensive emotional labor inherent in special education teaching, which occurs in a vacuum of institutional support. All participants described significant emotional work, including managing their own feelings of grief and frustration, providing support to students and families experiencing poverty and stigma, and performing "authentic caring" (Valenzuela, 1999). This contrasts sharply with the "aesthetic caring" (prioritizing compliance) which Valenzuela argues is a form of "subtractive schooling" :

"Honestly, sometimes I think, 'Why am I still here?' The pay is like this, the work is like this. But then I remember..., I taught him for two years... he finally managed to write his own name. Those tiny moments... that's what keeps you going. It is not the system." (Interview with Bapak B)

This discussion highlights a critical, systemic flaw: the system relies on teachers finding intrinsic, meaning-making rewards (Billingsley, 2004) to persist. However, this reliance on individual resilience, without systemic support for teachers' wellbeing, is a direct pathway to the high rates of burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014) and attrition (Gilmour, 2018) that plague the special education field.

The findings reveal that gaps between humanistic pedagogical ideals and SLB teachers' daily realities are not primarily due to teachers' inadequate skill or commitment but rather systemic failures to provide the conditions necessary for transformative teaching. Neoliberal education reforms emphasizing accountability, standardization, and measurable outcomes have colonized special education, creating an "audit culture" (Ball, 2003; Apple, 2006) where teachers spend disproportionate time on compliance rather than connection. The solution is not eliminating accountability but reimagining it with accountability to students and families rather than distant bureaucracies, focused on meaningful outcomes like independence and wellbeing rather than standardized metrics. Humanistic pedagogy requires material support (Slee, 2011), yet romanticizing individual teacher heroism or celebrating their ingenuity in under-resourced contexts risks normalizing inequity rather than challenging it. Humanistic pedagogy developed for neurotypical learners requires fundamental reconceptualization for students with significant disabilities (Kliewer et al., 2006), requiring us to rethink what voice, agency, and transformation mean across different forms of embodiment. The teachers in this study demonstrated sophisticated adaptive expertise, yet their practical wisdom remains undervalued by policy frameworks that privilege text-based, verbal forms of expression.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored how five special education teachers in Surakarta, Indonesia, navigate profound tensions between humanistic pedagogical ideals and the structural, material, and systemic constraints characterizing contemporary Indonesian SLB education. Through in-depth interviews, the research identified five major gaps: aspirations for authentic connection undermined by excessive administrative burden; communication and cognitive differences requiring fundamental pedagogical adaptation often unrecognized by policy; inadequate student-teacher ratios and resource scarcity; outcome-driven assessment pressures conflicting with holistic development goals; and intensive emotional labor occurring without institutional support. These findings contribute to educational scholarship by extending critical pedagogy and humanistic education theory into special education contexts often overlooked in these literatures, revealing how embodied difference complicates celebrated pedagogical approaches. The study documents specific manifestations of neoliberal education reform in Indonesian special education, a context underrepresented in international research, while centering teacher knowledge and voice recognizing special education teachers as critical theorists whose practical wisdom should inform policy.

The study's key contribution is demonstrating that the primary barriers to humanistic pedagogy in this context are systemic and structural, not individual. The teachers in this study were not failing to implement humanistic pedagogy due to a lack of skill or commitment. Rather, they were navigating impossible structural constraints while performing sophisticated adaptive work such as translating text-based pedagogies for non-verbal students and managing large, mixed-ability classes with no resources that are often invisible to policymakers. This research, therefore, complicates popular, romanticized narratives of "teacher heroism" by showing that individual dedication, while noble, is insufficient to overcome systemic failures. Transformation in special education, as these teachers demonstrated, requires different resources, timelines, and definitions of success than mainstream narratives often acknowledge.

Implications for Indonesian education policy include reducing administrative burden through streamlined, meaningful documentation systems; increasing funding for SLB schools to ensure adequate ratios, adaptive materials, and assistive technology; reforming assessment systems to recognize diverse outcomes and individualized growth; mandating and funding mental health support for special education teachers; and involving teachers and disability communities in policy development rather than imposing top-down reforms. For teacher education, programs should prepare pre-service special education teachers for emotional labor, systemic navigation, and adaptive expertise required in under-resourced contexts; teach advocacy and collective organizing alongside instructional methods; and center disability justice frameworks that challenge deficit narratives and structural ableism.

Despite limitations, including the sample size of five teachers and focus on specific contexts in Surakarta, this research makes important contributions by challenging both the romanticization of individual teacher sacrifice and deficit narratives about special education teachers in under-resourced contexts. Their perspectives reveal that the gap between pedagogical ideals and realities is systemic, not individual, requiring collective political action rather than expecting teachers to compensate for inequity through unsustainable personal sacrifice. Ultimately, for transformative, humanistic special education to become reality in Indonesian contexts, fundamental reforms are necessary that redefine accountability to prioritize student well-being over bureaucratic compliance, invest adequately in resources and support, reconceptualize assessment to recognize diverse pathways and outcomes, acknowledge and support teachers' emotional labor, and center the voices of teachers, students, and families in policy development.

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