

Inclusive Education in the Merdeka Belajar Era: Lessons from Focus Group Discussions

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ABSTRACT: Inclusive education ensures equal learning opportunities for all students, including those with special needs, aligning with the goals of the Merdeka Belajar Program. This study explores the implementation of inclusive education in high schools in Kendari City, focusing on challenges and the critical role of school principals, as well as its impact on students with special needs. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with school principals, teachers, and stakeholders. Participants were selected based on their involvement in inclusive education, and thematic analysis was conducted to identify key findings. The study highlights three main findings. First, while significant progress has been made in implementing inclusive education, challenges remain, such as limited accessibility and teaching aids. Second, school principals play a key role by formulating strategic policies, supporting teacher development, and fostering collaboration. Third, inclusive education has positively impacted students with special needs, improving their motivation, confidence, and academic performance. However, bullying persists as a major issue requiring joint efforts from schools, parents, and communities. In conclusion, inclusive education under the Merdeka Belajar Program has enhanced learning for students with special needs. To ensure its sustainability, this study recommends strengthening teacher training, improving infrastructure, and promoting community involvement to address remaining challenges.

Keywords: Focus Group Discussions, Inclusive Education, Merdeka Belajar Program, School Principal, Students with Special Needs.

ABSTRAK: Pendidikan inklusif memastikan kesempatan belajar yang setara bagi semua siswa, termasuk mereka yang berkebutuhan khusus, sejalan dengan tujuan Program Merdeka Belajar. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi implementasi pendidikan inklusif di SMA Kota Kendari, dengan fokus pada tantangan, peran penting kepala sekolah, serta dampaknya terhadap siswa berkebutuhan khusus. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui Focus Group Discussions (FGD) dengan kepala sekolah, guru, dan pemangku kepentingan lainnya. Partisipan dipilih berdasarkan keterlibatan mereka dalam pendidikan inklusif, dan analisis tematik dilakukan untuk mengidentifikasi temuan utama. Studi ini mengungkap tiga temuan utama. Pertama, meskipun implementasi pendidikan inklusif menunjukkan kemajuan signifikan, tantangan seperti keterbatasan fasilitas aksesibilitas dan alat bantu belajar masih ada. Kedua, kepala sekolah memiliki peran penting melalui kebijakan strategis, pengembangan guru, dan kolaborasi antar pihak. Ketiga, pendidikan inklusif berdampak positif pada siswa berkebutuhan khusus, meningkatkan motivasi, kepercayaan diri, dan prestasi akademik mereka. Namun, masalah bullying tetap menjadi tantangan yang membutuhkan upaya bersama antara sekolah, orang tua, dan masyarakat. Sebagai

kesimpulan, pendidikan inklusif dalam Program Merdeka Belajar telah meningkatkan kualitas belajar siswa berkebutuhan khusus. Untuk keberlanjutan program ini, penelitian ini merekomendasikan penguatan pelatihan guru, perbaikan infrastruktur, dan peningkatan keterlibatan masyarakat untuk mengatasi tantangan yang ada.

Kata Kunci: Focus Group Discussion, Kepala Sekolah, Pendidikan Inklusi, Program Merdeka Belajar, Siswa Berkebutuhan Khusus.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is essentially an educational approach that emphasizes diversity and equity for all students, regardless of their backgrounds and conditions (Ainscow, 2016). This concept aims to provide equal opportunities for all students to receive quality education, including those with special needs. In inclusive education, students with special needs are not only accepted into the school environment but are also supported to reach their full potential through a friendly, open, and individualized approach (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). Inclusive education aligns with the spirit of the Merdeka Belajar Program, which emphasizes freedom and flexibility in the learning process, enabling each student to develop effectively and efficiently (Sherly et al., 2021). In this context, incorporating the principles of inclusive education into the Merdeka Belajar Program is a strategic step to ensure that all students, including those with special needs, can have meaningful learning experiences.

The implementation of inclusive education has become a primary concern in global education systems (Acedo et al., 2009; Ydo, 2020). According to Roldán et al., (2021), inclusive education involves the acceptance and recognition that every individual has unique learning needs. Therefore, the learning environment must be designed to ensure all students feel welcomed and valued (El-Sabagh, 2021). This approach includes individualized and integrative learning strategies, enabling teachers to understand and meet the needs of each student. UNESCO also highlights the importance of inclusive education in achieving sustainable development goals (Rambla & Langthaler, 2016). Inclusive education not only enhances access to education but also improves the quality of learning, especially for vulnerable groups such as students with special needs (Krämer et al., 2021).

