

Alignment of Early Childhood Education and Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education During the Preschool-Primary Transition: A Mixed-Methods Study

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

inclusive education;
teacher perceptions;
preschool-primary
transition;
special educational needs;
home-school partnership

Article history:

Received 2025-11-19

Revised 2026-01-08

Accepted 2026-03-31

ABSTRACT

Inclusive education requires continuity across educational levels to ensure equitable learning opportunities for children with special needs (CWSN). However, alignment between early childhood education (PAUD) and primary school (SD) teachers during transitional periods remains underexplored, particularly in rural contexts where resource constraints are significant. This study employed a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 30 teachers (24 PAUD, 6 SD) using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire assessing knowledge, attitudes, and practices. Qualitative data were obtained through 12 interviews, 6 classroom observations, and document analysis. Descriptive and comparative analyses were conducted, alongside thematic analysis for qualitative data. Findings indicate that teacher perceptions of inclusive education are generally moderate and relatively similar across PAUD ($M = 2.80$) and SD ($M = 2.85$). While conceptual understanding is adequate, practical implementation remains limited. Alignment between teacher groups is evident at the attitudinal level but weak in classroom practices. Variations in training, teaching experience, and access to resources contribute to inconsistencies. Transition strategies are informal and unstructured, and parental and community involvement is minimal. The results highlight a gap between positive perceptions and effective inclusive practices, emphasizing the need for structured coordination mechanisms. Strengthening cross-level training, formal communication systems, and transition protocols is essential to improve alignment and ensure continuity of support for CWSN, particularly in rural educational settings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a fundamental principle that ensures all children, including those with special educational needs or disabilities, have equitable access to quality education. In Indonesia, this right is formally recognized in Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which mandates inclusive and non-discriminatory educational practices. Inclusive education is not merely about placing children

with special needs in mainstream classrooms; rather, it emphasizes meaningful participation, appropriate support, and the removal of barriers that hinder learning and development (UNESCO, 2009). Within this framework, children with special needs (CWSN) are entitled to educational environments that are responsive to their individual characteristics and developmental trajectories.

Despite strong policy support, the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia — particularly at the early childhood education (*Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* [PAUD]) and primary school (*Sekolah Dasar* [SD]) levels—remains inconsistent. Several studies have highlighted persistent challenges, including limited teacher competence, insufficient training in inclusive pedagogies, lack of adaptive curricula, and inadequate infrastructural support (Forlin, 2010; Mulyha & Khoiri, 2023). These challenges are often compounded by social stigma and limited awareness among communities, which can further marginalize children with special needs (UNICEF, 2014). Consequently, while inclusive education is widely endorsed in principle, its practical realization remains uneven, particularly in rural and under-resourced contexts.

One critical yet underexplored aspect of inclusive education is the transition from early childhood education to primary school. The transition period represents a significant developmental milestone for all children, but it is especially crucial for CWSN, who may require continuity in support, consistent instructional approaches, and coordinated communication between educational levels. Existing literature on the PAUD–SD transition tends to focus on school readiness, child development outcomes, and parental involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). However, relatively little attention has been given to the alignment of teacher perceptions and practices across these educational stages, particularly in relation to inclusive education.

Teacher perceptions play a central role in shaping inclusive practices. Research has consistently shown that teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about inclusion influence their instructional decisions, classroom management strategies, and willingness to accommodate diverse learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). When teachers possess positive attitudes toward inclusion but lack adequate knowledge or practical skills, a gap often emerges between beliefs and classroom practices. This “attitude–practice gap” can hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education and limit learning opportunities for CWSN (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Therefore, understanding how teachers perceive inclusive education—and whether these perceptions are aligned across educational levels—is essential for ensuring continuity and coherence in inclusive practices.

Alignment of perceptions between PAUD and primary school teachers is particularly important during the transition period. In this study, alignment refers to the extent to which teachers across educational levels share a common understanding of inclusive education concepts, maintain similar expectations regarding roles and responsibilities, and implement consistent practices in supporting CWSN. When such alignment is lacking, discontinuities may arise in instructional approaches, communication strategies, and support systems, potentially affecting children's adjustment and learning outcomes. Conversely, aligned perceptions can facilitate smoother transitions, enhance collaboration among teachers, and promote more effective inclusive practices.

