

Teachers' and Peers' Acceptance of Students with Special Needs in Indonesian Inclusive High Schools: A Quantitative Survey Study

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education requires not only physical access but also social acceptance and school readiness to support meaningful participation of students with special needs. This study examined teachers' and peers' acceptance of students with special needs in an inclusive secondary school in Banjarbaru, South Kalimantan, Indonesia, focusing on knowledge, attitudes, and perceived school support. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted involving 30 regular teachers and 30 regular students selected from one inclusive high school. Data were collected using two self-administered Likert-scale questionnaires. The teacher questionnaire consisted of 45 items covering knowledge, attitudes, and perceived school support facilities, while the student questionnaire consisted of 22 items covering knowledge and attitudes. Data were analyzed descriptively by converting subscale scores into percentage scores and interpreting them using predefined acceptance categories. Teachers showed a mixed acceptance profile. Their attitude toward students with special needs was high (70.14%), but their knowledge (64.95%) and perceived school support facilities (62.83%) were low, resulting in an overall teacher acceptance score of 65.97%. In contrast, students demonstrated high acceptance, with knowledge at 80.31%, attitude at 72.15%, and an overall score of 76.23%. These findings indicate that students showed more consistent acceptance than teachers, while teachers' positive attitudes were constrained by limited inclusive pedagogical knowledge and insufficient school support. The study highlights an attitude-readiness gap among teachers and a generally supportive peer climate among students. Strengthening teacher professional development, specialist consultation, inclusive facilities, and peer-mediated strategies is necessary to improve inclusive practice in secondary schools.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is widely recognised as a rights-based agenda for improving quality that seeks to remove barriers so that all learners, regardless of disability or other differences, can participate in and achieve success in their local schools. At a global level, this agenda is closely linked to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 and is implemented through international guidelines that emphasise participation, equity and the elimination of discrimination in schools. Recent global syntheses on disability inclusion further emphasize that access alone is insufficient; meaningful inclusion requires environments that enable learning, participation and dignity, including within education systems (UNICEF, 2024). Contemporary inclusive education frameworks emphasize that inclusion involves more than placing students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms; it requires a transformation of school cultures, capacities, and support systems. Alongside this, recent measurement work has proposed indicators that capture inclusion as an input–process–outcome system, emphasizing the importance of examining both the social climate and the operational readiness of schools (Munene, 2025).

One persistent challenge across countries is social acceptance, how teachers and peers perceive, interact with, and include students with disabilities or special educational needs. This matters because belonging and positive relationships are linked to participation and socio-emotional development in inclusive settings (Wang et al., 2025). International evidence also suggests that teacher attitudes can be neutral or ambivalent and that positive attitudes do not automatically translate into inclusive behaviour without support and training. A recent systematic review indicates variability in teachers' endorsement of inclusion, highlighting the central role of training and resources (Holzer & Moser Opitz, 2025). Cross-national modelling likewise demonstrates that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion differ systematically across contexts and are influenced by system-level conditions (Furrer et al., 2020).

Despite growing international consensus, an important research gap remains: a lack of empirical evidence from low- and middle-income contexts, especially at secondary and vocational levels, on how acceptance operates among teachers and peers, and on its relationship with practical readiness (knowledge, school support, and facilities). Recent reviews of the benefits and implementation of inclusive education note that evidence in secondary settings and diverse national contexts remains uneven, with social participation and peer processes often examined separately from school capacity and accommodations (Urton et al., 2023). Consequently, it remains unclear whether acceptance expressed by teachers and students in inclusive schools aligns with their preparedness to provide support and maintain inclusive learning environments in the absence of specialist assistance and infrastructure.

In Indonesia, children with special needs are guaranteed access to education, as outlined in existing policies, particularly Pasal 31 UUD 1945 ensures that every citizen, without exception, has the right to education, which serves as the fundamental foundation for ensuring access to education for all. This commitment is further reinforced by Undang-Undang No 8 of 2016 on the rights of persons with disabilities, including in education, which requires the government to provide adequate accommodation for students with special needs. According to the rules and policies in Indonesia, schools must be willing to provide education for children with special needs. Children with special needs go to different kinds of schools, include special schools and regular schools, where they learn with other students (Una et al., 2023). When children with special needs attend special schools, the school can make adjustments more easily because the environment is already familiar with the needs of children with special needs. In regular schools, it remains challenging to implement inclusive education and accommodate the learning needs of children with special needs.