In Indonesia, legal and policy frameworks have been established to support the implementation of inclusive education (Hata et al., 2021a). Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System emphasizes the importance of equity and equality in education (Pelawi & Is, 2021). Additionally, Ministerial Regulation Number 70 of 2009 governs inclusive education for students with disabilities as well as those with extraordinary intelligence and special talents (Warminda et al., 2022). This demonstrates the government's commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable education system for all students. However, despite a strong legal foundation, the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia still faces various challenges. Several studies indicate that the lack of infrastructure support, resources, and teacher training are the main obstacles to effectively implementing inclusive education

(Kurniawati, 2021). Teachers often lack sufficient knowledge or skills to address the special needs of students (Fadilah et al., 2022), while the physical facilities in schools are not yet fully accessible for students with disabilities (Hata et al., 2021b). Moreover, the curriculum used is often insufficiently flexible to accommodate the learning needs of students with special needs (Riswari et al., 2022).

Within the framework of the Merdeka Belajar Program, inclusive education offers significant opportunities to improve the quality and accessibility of education. The program allows students to learn according to their interests, talents, and needs. The Directorate General of Primary and Secondary Education of the Ministry of Education and Culture stated that the Merdeka Belajar Program can be an effective tool to support educational inclusion, provided that the learning environment and teaching strategies are designed to be inclusive and welcoming to diversity (Purwanti, 2021). This approach can help develop students' social and emotional skills, enrich their learning experiences, and prepare them for life in a diverse society. As a secondary education level, high schools play a crucial role in implementing inclusive education. In high schools, students with diverse needs and learning characteristics must be adequately served to ensure they receive quality and equitable education. The implementation of inclusive education in high schools requires not only the commitment of principals and teachers but also support from local governments, parents, and the community.

Meanwhile, Kendari City as the capital of Southeast Sulawesi Province, holds significant potential to become a model for implementing inclusive education in eastern Indonesia. With its diverse social and cultural background, high schools in Kendari face both challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive education. A study by Jasiah et al., (2024) shows that the implementation of inclusive education within the Merdeka Belajar Program at one high school in Indonesia has provided positive benefits for students with special needs. These students felt more accepted, motivated to learn, and experienced improvements in academic abilities. However, the study also highlights several challenges, such as a lack of teacher training, limited resources, and insufficient support from the school. In this context, the role of the school principal is critical in ensuring the success of inclusive education. As leaders, principals must motivate teachers and staff to support educational inclusion, allocate resources effectively, and create a school culture that is welcoming to diversity. Principals also need to establish partnerships with local governments and relevant institutions to secure the necessary support.

This study aims to evaluate the implementation of inclusive education within the Merdeka Belajar Program in high schools across Kendari City. The research focuses on how inclusive education is implemented, the challenges faced, the role of principals in supporting educational inclusion, and the impact of this implementation on the learning quality of students with special needs. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of policies and practices for inclusive education in Indonesia. Furthermore, this research aims to provide practical

recommendations for school principals, teachers, and local governments to support the more effective implementation of inclusive education. In doing so, inclusive education can become an integral part of the Merdeka Belajar Program, ensuring that all students, including those with special needs, benefit from quality and inclusive education.

METHODS

Participants and Questions Guide

The implementation of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) on inclusive education in high schools across Kendari City involved various participants (Table 1) from diverse backgrounds to gain comprehensive perspectives (Krueger, 2014; Morgan et al., 1998).