The challenges of achieving alignment are often more pronounced in rural settings. Rural schools frequently face constraints such as limited access to professional development opportunities, shortages of specialized personnel, inadequate resources, and geographical isolation (Sucuoğlu et al., 2014). These factors can exacerbate disparities in teacher knowledge and experience, leading to variations in how inclusive education is understood and implemented. In addition, parental involvement and community support—both of which are critical for successful inclusion—may be limited due to socioeconomic factors, lack of awareness, or cultural beliefs about disability (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). As a result, the transition process for CWSN in rural areas is often fragmented and insufficiently supported.

Empirical evidence from local contexts further underscores these concerns. Field observations in Bulu Subdistrict, Temanggung Regency, indicate that while children with special needs may receive relatively adequate support in PAUD settings, their transition to primary school is frequently marked by reduced attention to their needs, limited teacher preparedness, and insufficient coordination between institutions (Roza & Fitnah, 2020; Kulsum et al., 2024). This discontinuity highlights the importance of

examining not only individual teacher competencies but also the extent to which teachers across educational levels share aligned perceptions and practices.

Given these gaps, this study aims to investigate the alignment of perceptions between PAUD and primary school teachers regarding inclusive education during the transition period. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) assess teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in terms of knowledge, attitudes, and practices; (2) identify the level of alignment between PAUD and SD teachers and the factors influencing any discrepancies; (3) explore existing strategies for coordinating inclusive education transitions; and (4) examine the roles of teachers, parents, and community stakeholders in supporting these transitions. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of both the quantitative patterns and qualitative dynamics underlying teacher perceptions.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of more effective strategies for supporting inclusive transitions, particularly in rural contexts. By identifying gaps in perception alignment and coordination mechanisms, the study offers practical recommendations for improving teacher collaboration, strengthening professional development, and establishing structured transition protocols. Ultimately, enhancing alignment between PAUD and primary school teachers is essential for ensuring continuity in inclusive education and for promoting equitable learning opportunities for all children, especially those with special needs.

2. METHODS

This study employed a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design, with a dominant quantitative strand and an embedded qualitative strand. The quantitative component involved a structured questionnaire using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree) to measure the alignment of teacher perceptions on inclusive education during the transition from Early Childhood Education (PAUD) to Primary School (SD). The instrument was content-validated by experts, tested for item-total correlation, and demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.914$). Thirty teachers from 14 institutions—10 PAUD units (18 teachers) and 4 SD units (12 teachers)—were selected purposively based on location, participation in the local learning community, and experience with children with special needs. Teacher profiles included years of experience, prior inclusive training, and experience with ABK. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using means, standard deviations, and group comparisons (t-test or Mann-Whitney test, depending on distribution) to examine differences between PAUD and SD teachers.

The embedded qualitative component included 12 interviews with teachers and key stakeholders, 6 classroom observations, and a review of documentary evidence (e.g., assessment records, daily reports, and activity photos) to explore strategies for aligning perceptions and collaborative roles during the PAUD-SD transition. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, Sugiyono, 2017), including data reduction, coding, and theme development. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of sources, member checking, peer debriefing, audit trails, and researcher reflexivity. This integrated approach allowed a comprehensive understanding of the alignment of teacher perceptions and the coordination mechanisms supporting inclusive education during critical transitional periods.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study on the alignment of perceptions between early childhood education (PAUD) teachers and primary school (SD) teachers in the implementation of inclusive education employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data within a single study and time frame.