At the local level, schools in Banjarbaru have implemented inclusive education for several years, yet stakeholders still report uneven readiness and varying acceptance. Understanding acceptance in

this context is crucial because acceptance is a prerequisite for participation: when teachers and peers are accepting, students with special needs are more likely to be included in classroom activities and peer networks; when acceptance is low or conditional, students can experience isolation even in formally 'inclusive' schools (Sukadari, 2020). Inclusive implementation does not match the readiness of schools. Schools are not fully prepared, especially because there are not enough teachers with experience in special education. Schools also lack the necessary facilities and infrastructure to meet the needs of students with special needs. Parents and the community are not very aware of these students (Hanifah et al., 2022). Teachers who don't have a background in special education need to take training to learn more about it (Wardah, 2019). The facilities and infrastructure are not yet optimal, especially in terms of accessibility, such as the availability of ramps, disabled toilets, and others. Also, learning materials are not yet suitable for students with special needs. It's still hard to include students with special needs in regular schools.

Awareness of the existence of students with special needs is still not optimal. Various stakeholders have different levels of awareness and acceptance of the concept of inclusive education. A common issue is that teachers understand their roles and responsibilities in serving students with special needs, but they lack the appropriate knowledge and attitudes (Setyowati & Wardani, 2020). Another issue that has come to light relates to the acceptance and awareness of other students at school. The acceptance of peers has been shown to influence the psychological well-being and self-efficacy of students with special needs (Setyawati, 2019). A key factor in fostering acceptance and awareness is having the right perception in understanding students with special needs (Tania et al., 2021).

Accordingly, the following research questions guide this study: (1) What is the level of acceptance among regular teachers towards students with special educational needs in inclusive secondary schools in Banjarbaru, in terms of knowledge, attitudes and perceived support facilities/school readiness? (2) What is the level of acceptance among regular students towards students with special educational needs in the same schools, in terms of knowledge and attitudes?

2. METHODS

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to describe teachers' and peers' acceptance of students with special needs in an inclusive secondary school in Banjarbaru, South Kalimantan. Survey research is a study that collects information from a sample by asking questions through questionnaires or interviews to describe various aspects of the population and uses questionnaires as the main data collection tool (Creswell, 2014). The sample in this study (SMKN 1 Banjarbaru) was selected using purposive sampling from inclusive high schools in Banjarbaru. The selection criteria were: (1) officially implementing inclusive education, (2) enrolling students with special needs in regular classrooms during the study period, and (3) providing institutional permission to conduct the survey. Participants were recruited using a convenience/total-available sampling approach within the selected school. Inclusion criteria for teachers were: regular (non-special education) teachers who taught in classes where students with special needs were enrolled and who consented to participate. Inclusion criteria for students were: regular students (without identified special needs) enrolled in the same school who had regular interaction with students with special needs. A total of 30 regular teachers and 30 regular students completed the questionnaires.

Paper-based questionnaires were distributed through the school and completed anonymously. No names or personal identifiers were collected; only basic background information (e.g., teaching experience) was recorded for descriptive purposes. Two self-administered questionnaires were used. The teacher questionnaire contained 45 items covering three subscales: knowledge (12 items), attitude (23 items), and perceived school support facilities/readiness (10 items). The student questionnaire contained 22 items covering two subscales: knowledge (8 items) and attitude (14 items). All items were

rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher acceptance. Data analysis using subscale and total scores were converted to percentage scores using $(\text{obtained score} / \text{maximum possible score}) \times 100$. Percentage scores were interpreted using four categories: 0–35% (very low), 36–65% (low), 66–85% (high), and 86–100% (very high). From the survey results, the researchers made claims about the trends that exist in the population (Andhini, 2017). The research procedure is illustrated in the following flowchart.

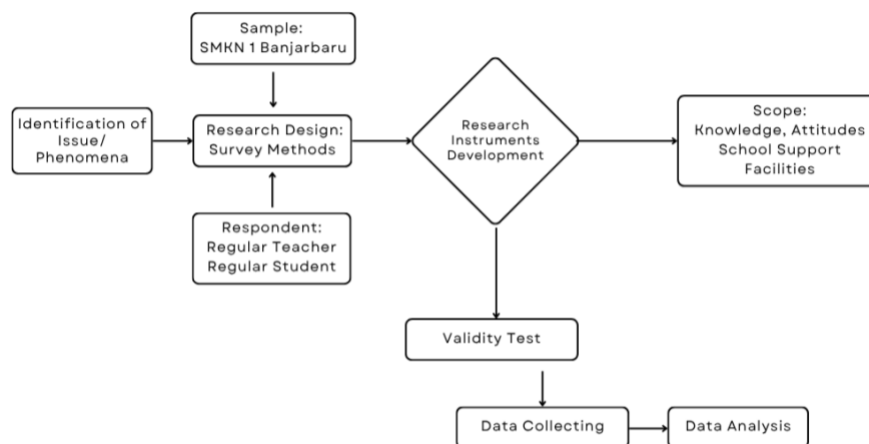


Figure 1. Research Procedure

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Level of Acceptance of Regular Teachers Towards Children With Special Needs In Inclusive Schools