Table 1. Participant of FGD and Questions Guide

| Participant | Contribution | Questions Guide |
|---|--|--|
| 1. The Principals of Public Senior High School 1 to 5 Kendari | Focus on internal policies, planning, and the implementation of inclusive education in each school. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is the inclusive education policy implemented in your school? 2. What are the biggest challenges faced in planning and implementing inclusive education? 3. How do you assess the support from internal parties (teachers, students) and external parties (parents, community) for inclusive education? 4. What steps have been taken to facilitate the integration of students with special needs in the school? 5. How is the process of training or improving teachers' competencies in managing inclusive classrooms? |
| 2. Special Needs Assistant Teachers and Subject Teachers. | Share their views on the delivery of instructional material and the challenges of integrating inclusive students in regular classes. | <p>Special Needs Assistant Teachers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the biggest challenge you face in supporting students with special needs? 2. How do you adapt teaching methods for students with various types of special needs? 3. What support has been most helpful in assisting students with special needs at your school? 4. Are there any challenges in collaborating with subject teachers, and what solutions have been implemented? 5. What are your hopes for the development of inclusive education at the school? <p>Subject Teachers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What has been your experience in integrating students with special needs into learning in regular classrooms? 2. What challenges do you face in teaching students with special needs? 3. What form of support do you need to improve the inclusive learning process in your classroom? 4. Has the school provided any training or assistance to support inclusive teaching? 5. How do you assess the school's readiness to implement inclusive education? |

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| 3. Students with special needs | Students with visual impairments, wheelchair users, and students with hearing disabilities provide valuable insights into their direct experiences in participating in inclusive learning, including the support they receive and the barriers they face. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What has been your experience in participating in learning in an inclusive classroom? 2. What challenges do you face during the teaching and learning process at school? 3. What kind of support do you expect to make your learning process easier? 4. How do you feel about your interactions with classmates and teachers in the inclusive classroom? 5. What are your hopes for the development of inclusive education at the school? |
| 4. Parents of students | Share their perceptions, support, and hopes regarding the implementation of inclusive education. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you assess the implementation of inclusive education at your child's school? 2. What are your expectations from the school in supporting the education of children with special needs? 3. How do you see the role of parents in supporting inclusive education? 4. What challenges or obstacles do you face as a parent in supporting your child's inclusive education? 5. How is the communication between parents and the school regarding the child's progress in inclusive learning? |
| 5. Psychologist | Provide input on issues related to students' emotional well-being and efforts to address bullying. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you assess the emotional well-being of students with special needs at the school? 2. What is the role of the school psychologist in supporting the implementation of inclusive education? 3. How do you handle bullying issues that may occur among students with special needs? 4. What is the biggest challenge in ensuring the emotional well-being of inclusive students at the school? 5. What recommendations do you have for improving psychological support for students with special needs? |
| 6. School committee | Focus on the support of facilities and the role of the community in the implementation of the inclusive program. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does the school committee play a role in supporting inclusive education at the school? 2. What challenges does the school committee face in providing facilities for inclusive education? 3. How does the school committee collaborate with the school and the community in supporting inclusive education? |

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| | | 4. What type of support do you feel is needed to improve the quality of inclusive education at the school? |
| 7. The Education Office of Kendari City | A representative from the Education Office of Kendari City in the field of inclusive education provides insights on government policies, supervision, and support for inclusive education in senior high schools. | 1. How does the Education Office of Kendari City support the implementation of inclusive education in senior high schools across Kendari? 2. What policies are in place regarding inclusive education at the city level? 3. How is supervision and evaluation of the inclusive education program in senior high schools conducted? 4. What efforts have been made to improve the quality of inclusive education in schools? 5. What steps will be taken to further support inclusive education in the future? |
| 8. NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) | Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the field of inclusive education or disability rights play a role in advocacy and external support for inclusive programs. | 1. What role do NGOs play in supporting inclusive education in Kendari City? 2. How do NGOs advocate for the rights of students with special needs in the context of inclusive education? 3. What challenges do NGOs face in advocating for policy or practice changes related to inclusive education? 4. How do NGOs collaborate with schools and the government to improve inclusive education? 5. What recommendations do you have for improving the quality of inclusive education through collaboration between NGOs and the government? |

Table 2. Summary of Key Findings

| Themes | Sub-themes | Summary |
|--|--|---|
| Implementation of Inclusive Education in the Merdeka Belajar Program | Admission of Students with Special Needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The process of admitting students with special needs into regular classes. - Case study on several senior high schools (for example, Public Senior High School 1 & 2 Kendari). |
| | Facilities and Learning Aids | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provision of assistive devices such as wheelchairs, screen readers, and Braille books. - Infrastructure challenges that exist. |
| | Inclusive New Student Admission Policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenges in admitting students with special needs. - Lack of understanding regarding inclusive PPDB policies. |
| The Impact of Inclusive Education | Improvement of Academic Abilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improvement of academic abilities of students with special needs. - Case study at Public Senior High School 1 & 2 Kendari, and others. |

