



Teachers' Perceptions of the Identification Process and Implementation of Individualized Education Programs for Special Needs Students in Elementary Schools

Hanrezi Dhanian Hasnin, Rasmitadila, Annisa Mawardini, Nabila Kamaliah,
Syahara Putri Kholifah

Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar, Fakultas Agama Islam dan Pendidikan Guru
Universitas Djuanda
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Correspondence:

(Hanrezi Dhanian)

(081280396860)

(hanrezidhanian@unida.ac.id)

Abstract: Identifying and developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are essential steps in providing appropriate educational services for students with special needs. However, in practice, not all schools that enroll students with special needs possess the knowledge or ability to identify these needs and create effective IEPs. Consequently, educational services for these students are often considered less than optimal. This study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of students with special needs and the implementation of identification and IEP processes in schools. The participants were teachers at SDN Rangka Mekar, Bogor City, a school that has not been officially designated as inclusive but has enrolled students with special needs. The results indicated that while most teachers recognized the importance of inclusive and specialized educational approaches, only a few had sufficient knowledge regarding student needs assessment and the development of IEPs. Data showed that 90% of teachers acknowledged the necessity of differentiated education to optimize student potential. However, only 63% understood the concept of needs identification, 36% were familiar with IEPs, and none had experience creating an IEP for a student. Teachers' perceptions of students with special needs varied, influenced by their individual levels of knowledge and experience. Nonetheless, teachers expressed optimism that, with the right strategies, students with special needs could develop successfully. This study highlights the urgent need for additional training and resources to strengthen teachers' competencies in supporting students with special needs, thereby fostering a more inclusive learning environment.



INTRODUCTION

Teachers play a crucial role in transferring knowledge and instilling values in students through education and teaching. To fulfill this role effectively, teachers must possess adequate competencies. These competencies are developed through specific educational processes that demonstrate teachers' abilities and skills in managing learning.

Competence encompasses various aspects that together define teacher professionalism, including professional knowledge, teaching techniques, classroom management, collaboration in learning, and the assessment and evaluation of learning outcomes. More broadly, teacher competence represents a combination of personal, scientific, technological, social, and spiritual abilities. These dimensions collectively form the standard of professional competence, covering mastery of subject matter, understanding of student characteristics, the ability to manage educational learning, and engagement in personal and professional development.

Teacher competence becomes even more critical in the context of inclusive education, where all students—including those with special needs—are entitled to quality educational services. In inclusive schools, teachers are expected to manage diverse classrooms and apply approaches tailored to each student's needs. Arifin (2018) emphasized that pedagogical competence involves managing effective learning, which includes assessing students' needs and designing appropriate instructional plans. A key manifestation of this competence is the ability to identify student needs and develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that addresses each student's characteristics, abilities, and learning requirements.

Identification serves as an initial stage of assessment aimed at recognizing students facing physical, intellectual, or socio-emotional barriers. Through this process, students who require specialized educational services can be appropriately identified and supported through inclusive programs designed to meet their

unique needs. Thus, teachers must possess the necessary competencies to effectively conduct identification and develop IEPs.

The implementation of IEPs has been shown to positively impact students' learning abilities. Tomlinson (2014) asserts that quality education must accommodate the specialized needs of each student. IEPs allow for learning adjustments that enable students to learn in ways most suited to them, thereby enhancing engagement, improving learning outcomes, reducing learning anxiety, and boosting student self-confidence. However, in practice, many teachers still lack an understanding of the processes involved in identifying needs and developing IEPs. Therefore, there is a pressing need to improve teachers' knowledge and skills in this area. Before this can be effectively addressed, it is essential for teachers to adopt a positive attitude toward students with special needs.

According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), teachers' attitudes toward students with special needs significantly influence how they plan and implement teaching. Teachers who

have positive perceptions and a good understanding of these students' needs are better equipped to design appropriate and effective learning strategies. Positive perceptions also encourage greater motivation for self-development and professionalism. Teachers who understand the characteristics of students with special needs are more capable of identifying their strengths and weaknesses, which is crucial for developing effective individualized learning plans. Additionally, teachers' attitudes and perceptions directly impact their behavior and acceptance of students (Newton et al., 2014).

Overall, a positive and open perception of students with special needs is essential for improving teachers' teaching competencies and creating more effective learning experiences. Research indicates that teachers' perceptions are a critical factor in the success of inclusive education programs, as teachers play a central role in integrating students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. Therefore, understanding teachers' perceptions regarding identification and IEP development is

key to enhancing their competencies in teaching students with special needs at the elementary school level.

METHOD

The method employed in this study is qualitative, utilizing a case study approach to explore phenomena through various data sources. A case study is an empirical investigation that examines a phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple data collection methods, as it involves an in-depth study of a specific issue (Priya, 2021). Furthermore, this study adopts an explanatory approach, which seeks to identify causal factors that can explain a particular phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Data collection techniques included interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and the analysis of supporting documents.