3.1. Quantitative Analysis

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Perceptions toward Inclusive Education

No.	Teacher Level	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
1	Early Childhood Education	24	1.40	3.70	2.80	0.52
2	Primary School	6	1.60	3.30	2.85	0.64

The descriptive statistical results of teacher perceptions are presented in Table 1. PAUD teachers (N = 24) obtained a mean score of 2.80 (SD = 0.52), while SD teachers (N = 6) showed a slightly higher mean score of 2.85 (SD = 0.64). These findings indicate that perceptions of inclusive education among both groups are at a moderate level and relatively comparable. The minimum and maximum scores suggest variability in teachers' understanding and attitudes toward inclusive education, although the difference in mean scores between educational levels is minimal. Overall, the results indicate that teachers' perceptions are not yet consistently strong, highlighting the need to strengthen understanding and inclusive practices, particularly during the transition from PAUD to primary school. Teacher perceptions were further analyzed across four domains: knowledge, learning process, experience, and perspective. The descriptive statistics for each domain are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Perceptions by Indicator

Indicator	Teacher Level	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Knowledge	Early Childhood Education	24	1.50	4.00	3.22	0.70
	Primary School	6	2.00	4.00	3.33	0.75
Learning Process	Early Childhood Education	24	1.70	3.70	2.53	0.44
	Primary School	6	2.20	3.50	2.65	0.50
Experience	Early Childhood Education	24	1.30	4.00	2.84	0.57
	Primary School	6	1.30	3.30	2.81	0.78
Perspective	Early Childhood Education	24	1.30	3.90	2.62	0.55
	Primary School	6	1.40	3.10	2.55	0.60

Descriptive statistics reveal similar patterns across PAUD and SD teachers. In the knowledge domain, SD teachers demonstrated a slightly higher mean score (M = 3.33; SD = 0.75) compared to PAUD teachers (M = 3.22; SD = 0.70), indicating a relatively adequate conceptual understanding at both levels. For the learning process domain, SD teachers again showed a marginally higher mean (M = 2.65; SD = 0.50) than PAUD teachers (M = 2.53; SD = 0.44), although both remained within the moderate category. In terms of experience, mean scores were nearly equivalent between PAUD (M = 2.84; SD = 0.57) and SD teachers (M = 2.81; SD = 0.78), suggesting comparable but varied exposure to inclusive education practices. Meanwhile, in the perspective domain, PAUD teachers scored slightly higher (M = 2.62; SD = 0.55) than SD teachers (M = 2.55; SD = 0.60), reflecting moderate openness and awareness toward inclusive education. Collectively, these findings suggest that while differences between PAUD and SD teachers are minimal, none of the perception indicators consistently reached a high level, underscoring the need for sustained capacity building to support inclusive transitions. The frequency distribution of teacher perception levels is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Teacher Perception Levels

Indicator	Early Childhood Education	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Knowledge	Early Childhood Education	24	1.50	4.00	3.22	0.70
	Primary School	6	2.00	4.00	3.33	0.75
Learning Process	Early Childhood Education	24	1.70	3.70	2.53	0.44
	Primary School	6	2.20	3.50	2.65	0.50
Experience	Early Childhood Education	24	1.30	4.00	2.84	0.57
	Primary School	6	1.30	3.30	2.81	0.78
Perspective	Early Childhood Education	24	1.30	3.90	2.62	0.55
	Primary School	6	1.40	3.10	2.55	0.60

The frequency distribution indicates that most PAUD teachers fall within the moderate category (31.25%), whereas a larger proportion of SD teachers are categorized as good (25.00%). Nevertheless, a small proportion of teachers at both levels remain in the low category, indicating inconsistencies in perception. Overall, these findings suggest that while teacher perceptions of inclusive education tend to range from moderate to good, the presence of lower perception levels may hinder the continuity and effectiveness of inclusive practices, particularly during the transition from PAUD to primary school.

3.2. Qualitative Analysis

3.2.1 Perceptions of Early Childhood and Primary School Teachers on Inclusive Education

In general, early childhood (PAUD) and primary school teachers understand inclusive education as an approach that provides equal learning opportunities for all children, including children with special needs (ABK). However, differences exist in the level of understanding, skills, and classroom practices.

"In my opinion, inclusive education is a learning approach that provides opportunities for all children, including children with special needs... without discrimination." (Interview, SDN 3 Wonotirto)

"I know inclusive education is about accepting children in schools, including ABK, but I still don't fully understand how to implement it in PAUD and primary schools." (Interview, SDN 2 Wonotirto)

This aligns with observations showing that primary school teachers tend to have a better understanding of regulations and ABK-related materials compared to PAUD teachers. Inclusive teaching practices in classrooms are still limited, especially in schools without ABK students.