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| on the Quality of Learning | Emotional Well-being of Students with Special Needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The impact of inclusive education on students' emotional well-being. - The influence of teacher training in supporting inclusive learning. |
| | Bullying of Inclusive Students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenges of bullying in the school environment. - School efforts in addressing bullying through anti-bullying policies. |
| Challenges in the Implementation of Inclusive Education | Inadequate Infrastructure | Limitations of facilities and assistive devices for students with special needs. |
| | Limited Number of Trained Educators | Lack of training for teachers in inclusive education. |
| | Understanding of Parents and the Community | Barriers in society's acceptance of inclusive education. |
| | Bullying Issues | Challenges and efforts to address bullying against inclusive students. |
| The Role of School Principals in the Implementation of Inclusive Education | Leadership in Planning Learning Facilities and Assistive Devices | Principal's initiatives in providing facilities for students with special needs. |
| | Policy Arrangements that Promote the Creation of an Inclusive Environment in Schools | Policies that Support Inclusive Education |
| | Teacher Training for Inclusive Education | Efforts of school principals in ensuring teachers receive appropriate training. |
| | Collaboration with Parents and the Community | Communication between school principals, parents, and the community to enhance understanding of inclusive education. |
| Inclusive Policies and Programs that Support Implementation | Internal School Policies | Internal policies that support inclusive education (e.g., providing extra time during exams). |
| | Training Programs and Workshops | Training programs for teachers and workshops for parents and the community. |
| | Anti-Bullying Program | Implementation of anti-bullying programs and bullying reduction efforts. |

Procedures

The procedure in conducting the FGD on inclusive education in high schools across Kendari City began with the initial preparation stage, during which the theme and objectives of the FGD were determined, focusing on discussing policies, challenges, and experiences related to the implementation of inclusive education. Participants were selected by inviting school principals, special education teachers (GPK), subject teachers, students with special needs, parents, school psychologists, school committees, the Kendari City Education Office, and relevant non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The schedule and venue for the FGD were arranged, ensuring adequate facilities and logistical preparations, such as stationery and documentation tools.

During the implementation stage, the FGD commenced with an opening by the moderator, who explained the objectives and rules of the discussion, followed by the introduction of the topics to be addressed. The discussion was organized by dividing topics among participant groups, such as inclusive education policies in schools, teachers' and students' experiences in inclusive learning, and parental and community support. The moderator ensured that all participants had the opportunity to share their perspectives through open-ended questions and managed the time allocation for each topic effectively.

After the discussion concluded, the moderator summarized the key points and gathered recommendations from each participant group regarding the challenges faced in inclusive education. Formulating these recommendations became a crucial part of the discussion's conclusions, which were followed by an expression of gratitude to the participants and information about subsequent follow-up actions. The final stage involved documentation and reporting, where all discussion outcomes were recorded, and a report was prepared to be shared with all participants and relevant stakeholders. This was aimed at ensuring that the recommendations could be implemented to improve inclusive education programs in Kendari City.

Data Analysis Procedure

The first step in analysing data from the FGD was to transcribe the FGD results verbatim from the discussion recordings to ensure that every participant's opinion and response were clearly documented. Once transcription was complete, the collected data were organized by themes or topics discussed (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023), such as challenges, support, policies, and experiences.

The next process was coding, where relevant data segments were labelled according to the issues discussed, such as "challenges in implementing inclusive education" or "support from parents." After coding, the data were further grouped into broader categories based on emerging themes, such as policies, support, or challenges, to identify patterns. Subsequently, thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes emerging from the data, such as inclusive education policies, student experiences, and challenges in implementing inclusive education.

These main themes were then analysed in greater depth by developing more specific sub-themes if necessary and examining relationships between different themes. Comparative analysis between participant groups was also conducted to identify differences and similarities in their perspectives. For example, whether the challenges faced by school principals differed from those experienced by special education teachers or parents. In this analysis, social, cultural, and policy factors were also examined to assess their influence on the implementation of inclusive education.

Following this, conclusions were drawn based on the analysis, summarizing the key findings regarding supporting and inhibiting factors for the implementation of inclusive education in high schools across Kendari City. These conclusions provided an overview of successful policies, challenges encountered, and recommendations for improvement. Based on the analysis results, the researcher formulated recommendations regarding policies that need improvement, training required for teachers, and enhanced support from various stakeholders to advance inclusive education development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings, the main themes (Table 2) that emerged provide a clear structure for discussing the topics within the study while also facilitating readers' understanding of the key aspects of implementing inclusive education in the Merdeka Belajar Program at high schools across Kendari City.