Teachers completed a questionnaire covering three areas: knowledge acceptance, attitude acceptance, and acceptance of facility support and school readiness. The results of the questionnaire, completed by 30 teachers, are as follows:

Table 1. Average Level Acceptance Results of Regular Teachers

Aspect of Acceptance	Average Percentage Score	Category
Knowledge	64.95	Low
Attitude	70.14	High
School Support Facilities	62.83	Low
Overall Average Percentage	65.97	Low

Teachers consistently demonstrate a 'willing but not fully prepared' profile. Across the three teacher dimensions (knowledge, attitude, and school support facilities), attitude acceptance tends to be stronger than knowledge and perceived school support/readiness.

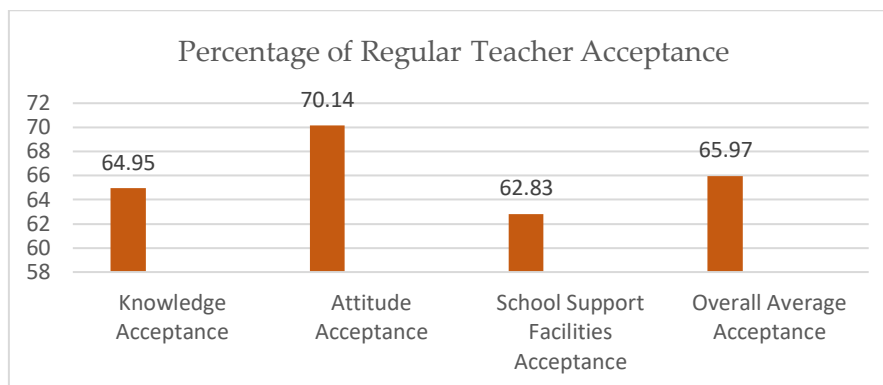


Figure 2. Graph of Average Results of Regular Teachers Acceptance

The findings of the study indicate an imbalance, with many teachers expressing support for the concept of inclusion, yet simultaneously reporting diminished confidence in comprehending students with special needs related learning requirements and the adequacy of the available support mechanisms. The results of the questionnaires indicate that teachers often hold misconceptions regarding the knowledge aspect, which encompasses special educational needs and inclusive education principles. These principles include the role of teachers, the learning process, and the characteristics of children with special educational needs. In relation to the attitudes of regular teachers in the classroom towards children with special educational needs, the results obtained are indicative of a high level of commitment and awareness. This encompasses the participation of these children in classroom activities, the responses of teachers during the learning process, and other forms of attitude. Nevertheless, a proportion of respondents continue to experience a sense of unease and perceive the learning of children with special educational needs in the classroom to be an act of irresponsibility. With regard to the provision of facility support and the degree to which the school was prepared to receive children, the category was low. Teachers expressed the opinion that the school had not made sufficient provision for the learning needs of children or the principles of inclusive learning. The following table illustrates the highest and lowest percentages of respondents who completed the questionnaire.

Table 2. Data on the Highest and Lowest Respondent Scores

Respondent	Knowledge Acceptance	Attitude Acceptance	School Support Facilities Acceptance
Lowest Score	58.33	56	50
Highest Score	100	80	80

As demonstrated in Table 2, there is considerable variability between teachers. While some teachers report very high acceptance, a noticeable minority report low acceptance, indicating that inclusive readiness is uneven across staff and may reflect differences in prior exposure, experience, or training.

3.1.2 Level of Acceptance of Regular Students Towards Children With Special Needs In Inclusive Schools

It has been reported that students exhibit a more consistently positive profile in comparison to their teachers. The majority of students demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of students with special needs and exhibit supportive peer attitudes in their daily school interactions. The percentage scores are shown in this table.