This research focuses on teachers' perceptions regarding the identification of students' needs and the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) at SDN Rangga Mekar. Although this school has not officially been designated as an inclusive school, it has already admitted students with special needs. Another reason for selecting SDN

Rangga Mekar is that it was chosen as one of the target schools for the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture's "Teaching Campus" program in 2023, further highlighting the relevance of studying inclusive practices within this context.

The process of data analysis involved systematically organizing and reviewing field notes, interview transcripts, observation records, and supporting documents to gain a deeper understanding of the cases studied. The collected data were processed and analyzed qualitatively to produce a clear and accessible presentation of the findings. The steps for qualitative data analysis followed the procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), as illustrated in Figure 1.

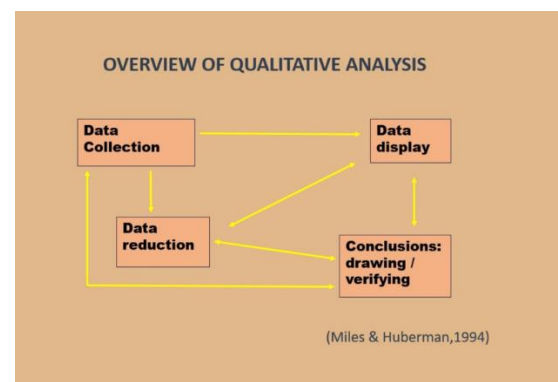


Figure 1 Overview of qualitative analysis

RESULT & DISCUSSION

RESULT

Based on observation results, SDN Rangga Mekar has approximately 15 teachers. As a public school, it accepts students with special needs; however, it has not been specifically prepared as an inclusive school. Consequently, when students with special needs were admitted, the school initially felt unprepared to provide appropriate support. Observations identified two students diagnosed with special needs in grades 3 and 4. In addition, several students across different classes exhibited relatively low reading comprehension levels or faced difficulties in achieving learning targets promptly. These learning challenges are likely influenced by internal factors, particularly differences in students' cognitive abilities compared to their peers.

To explore teachers' perceptions of students with special needs, five key themes emerged:

1. Teachers' Perceptions of Students with Special Needs. All teachers demonstrated an understanding of the term "special needs students," recognizing them

as students who require particular support. Most teachers believed that there were students with special needs among their pupils, although they were often unsure of the specific types of special needs involved. Teachers generally based their assessments on observed behaviors, such as difficulties in understanding lessons despite repeated instruction or an inability to remain seated, which impeded learning. Furthermore, all teachers agreed that students with special needs could develop well if provided with learning tailored to their abilities. Notably, 90% of teachers believed that students with special needs required different educational approaches to optimize their potential, while only 10% believed no special education was necessary.

2. Teachers' Perceptions of the Identification and Creation of IEPs. Most teachers recognized the importance of providing differentiated education to support the development of students with special needs. However, only 63% were familiar with the concept of

identification. For instance, Mrs. A defined identification as "recognizing characteristics that appear in children with special needs," while Mrs. B described it as "assessing whether someone belongs to the special needs category." Despite this awareness, only about 27% of teachers reported having performed identification in practice. Furthermore, while 36% of teachers knew about Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), none had experience in creating one, mainly due to a lack of knowledge on how to design an IEP.

3. Teachers' Perceptions of Challenges in Teaching Students with Special Needs.

Teachers reported varying perceptions of the challenges involved. Some viewed teaching students with special needs as a burden due to the additional attention required. Others saw it as a challenge, citing their limited knowledge and skills in special education. Some teachers expressed feelings of sadness when students struggled to follow lessons, while

others considered teaching students with special needs as extra work requiring greater patience and dedication. These varied perceptions were influenced by differences in teachers' prior knowledge and experiences with inclusive education.

4. Teachers' Perceptions of the Learning Success of Students with Special Needs.

Despite the challenges, teachers expressed strong optimism and hope for the success of students with special needs. They aspired for these students to develop according to their individual capabilities, improve socially and academically, and achieve better outcomes compared to when they first entered school. Teachers also emphasized that the success of special needs students largely depends on the teacher's ability to manage learning in a way that is tailored to the students' characteristics and needs. Even if cognitive challenges remain, teachers believed that students could still develop life skills, learn to socialize, and achieve a level of

independence that would benefit them in future societal participation.

5. Teachers' Perceptions of the Need for Increased Knowledge and Skills. Teachers expressed a strong desire for appropriate training to enhance their competencies in supporting students with special needs. Given the current policy prohibiting schools from rejecting any student, regardless of their condition, teachers acknowledged the urgent need for improved knowledge, skills, and better facilities and infrastructure. At present, the learning process is limited to teachers' existing knowledge, which often proves ineffective for students with special needs. Without proper identification and individualized learning programs, students are often expected to participate in standard learning processes designed for general students, resulting in suboptimal outcomes. Teachers emphasized the importance of creating individualized learning plans based on comprehensive identification of students' abilities and needs to truly support the

learning and development of students with special needs.