Implementation of Inclusive Education in the Merdeka Belajar Program

The implementation of inclusive education within the Merdeka Belajar Program at senior high schools across Kendari City has demonstrated positive efforts, despite facing various challenges. According to information from school principals and feedback from participants of a recent FGD, the inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms has been successfully carried out at most schools. For example, at Public Senior High School 1 Kendari, students with visual impairments are able to participate in lessons using assistive technology like screen readers. However, one FGD participant noted that while screen readers are available, their functionality is sometimes hampered by outdated software, which can limit students' learning experiences. At Public Senior High School 2 Kendari, ramps provide better accessibility for wheelchair users, yet some participants observed that certain areas of the school, such as the science labs and library, remain inaccessible.

Despite progress, challenges persist, particularly regarding supporting infrastructure and learning tools. At Public Senior High School 3 Kendari, shortages of adequate resources, such as Braille books, make it difficult to deliver lessons optimally. One teacher noted during the FGD that "*we often have to print Braille materials ourselves due to the lack of supplies*", which delays lesson planning. Additionally, the inclusive student admission policy often faces obstacles due to a lack of understanding of how to implement it effectively. This was highlighted by the

principal of Public Senior High School 4 Kendari, who expressed difficulties in admitting students with special needs because *"there is no detailed technical guidance available for inclusive admissions"*.

Nevertheless, the role of the school principal remains pivotal in ensuring the smooth implementation of inclusive education. At Public Senior High School 5 Kendari, for instance, the principal actively sends teachers for training on inclusive education and formulates internal policies that support equal access for students with special needs. FGD participants commended these efforts, noting that *"continuous professional development helps teachers feel more confident in handling diverse student needs"*. Similarly, at Public Senior High School 1 Kendari, the principal initiated policies to facilitate the provision of learning tools and classroom adjustments, such as rearranging seating for students with physical disabilities to ensure better engagement during lessons. However, participants also stressed the importance of strengthening collaboration between schools, parents, and the local government to overcome these challenges. For instance, one parent representative shared during the FGD that *"families often feel left out in planning processes, which can lead to unmet student needs"*. Others emphasized the need for local authorities to allocate budgets specifically for inclusive education infrastructure.

Despite the ongoing challenges, the consistent support from school principals in preparing human resources and creating inclusive environments has been a key factor in the success of implementing inclusive education under the Merdeka Belajar Program. These efforts, when combined with stronger partnerships and enhanced policy guidance, can further advance inclusive practices in Kendari City.

Impact of the Implementation of Inclusive Education on the Quality of Learning for Students with Special Needs

The implementation of inclusive education within the Merdeka Belajar Program has had a significant impact on the quality of learning for students with special needs at senior high schools in Kendari City. Improvements are evident not only in academic abilities but also in the emotional well-being of these students. Statements from school principals, teachers, and insights gathered during a recent FGD confirm that inclusive education has positively influenced learning outcomes and engagement.

At Public Senior High School 1 Kendari, teachers trained in inclusive education reported a deeper understanding of how to adapt teaching methods to meet the needs of students with special needs. This has fostered greater participation and enthusiasm in classrooms. A teacher shared during the FGD, *"Students with visual impairments now feel confident to raise questions and contribute to discussions because the teaching approach is more accommodating"*. Similarly, at Public Senior High School 2 Kendari, students with visual impairments expressed increased motivation due to the availability of assistive technology, such as screen readers. One

student noted, *"These tools make complex subjects like mathematics easier to understand, and they've boosted my confidence in keeping up with the lessons"*.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain, particularly in addressing **bullying against inclusive students**. At Public Senior High School 3 Kendari, some students reported experiencing bullying from peers, resulting in a noticeable decline in their self-confidence. FGD participants pointed out that the root of such behavior often lies in a lack of awareness about inclusive education among regular students. A parent shared, *"The constant teasing my child faces at school has made them reluctant to attend, which deeply affects their emotional well-being"*.