Table 3. Average Level Acceptance Results of Regular Students

Aspect of Acceptance	Average Percentage Score	Category
Knowledge Acceptance	80.31	High
Attitude Acceptance	72.15	High
Overall Average	76.23	High

Overall, students' acceptance levels are high across both dimensions, suggesting a generally inclusive peer climate. The relatively strong knowledge dimension suggests that many students have the ability to respond appropriately to students with special needs, and can support participation and belonging through day-to-day peer interactions. This is illustrated in the following graph.

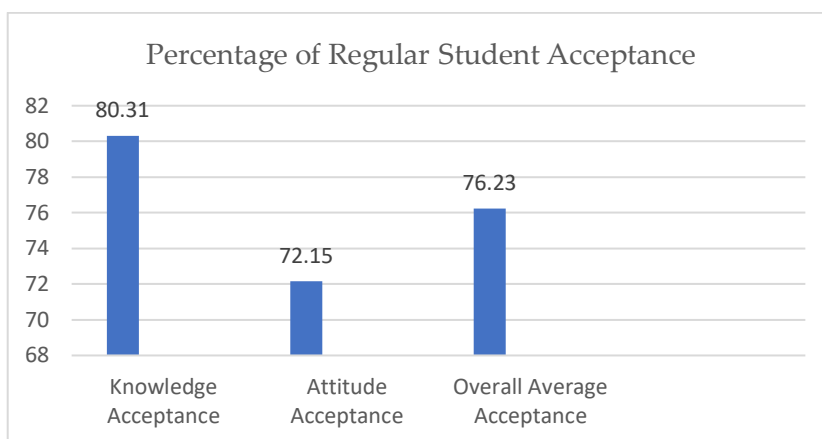


Figure 3. Graph of Average Results of Regular Students Acceptance

Reinforces this pattern, showing students' results clustered in the high category across dimensions, with smaller gaps between knowledge and attitude than those observed among teachers. All aspects of regular students' acceptance of students with special educational needs in inclusive schools fall into the high category. The knowledge aspect achieved a high average score, meaning that regular students generally understand and are familiar with the concept of children with special educational needs. Regarding acceptance attitudes, the average score was also high, indicating that regular students accept children with special needs as their peers. However, several statements completed by regular students indicate that some still feel uncomfortable with the presence of students with special educational needs in their school environment and do not feel responsible for befriending and helping them. The table below shows the highest and lowest percentage scores from the respondents who filled out the questionnaire.

Table 4. Data on the Highest and Lowest Respondent Scores

Respondent	Knowledge Acceptance	Attitude Acceptance
Lowest Score	59	63
Highest Score	100	95

As illustrated in Table 5, the level of peer acceptance varies, with a small proportion of students reporting comparatively low acceptance. This difference was influenced by various factors, including acceptance within each individual and social interaction with student with special needs in the classroom and at school. The importance of students acceptance for students with special needs is because even a small number of less supportive peers can have a significant impact on students with special needs experiences, including group work, break times, and informal classroom culture.

Based on survey results in teachers and students, comparison of the two groups reveals a marked difference in terms of readiness: students demonstrate consistently higher levels of knowledge and overall acceptance, while teachers' attitudes are positive but are constrained by their limited knowledge and perceptions of school support (Tables 2 and 4). These contrasts suggest that professional development and improved facilities/support systems are priorities for strengthening inclusive implementation.

3.2 Discussion

This discussion interprets the survey patterns by positioning them within evidence on inclusive schooling and broader international inclusive education research. Across the groups, a clear contrast emerged: teachers expressed generally positive attitudes towards inclusion, yet reported lower levels of knowledge and perceived school support/facilities, whereas students demonstrated consistently higher acceptance across knowledge and attitude dimensions. These results suggest that acceptance in inclusive secondary settings is shaped not only by beliefs, but also by professional capacity and enabling school conditions.

3.2.1 Level of Acceptance of Regular Teachers Towards Children With Special Needs In Inclusive Schools

The presence of student with special needs in regular schools is the most fundamental principle of inclusive education. Implementing inclusive education requires acceptance and openness from everyone in the school, including regular teachers. A survey of teachers' acceptance levels found varying degrees of acceptance in several areas: low knowledge, high attitude and low support in terms of facilities and school readiness.

The teacher profile in this study reflects an attitude–readiness gap: while many teachers support the idea of inclusion, they often feel less prepared to enact inclusive practices and perceive school supports as insufficient. Similar findings have been reported in Indonesian studies, where regular teachers in inclusive schools often show goodwill towards students with special needs while reporting constraints in pedagogical knowledge, identification/assessment competence, and access to specialist support (Amka & Ekasari Kusumastuti, 2019). Research conducted on a national scale has also drawn attention to the limitations of infrastructure and learning resources (e.g. accessibility features, adapted materials) which can result in inconsistent implementation across different classrooms (Hanifah et al., 2022).