3.2.2 Level of Perceptual Alignment and Factors Influencing Differences

Although there is agreement regarding the goals of inclusive education, perceptual alignment between PAUD and primary school teachers is not always achieved. Differences mainly appear in teaching strategies, methods, and readiness for implementation.

"There is a shared view—we both want all children to learn together... the difference is usually in strategies and teaching approaches." (Interview, SDN 2 Wonotirto)

"Differences arise because primary school teachers usually understand ABK regulations and materials better. The challenge is to bring PAUD teachers' understanding up to the same level." (Interview, SDN 2 Kwadungan)

Factors contributing to these differences include limited cross-level training and socialization, direct experience with ABK students (schools with ABK tend to be more prepared), and differences in PAUD and primary school teachers' knowledge levels.

3.2.3 Strategies Used to Coordinate Inclusive Education Transitions from PAUD to Primary School

Coordination between PAUD and primary school teachers remains informal and sporadic, often limited to brief communications, child development notes, or occasional meetings. No structured cross-level mechanisms or training currently exist.

"Usually, communication is simple, like brief talks or messages when an ABK student is about to enter primary school." (Interview, SDN 2 Kwadungan)

"Effective strategies could include joint cross-level training, standardized written guidelines, and regular communication forums." (Interview, TK Dewi Sartika 1)

Consequences observed from the interviews include: ABK support is often ad hoc, teachers' perceptions of inclusive education are positive but not yet matched by technical competence, and children experience suboptimal transitions due to passive communication.

3.2.4 Roles and Gaps of Teachers, Parents, and Community Actors in Supporting Inclusive

The roles of parents and the community in supporting PAUD-to-primary school transitions remain limited, episodic, and unstructured. Collaborative forums rarely occur, resulting in suboptimal support for inclusive education.

"It is not scheduled, but there was a casual meeting between teachers, parents, and the community... there has been no follow-up." (Interview, TK Dewi Sartika 1)

"Parents mostly just accompany the children to school and leave. Their support during the transition is still minimal." (Interview, SDN 3 Wonotirto)

"We have collaborated with hospitals and inclusive cadres... helping with child support and therapy facilities." (Interview, TK Dewi Sartika 1)

Observed gaps include: lack of cross-level training or socialization, irregular teacher-parent-community collaboration, and varying levels of parental involvement; some are active, while others participate only formally.

3.3 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that both early childhood education (PAUD) and primary school (SD) teachers generally hold positive perceptions of inclusive education, particularly in recognizing the importance of providing equitable learning opportunities for children with special needs (CWSN). This result aligns with prior research suggesting that teachers increasingly endorse inclusive principles at a conceptual level (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). However, the present study reveals that such positive perceptions are not consistently reflected in classroom practices. This discrepancy highlights the well-documented "attitude-practice gap," where favorable beliefs about inclusion are not matched by adequate pedagogical implementation. In this case, teachers demonstrated moderate levels of knowledge and attitudes, yet their ability to translate these into effective instructional strategies remained limited.

One important explanation for this gap lies in the variation of teachers' professional experience and access to training. The results show that primary school teachers tend to possess slightly higher levels of conceptual understanding compared to PAUD teachers, likely due to greater exposure to formal regulations and instructional materials related to CWSN. Nevertheless, both groups exhibited only moderate levels across all domains, suggesting that professional competence in inclusive education is still developing. This finding supports the argument that teacher preparedness is a critical determinant of inclusive practice, and that insufficient training can lead to inconsistent implementation

(Forlin, 2010). In rural contexts, where access to professional development is often limited, these disparities become even more pronounced.