Teachers at Public Senior High School 4 Kendari highlighted that, while inclusive education policies exist, their implementation requires improvement. One teacher remarked, *"We need specialized training to handle bullying incidents effectively and foster a culture of respect in schools"*. To combat bullying, some schools have taken proactive measures. At Public Senior High School 5 Kendari, anti-bullying programs for students and teachers have reduced incidents significantly. Workshops led by school psychologists have fostered empathy and encouraged better peer relationships.

Another noteworthy impact is **the boost in self-confidence and motivation** among students with special needs. At Public Senior High School 2 Kendari, students feel empowered to select learning methods that match their individual preferences. For example, a hearing-impaired student at SMA Negeri 1 Kendari reported improved lesson comprehension with the help of a sign language interpreter. Similarly, students at Public Senior High School 4 Kendari thrived in collaborative class projects tailored to their interests, such as visual arts and scientific experiments, which allowed them to demonstrate their abilities.

The flexible curriculum of the Merdeka Belajar Program has also been instrumental in supporting inclusive education. Principals and teachers emphasized that the program's adaptability enables schools to customize learning plans for students with special needs, allowing them to progress at their own pace while achieving academic success.

While challenges such as bullying and the need for stronger policy implementation remain, the overall impact of inclusive education under the Merdeka Belajar Program has been overwhelmingly positive. Continuous efforts to increase awareness, provide teacher training, and strengthen collaboration with parents and the broader community will be essential to ensuring its long-term success and sustainability in Kendari City.

Challenges Faced in the Implementation of Inclusive Education

The main challenges in implementing inclusive education at senior high schools across Kendari City include several aspects that require serious attention and immediate action. One significant challenge is the **inadequate infrastructure**, particularly in terms of accessibility facilities for students with physical needs and the

lack of learning aids for visually impaired students. At Public Senior High School 1 Kendari, for instance, while a ramp has been installed for wheelchair users, it is limited to certain areas and does not cover the entire school. This restricts the mobility of students with special needs and limits their participation in various school activities. Similarly, at Public Senior High School 3 Kendari, visually impaired students struggle due to the insufficient availability of Braille books and computers with screen reader software. One visually impaired student shared during the FGD, *"I often feel left behind because the materials I need are not available on time. It makes me work twice as hard to keep up"*.

Another pressing issue is the **shortage of trained educators** in inclusive education. Although some schools have initiated training programs, many teachers still feel unprepared to address the diverse needs of their students. At Public Senior High School 2 Kendari, several teachers admitted during the FGD that they lack confidence in adapting instructional materials or designing classroom activities that cater to students with special needs. One teacher noted, *"We've received some training, but it was too brief and did not cover practical strategies we can apply in the classroom"*.

The **lack of understanding among parents and the wider community** regarding inclusive education also remains a critical challenge. At Public Senior High School 5 Kendari, some parents expressed concerns about the quality of education provided to students with special needs, questioning whether their children would receive the same opportunities as other students. A parent shared, *"I'm worried that my child's special needs will not be met adequately in a regular school environment"*. This limited awareness often leads to resistance and creates additional barriers to the acceptance and support of inclusive education.

Equally troubling is the issue of **bullying towards inclusive students**, which continues to occur in many schools. At Public Senior High School 1 Kendari, students with special needs reported experiencing bullying from their peers, often due to a lack of understanding and empathy. Teachers at Public Senior High School 2 Kendari acknowledged that while anti-bullying policies have been implemented, they are not always effective. A student remarked during the FGD, *"I sometimes feel scared to go to class because of the teasing. It makes me feel like I don't belong here"*.

To address these challenges, participants in the FGD proposed several strategies. Improving infrastructure was highlighted as a top priority, including expanding accessibility facilities and providing sufficient learning aids such as Braille books, assistive devices, and screen reader-equipped computers. Additionally, more **comprehensive teacher training programs** are needed, focusing on practical techniques for inclusive teaching and classroom management. Participants also emphasized the importance of **community engagement** programs to raise awareness about inclusive education among parents and the broader community. The need to **strengthen anti-bullying policies** was underscored. At Public Senior High School 2 Kendari, a school psychologist suggested implementing peer support programs and

workshops to foster empathy and understanding among students. One principal noted, *"Creating a culture of inclusivity starts with education—not just for teachers and students, but for parents and the community as well"*.