International research also cautions that favorable attitudes do not automatically translate into inclusive teaching. Research on teachers' implementation intentions suggests that perceived behavioral control often influenced by training, resources, and school-level support and predicts whether teachers adopt inclusive strategies (Urton et al., 2023). Cross-context findings also show that teachers' attitudes vary systematically with system conditions, including resourcing and support structures (Syafiulia & Maadad, 2026). Therefore, the relatively positive attitudes observed here can be understood as an important starting point, but not a sufficient condition for high-quality inclusive practice.

The survey questionnaire revealed that, while regular teachers understand that inclusive education involves schools providing for children with special needs, more complex and in-depth knowledge remains a challenge. They still tend to have difficulty understanding the principles of learning for children with special needs, and do not yet know how to design individual learning programs and strategies. Basic knowledge that teachers should have mastered is not yet understood by regular teachers, impacting their teaching methods (Tejena et al., 2022). Teachers require training to develop their children with special needs learning knowledge (Liani et al., 2021). The government

should organize sequential training or workshops for regular teachers in inclusive schools to ensure knowledge is distributed evenly (Priatmoko, 2017).

In terms of attitude, with high acceptance category means teachers generally felt empathy and believed in the potential of children with special needs, there were still some contradictions and disagreements. Some teachers felt that teaching children with special needs was beyond their professional remit, making them feel uncomfortable when interacting with such children. Regular teachers who do not have a background in special education tend to feel that they are not professionally responsible for teaching children with special needs in the classroom, leaving this responsibility to special education teachers (GPK). In reality, implementing ideal inclusive education requires the collaboration of GPK and regular teachers without a special educational background (Wardah, 2019). One of regular teachers' roles is to reduce discrimination in the classroom. This can be achieved by organizing learning activities that encourage interaction and involvement between regular students and those with special needs, thereby creating an accepting environment (Mirnawati et al., 2024).

In terms of acceptance of facility support, was in the low category is quite crucial, given that inclusive education has been promoted and implemented in schools for some time, in the hope that the facilities provided by schools are adequate and meet the needs of their users, including teachers, who provide services to students. Teachers consistently answered that the GPK was inadequate and that schools were not doing enough to optimise support for regular teachers. This includes equitable training, which not all regular teachers have received, despite having to deal with and teach children with special needs in their daily lives (Mukti et al., 2023). Several respondents believe that schools do not yet have clear procedures for accepting student with special needs, meaning that the inclusive education process is not running optimally. This is partly due to the unavailability of GPK from the special education, which should act as a consultant for designing and implementing learning in the classroom. The presence and involvement of GPK in schools accepting children with special needs is a key factor in facilitating appropriate learning (Nugroho & Minsih, 2021). However, this remains a challenge for regular teachers in inclusive schools.

Based on the survey result it is evident that, despite the teachers' positive attitudes, there is a paucity of knowledge and facilities. This may be explained in three different ways. Firstly, inclusive education policies may engender normative expectations that encourage teachers to endorse inclusion (attitudinal acceptance), whilst the availability of structured learning opportunities to build inclusive competence remains limited. In numerous Indonesian contexts, professional development is often characterized by disparities, being limited in duration or lacking a systematic alignment with classroom realities. This can result in teachers who are supportive yet lacking in the skills necessary to differentiate instruction, design individualized adjustments, and effectively manage diverse learning needs (Soeharto et al., 2024).

Secondly, the support system required for inclusive schooling, such as the presence of special education teachers (GPK), consultation mechanisms, and clear procedures for accommodation, may be inconsistently available. In instances where consultation and co-planning are found wanting, it falls upon regular teachers to rely on personal experience, a factor which can account for the considerable variation observed in the findings. Thirdly, perceived limitations in terms of facility are likely to reflect a broader challenge concerning resources. This is evidenced by the finding that accessibility infrastructure and assistive learning resources often develop more slowly than policy commitments, particularly in secondary and vocational settings where equipment and curricular demands are already complex (Donath et al., 2023).

3.2.2 Level of Acceptance of Regular Students Towards Children With Special Needs In Inclusive Schools

The acceptance of inclusive education for students with special needs is clearly visible, including among regular students. Peers in the same class who study together are crucial point affect the acceptance student with special needs in inclusive school. The results of the questionnaire survey distributed to regular students who interact with children show a high level of acceptance.