The study also highlights that alignment of perceptions between PAUD and SD teachers is relatively strong at the attitudinal level but weak at the level of practice. While teachers across both levels share a common understanding of the goals of inclusive education, differences emerge in instructional strategies, classroom management approaches, and readiness to accommodate diverse learners. This partial alignment suggests that shared beliefs alone are insufficient to ensure continuity in inclusive practices. Instead, alignment must extend to practical dimensions, including coordinated teaching approaches, consistent use of documentation, and structured communication between educational levels. Without such alignment, transitions for CWSN may become fragmented, potentially affecting their adjustment and learning outcomes.

Several factors contribute to the observed misalignment. First, the lack of systematic cross-level training limits opportunities for teachers to develop shared competencies and common frameworks for inclusion. Second, communication between PAUD and SD teachers is largely informal and sporadic, often relying on brief conversations or unstructured exchanges of information. This absence of formal coordination mechanisms reduces the effectiveness of transition planning and weakens continuity in support for CWSN. Third, contextual constraints in rural areas—such as limited resources, geographical barriers, and social stigma—further hinder collaboration and the implementation of inclusive practices. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of institutional support and collaborative structures in sustaining inclusive education (Sucuoğlu et al., 2014).

Another critical finding relates to the limited role of parents and community stakeholders in supporting inclusive transitions. Although inclusive education requires a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach, the study reveals that parental involvement remains minimal and often passive. Similarly, community engagement is sporadic and lacks clear structure or sustainability. This lack of coordinated support reduces the effectiveness of inclusive practices and places greater responsibility on teachers, who may already face constraints in terms of time, resources, and expertise. Prior research has emphasized that strong home-school partnerships are essential for successful inclusion, particularly during transitional periods (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). The absence of such partnerships in this context represents a significant gap that must be addressed.

Importantly, the findings suggest that improving inclusive education during the PAUD-SD transition requires more than enhancing individual teacher competencies. It necessitates the development of systemic and structured approaches to coordination and collaboration. For instance, the introduction of formal transition protocols—such as standardized handover documentation, scheduled coordination meetings, and clearly defined referral pathways—could help ensure continuity in support for CWSN. In addition, regular cross-level training programs would enable teachers to develop shared understandings and practical skills, thereby strengthening alignment across educational stages. These strategies not only address the technical aspects of inclusive education but also foster a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility.

Despite these contributions, the study's findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The small and uneven sample size, particularly the limited number of primary school teachers, restricts the generalizability of the results. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as teachers may present socially desirable responses rather than accurately reflecting their practices. The absence of direct measures of children's outcomes further limits the ability to assess the actual impact of teacher perceptions on inclusive education. Nevertheless, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data provides a comprehensive understanding of the issue and offers valuable insights for future research and practice.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of moving beyond positive perceptions toward the development of consistent and aligned inclusive practices across educational levels. While teachers demonstrate a shared commitment to inclusion, significant gaps remain in implementation,

coordination, and stakeholder involvement. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates professional development, structured collaboration, and community engagement. Such efforts are essential for ensuring that inclusive education is not only a policy aspiration but a practical reality for all children, particularly those with special needs.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, most PAUD and primary school teachers hold positive perceptions of inclusive education and understand the importance of providing equal learning opportunities for all children, including children with special needs (CWSN). However, classroom practices remain weak due to differences in experience, access to training, technical competence, and limited resources, particularly in rural contexts. Perception alignment between PAUD and primary school teachers is moderate at the attitudinal level but weak in practice, influenced by uneven cross-level training, informal coordination, and contextual constraints. Existing transition strategies—such as coordination meetings, child development notes, and cross-level training—are limited and unstructured, while parent and community involvement remains minimal. Therefore, recommended to include handover notes, regular coordination meetings, collaborative cross-level training, referral pathways, and a documentation and monitoring system to ensure continuity of inclusive practices and a comprehensive understanding of children's needs, especially for CWSN.

Acknowledgments: The authors extend their deepest gratitude to all early childhood education (PAUD) and elementary school teacher respondents who participated in this study, as well as to the schools, communities, and parents who provided support during the data collection process. Thank you to the supervisors, co-researchers, and educational institutions that provided guidance, advice, and facilities for completing this research.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in this research, whether financial, personal, or institutional, that could affect the objectivity of the research results or data interpretation. This research was conducted independently and based on empirical data without any significant external influence.

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