The Role of the Principal in the Implementation of Inclusive Education

The principal plays a crucial role in managing and implementing inclusive education in senior high schools across Kendari City. According to the principal of Public Senior High School 1 Kendari, the principal is responsible for planning and facilitating the provision of necessary facilities and learning aids for students with special needs. For example, at SMA Negeri 1 Kendari, the principal took the initiative to secure wheelchairs, hearing aids, and Braille books for visually impaired students, collaborating with local organizations and government programs to meet these needs. A teacher noted during the FGD, *"The principal's persistence in lobbying external stakeholders has brought remarkable improvements to our school's inclusivity infrastructure"*. In addition, the principal ensures that teachers receive adequate training tailored to the needs of inclusive students. At Public Senior High School 3 Kendari, the principal has sent several teachers to participate in specialized training on inclusive education. After attending, these teachers conducted internal training sessions for their peers, creating a cascading effect of knowledge sharing. One teacher mentioned, *"The principal's strategy of encouraging collaborative learning among teachers has empowered us to handle diverse classroom situations more effectively"*.

The principal also plays a pivotal role in setting school policies that foster an inclusive and safe environment for all students. For instance, at Public Senior High School 2 Kendari, the principal implemented an internal policy to provide additional time for students with special needs during exams, which helps support their success in learning. Furthermore, the school has adopted flexible grading criteria for students with special needs, allowing their progress to be evaluated based on individual goals. A parent shared during the FGD, *"This policy has relieved much of the pressure on my child and allowed them to focus on learning at their own pace"*. Moreover, the principal actively establishes communication with parents and the surrounding community to promote inclusivity. At Public Senior High School 5 Kendari, the principal organizes regular meetings with parents to provide a better understanding of inclusive education and its benefits. These meetings also serve as a platform to address parental concerns and gather feedback on the school's inclusive practices. A community leader added during the FGD, *"The principal's open communication has helped change mindsets in the community, making inclusive education more widely accepted"*. Workshops and seminars on inclusivity are also organized, fostering greater awareness among teachers, parents, and students.

Leadership also extends to addressing challenges. At Public Senior High School 4 Kendari, the principal has demonstrated exceptional leadership by prioritizing the needs of students with special needs in every school policy decision. For example, the

principal initiated a buddy system where general education students are paired with students with special needs, promoting mutual understanding and reducing incidents of bullying. A student remarked during the FGD, *"Having a buddy has made me feel more included and supported in school activities"*.

As a concrete result of this proactive leadership, the number of students with special needs successfully completing their education at Public Senior High School 4 Kendari has significantly increased in recent years. According to data shared during the FGD, the school has seen a 30% rise in graduation rates among inclusive students over the past five years. A teacher concluded, *"The principal's visionary leadership has not only transformed our school environment but also changed the lives of many students with special needs"*.

Implementation of Inclusive Education in the Merdeka Belajar Program: An Analysis and Discussion

The implementation of inclusive education within the Merdeka Belajar Program in high schools across Kendari City shows significant progress, despite some challenges that still need to be addressed. Inclusive education, as one of the fundamental principles of equitable education, aims to provide equal opportunities for all students, including those with special needs. With this principle, students with special needs, whether physical, intellectual, or emotional, can learn alongside their peers in the same environment, supported by accommodations tailored to their needs. In the context of the Merdeka Belajar Program, inclusive education not only involves the acceptance of students with special needs into regular classrooms but also includes the provision of accessibility facilities and the development of educators' capacity to adapt inclusive teaching methods.

Research findings from several high schools in Kendari indicate that schools in this region have begun to accommodate the needs of students with physical and intellectual disabilities quite well. For instance, at Public Senior High School 1 Kendari, visually impaired students are provided with assistive tools such as screen readers, which facilitate their access to learning materials. Similarly, Public Senior High School 2 Kendari has adequate ramps to accommodate students using wheelchairs. This reflects the schools' commitment to creating an inclusive environment, aligning with the principles of inclusive education that prioritize diversity and equal access for all students (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; DeMatthews et al., 2021). Moreover, the admission policies for students with special needs at several schools in Kendari have been implemented transparently and inclusively. However, the biggest challenge faced by schools in Kendari in implementing inclusive education is the lack of adequate infrastructure and learning aids. While some schools have provided facilities such as braille books for visually impaired students, the quantity is still very limited. At Public Senior High School 3 Kendari, for example, assistive tools for visually impaired students are scarce, hindering their ability to fully engage in the learning process.