It was reported by students that there was a high level of acceptance across knowledge and attitude, suggesting that there was a generally supportive peer climate. In line with this, Indonesian studies have noted that peer acceptance is closely linked to daily contact, familiarity, and accurate perceptions of students with special needs (Tania et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the existence of a small subgroup of less accepting peers remains significant, as even limited peer exclusion can impact participation in group work, break-time interactions, and students' sense of belonging (Setyawati, 2019).

Based on the survey result, regular students are aware of the circumstances and needs of their peers with special educational needs and disabilities. They understand that their school is inclusive, so they must study and interact together. However, some respondents were not familiar with the presence of students with special educational needs in the school environment. It is hoped that if regular students have the right knowledge about inclusive education and students with special needs, this will impact their attitudes and interactions at school (Sulfianti S et al., 2022). This knowledge is expected to increase regular students' familiarity with, and understanding of, the behaviour exhibited by students with special educational needs in the classroom (Amka & Ekasari Kusumastuti, 2019).

Regular students who were accustomed to the presence of students with special needs were effective in influencing the attitudes of other regular students. Regular students are comfortable interacting with students with special needs and tend to empathise with them, offering assistance if required outside the classroom or during learning activities. However, some respondents still tend to avoid interacting with students with special needs, feeling no responsibility for befriending them. These varied responses indicate a lack of familiarity with the concept of inclusive education. Students with special needs will feel optimally accepted if this is reflected in the attitudes and responses of their peers in the classroom (Tyas Pratiwi et al., 2022).

International evidence corroborates the pivotal role of peer processes in this context. Social participation and peer relationships are pivotal outcomes of inclusion, contingent on the prevailing social climate and the supports that facilitate meaningful engagement in classroom and school routines (Dodds et al., 2024). Consequently, the presence of strong peer acceptance in this study is indicative of a positive outcome; however, it should be reinforced through the implementation of structured peer-support strategies to ensure that acceptance is consistent across classrooms and social groups.

Survey result in this study proven that Inclusive education has been extensively endorsed at the policy level. Nevertheless, educational institutions may not receive the sustained training, specialist support, and infrastructure investment required to translate inclusion from access to participation. In addition, global guidance asserts that access alone is insufficient for inclusive systems to thrive; these systems require enabling environments and supports that protect learning and dignity (UNICEF, 2024). Within an input–process–outcome view of inclusion, teacher knowledge and facility supports function as critical inputs that shape daily processes (e.g. instructional adaptation, participation opportunities) and outcomes (e.g. belonging and achievement). The present study provides empirical evidence from Indonesian inclusive secondary/vocational schooling and demonstrates that acceptance is multidimensional: attitudinal support can coexist with low readiness when knowledge and enabling resources are limited. This extends the scope of acceptance discussions by highlighting the practical conditions under which positive attitudes are more likely to translate into inclusive practice.

The findings indicate the efficacy of targeted, school-based strategies: The first component of the programs is focused on the continuous professional development of pedagogical adaptation and classroom management for a diverse range of learners. The second component is the strengthening of collaboration and consultation with General Pedagogical Knowledge (GPK) or special education expertise. The third component is peer-mediated inclusion activities that support consistent acceptance among students. The findings of the study support the necessity for system-level actions, including minimum service standards for inclusive secondary schools (training requirements, availability of specialist support, and accessibility resources), dedicated funding for inclusive facilities and learning aids, and monitoring mechanisms that evaluate not only enrolment but also participation and classroom-level implementation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study found that acceptance of students with special needs in the selected inclusive secondary school in Banjarbaru differed between teachers and peers. Regular teachers generally showed positive attitudes toward inclusive education, but their overall readiness remained limited due to lower levels of inclusive pedagogical knowledge and perceived inadequacy of school support facilities. In contrast, regular students demonstrated a higher and more consistent level of acceptance, indicating a generally supportive peer climate for students with special needs. These findings suggest that successful inclusive education depends not only on positive beliefs, but also on teachers' professional competence, adequate school facilities, and structured support systems. However, this study is limited by its small sample size, single-school context, reliance on self-reported questionnaire data, and absence of direct classroom observation or perspectives from students with special needs. Future research should involve larger samples across multiple schools and regions, use mixed-methods approaches, and examine how teacher training, specialist consultation, inclusive infrastructure, and peer-mediated programs influence the participation, belonging, and learning outcomes of students with special needs over time.

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