DISCUSSION

Teachers' perceptions of students with special needs are generally positive. Most teachers are aware of the presence of these students in their classrooms, even though they may not yet fully identify the specific types of needs. This initial awareness indicates strong pedagogical instincts and a growing understanding of student diversity. As McLeskey and Waldron (2011) point out, recognizing student needs is a critical first step in offering meaningful support. In this regard, teachers must be able to recognize early symptoms—such as difficulty understanding lessons or trouble concentrating—as potential indicators of special needs.

Equally important is the belief among teachers that students with special needs can grow and succeed when taught with the right approach. This belief underpins inclusive education, which is best supported through differentiated instruction, as emphasized by Tomlinson (2014). The fact that 90% of teachers believe in the importance of differentiated

instruction shows a collective commitment to inclusive education, though the remaining 10% may reflect a gap in training or awareness.

However, despite this awareness, there is a significant gap between theory and practice, particularly in the areas of identification and the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). While many teachers acknowledge the importance of individualized approaches, only 63% are familiar with the concept of identification, and just 27% have conducted identification in practice. Fuchs and Fuchs (2001) underscore that accurate identification is essential for delivering appropriate interventions. Yet, only 36% of teachers are aware of IEPs, and none have ever developed one—highlighting an urgent need for targeted professional development in inclusive education.

Teachers also have varied perceptions regarding the challenges of teaching students with special needs. Some feel burdened by the additional attention required, echoing Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) findings that teachers can feel overwhelmed without

adequate support. Others view it as a challenge requiring specialized strategies, while some feel emotionally affected when students struggle to keep up. This empathy—an essential component of inclusive teaching—is crucial, as De Klerk & De Klerk (2018) argue that empathy is foundational for successful classroom inclusion. Teachers' recognition that teaching students with special needs requires extra patience and emotional commitment is supported by Muna et al. (2021), who note that this work demands additional effort. Such differences in perception are often shaped by prior experience and training, with more experienced teachers generally demonstrating more optimistic views (Florian & Linklater, 2010).

In relation to IEPs, research shows that effective implementation requires not only legal compliance but also strategic planning and cross-disciplinary collaboration. The IEP, according to Rotter (2014) and Yell & Drasgow (2007), serves as both a legal document and a practical roadmap for individualized instruction. Furthermore,

Bray and Russell (2016, 2018) highlight the importance of IEP meetings as collaborative spaces where general and special education teachers, along with parents, align institutional expectations with actual student needs. These meetings balance structure with educator autonomy, leading to more responsive instructional planning.

From the perspective of teacher preparedness, Razalli et al. (2021) and Abdullah et al. (2021) emphasize that successful IEP implementation depends on teacher training and the ability to collaborate. Razalli et al. point out that readiness among special education teachers is essential for integrating IEPs effectively, while Abdullah et al. stress the importance of early identification, targeted objectives, and evidence-based interventions. The involvement of general education teachers, as discussed by Menlove et al. (2001), ensures that IEPs are grounded in classroom realities. Murphy (2018) further advocates for leadership that promotes a culture of inclusion to sustain such collaboration. In the Indonesian context, Ummah et al. (2024) note the significance of environmental systems in facilitating

holistic student identification prior to IEP development.

Woods et al. (2023) also introduce a model for collecting and analyzing IEP data, which can be used to monitor program effectiveness and inform ongoing improvements. Rather than focusing solely on administrative compliance, this approach emphasizes continuous quality enhancement. Together, these studies reinforce that effective IEP implementation is a holistic process integrating legal mandates, educational strategies, and collaborative evaluation.

Therefore, enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills is critical to building an inclusive and effective learning environment. The current policy that prevents schools from rejecting any students adds pressure on teachers to accommodate diverse learners, often without sufficient preparation. Without proper training and resources, instruction may fail to meet students' needs (Florian & Linklater, 2010). Inadequate identification can result in mismatches between teaching methods and individual learning profiles. Effective identification is necessary for

understanding student strengths and weaknesses, which in turn supports the development of targeted IEPs. As Tomlinson (2014) emphasizes, without differentiated instruction, students with special needs risk falling behind.

Thus, it is imperative for educational institutions to invest in adequate infrastructure, support systems, and teacher training programs. With increased competence, teachers will be better equipped to identify and respond to individual needs, ensuring more inclusive and effective teaching practices. Mastropieri et al. (2006) assert that effective inclusion requires continuous professional development and institutional support. Ultimately, improving teacher capacity is essential not only for enhancing instructional quality but also for ensuring that every student—regardless of ability—receives an education that aligns with their unique potential.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while teachers generally hold positive perceptions toward students with special needs and recognize the importance of inclusive education, significant gaps remain

between awareness and practice. Limited knowledge about identification processes and the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) hinders the provision of appropriate support. The diversity in teacher perceptions—ranging from feeling burdened to showing empathy—highlights the critical role of training, experience, and institutional support in shaping inclusive teaching attitudes. Research consistently underscores that successful inclusion relies on teacher preparedness, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and a strong understanding of students' individual needs.

Therefore, comprehensive and continuous professional development, backed by adequate infrastructure and leadership commitment, is essential to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Only through these efforts can inclusive education be truly realized, ensuring that all students, including those with special needs, receive equitable and effective learning opportunities.

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