This limitation in facilities poses a significant challenge in ensuring that every student can learn in ways that meet their specific needs. Studies by Mpu & Adu (2021); Okoye et al., (2023) have also shown that adequate infrastructure is a key factor in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Additionally, many schools still lack adequately trained educators in inclusive education. Although some training sessions have been provided by the government and local education offices, most teachers feel underprepared to adapt teaching materials and methods for students with special needs. This indicates that the existing training programs have not sufficiently equipped teachers with a deep understanding of inclusive teaching strategies. This finding aligns with Woodcock et al., (2022), who stated that limited understanding of inclusive education among educators could hinder its implementation in schools.

The critical role of school principals in supporting the implementation of inclusive education cannot be overlooked. In several schools in Kendari, principals with an inclusive vision have proven to drive better educational outcomes for students with special needs. For example, at Public Senior High School 1 and 5 Kendari, principals actively support the procurement of special facilities, such as teaching aids and training for teachers. This proactive leadership enables these schools to create more inclusive environments for students with special needs. Consistent with findings by Winzer (2009) and Sharma (2015), the success of inclusive education heavily depends on strong leadership and the willingness of school principals to prioritize the development of inclusive education in schools. Despite these positive efforts in some aspects, the biggest remaining challenge is the issue of bullying against inclusive students. Students with special needs, such as those with visual impairments or dyslexia, often become targets of bullying by their peers. This phenomenon significantly hinders their learning process and personal development. Research by Sigurdson et al., (2015) highlights that school bullying, especially against students with special needs, has long-term impacts on their mental health and social development. Therefore, it is crucial for schools to implement strict anti-bullying policies and educate the entire school community about the importance of mutual respect and appreciation for diversity.

Some schools in Kendari, such as Public Senior High School 5, have already started anti-bullying training programs for students and teachers as a preventive measure to reduce bullying incidents. Moreover, the positive impact of inclusive education on the learning quality of students with special needs has begun to emerge. At Public Senior High School 1 and 2 Kendari, students with special needs who are provided with adapted teaching methods have shown increased motivation and confidence. Within the Merdeka Belajar Program, which allows for flexibility in choosing teaching methods, students can learn more freely according to their abilities and needs. This demonstrates that inclusive education, when supported by appropriate policies and facilities, can provide significant benefits for all students, including those with special needs (Gülsün et al., 2023).

Although there are still various challenges in implementing inclusive education in high schools across Kendari City, the positive impacts on the learning quality of students with special needs are already being felt. To ensure the sustainability and success of inclusive education, further efforts are needed to strengthen infrastructure, provide ongoing teacher training, enforce anti-bullying policies, and enhance community and parental understanding of the importance of inclusive education. With these measures, inclusive education can develop further and provide greater benefits for students with special needs in the future.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of inclusive education within the Merdeka Belajar Program at high schools in Kendari has shown positive progress, although there are still several challenges that need to be addressed. Overall, the schools have made efforts to provide adequate facilities for students with special needs, such as assistive devices for visually impaired students and accessibility for students with physical disabilities. However, the main challenges remain the limited infrastructure, the shortage of assistive learning tools, and the insufficient training for teachers in adapting inclusive teaching methods.

The role of school principals with an inclusive vision is crucial in creating an environment that supports education for all students, including those with special needs. The impact of inclusive education on the quality of learning for students with special needs has also shown positive results, with improvements in motivation, self-confidence, and academic skills. The Merdeka Belajar Program provides freedom in choosing teaching methods that match the students' abilities, contributing to an overall improvement in the quality of education.

Moving forward, to ensure the sustainability and success of inclusive education implementation, efforts are needed to strengthen facilities, provide better training for teachers, and enhance support from school principals and relevant stakeholders. With these measures, inclusive education can continue to evolve and provide greater benefits for all students, particularly for students with special needs in the future.

Study and Implications for Generalization

This study is limited to high schools in Kendari City, which may affect the generalization of the results to other regions with different conditions. Each region has its own unique cultural, social, and economic context, which can influence the implementation of inclusive education. Factors such as community values, local educational policies, and community support may vary outside of Kendari City, so the implementation of inclusive education in other areas may face different challenges and opportunities. Therefore, the findings of this study are more relevant to the conditions in Kendari City, and further research is needed for other regions.

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