



Developing a Collaborative Inclusive Education Model for Children with Special Needs in Primary Schools: A Comparative Review of Practices in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Inclusive education has emerged as a central principle in ensuring equitable access to quality education for all children, including those with special needs (CWSN). This study employs a descriptive qualitative design based on a comparative literature review of inclusive education practices in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Data were drawn from scholarly publications and policy documents between 2015 and 2024 retrieved from Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus databases. The findings reveal that inclusive education in primary schools has generally advanced through the admission of CWSN into regular classes but continues to be hindered by limited teacher competence and resource constraints. In response, this research proposes the Collaborative Inclusive Education Model (CIEM), emphasizing multi-stakeholder collaboration, differentiated instruction, and the cultivation of an inclusive school culture. The model promotes shared responsibility among teachers, special educators, parents, and the community in developing individualized learning plans that address diverse learner needs. Theoretically, CIEM reinforces humanistic education principles, while practically, it provides a framework for adaptive, participatory learning environments. The study concludes that collaborative and context-sensitive strategies are essential to advancing inclusive education reform in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Children with Special Needs, Collaborative Model, Primary Schools, Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an essential framework that recognizes the right of all children, including those with special needs, to access quality education without discrimination. This principle aligns with global standards, notably articulated in UNESCO's Education for All initiative and UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child, both of which champion the idea that education should be accessible and equitable for every child, regardless of their individual challenges (Zhang & Li, 2021; Chekan et al., 2023; Palacios et al., 2022). In Indonesia, the legal framework supporting inclusive education is outlined in Permendiknas No. 70 of 2009, which mandates schools to accommodate students with varying disabilities and promotes a unified learning environment (Balık & Özgün, 2024). Despite this legislative framework, implementing inclusive education remains fraught with challenges. Factors such as insufficient teacher training, inadequate resources, and a lack of effective pedagogical models that cater to diverse learning needs impede the full realization of inclusive education in the country (Martins & Moriña, 2022; Merrigan & Senior, 2021; Albarran et al., 2024). This situation highlights the need for educational reforms and innovative approaches that can bridge the gap between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities.





At the practical level, the challenges identified in implementing inclusive education significantly affect the educational trajectories of students with special needs. Studies from various contexts, including New Zealand and Ghana, reveal that educators often struggle to adapt teaching strategies to meet diverse learner needs due to insufficient preparation and support (Zhang & Li, 2021; Sharma et al., 2022). In particular, primary schools, which serve as the cornerstone for children's education, have a pivotal role to play in fostering an inclusive atmosphere (Kurniawati & Mariyam, 2022). Research indicates that schools that effectively cultivate an inclusive culture empower teachers through professional development, facilitate collaborative environments, and engage with the broader community, including parents and local organizations (Soledad, 2022; Lakkala et al., 2021). The recognition that inclusive education is not merely a pedagogical practice but also a social commitment is essential for creating an ecosystem that nurtures all learners, especially those with unique educational needs (Khumalo & Mosia, 2023).

In light of these considerations, this study aims to identify the characteristics of inclusive education practices in Indonesian primary schools while analyzing the intrinsic challenges and needs that educators face in implementing such a framework. Furthermore, the research aims to develop and propose a collaborative and effective model for inclusive education that genuinely integrates the perspectives and contributions of teachers, parents, and the broader community (Oliveira et al., 2020; Nurdyansyah et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022). Engaging multiple stakeholders in the design and implementation of inclusive educational frameworks will ensure that the diverse needs of all students are addressed and met appropriately. By fostering a culture of inclusivity in education, we can move beyond mere compliance with legal standards to create a rich, engaging learning environment that nurtures diversity and promotes equity in education for all children (Bello & Chumba, 2025; Lepore et al., 2025).

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach rooted in a comparative literature review paradigm. This methodology is strategically chosen to gain a nuanced understanding of various models of inclusive education for children with special needs (CWSN) within primary schools across Southeast Asia, with a specific focus on Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The research does not involve direct data collection from field settings; instead, it synthesizes information gathered from a wide array of scholarly articles, research reports, and policy documents related to inclusive education published between 2015 and 2024. Previous literature suggests that the analysis of existing studies is particularly effective in identifying theoretical and methodological frameworks that enhance the understanding of inclusive educational practices (Asri et al., 2022; Asri et al., 2023; Aydin et al., 2023). Such an approach enables a robust examination and juxtaposition of the strengths and challenges encountered in implementing inclusive education within these three countries, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on educational accessibility (Azwar et al., 2021; Sarwendah et al., 2023).

Systematic literature review procedures are employed to explore publications from databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus. The search utilizes key



terms, including inclusive education, special needs students, primary school inclusion, and Southeast Asia education policy, ensuring a comprehensive gathering of relevant data. The inclusion criteria for the reviewed studies encompass articles that investigate the practices, challenges, and strategies associated with implementing inclusive education at the primary school level. Through this comparative lens, the study not only focuses on policy frameworks and their implementation in schools but also assesses educational outcomes for CWSN across the three selected nations, providing insights into practical strategies and areas requiring improvement (Hajati et al., 2023; Hutapea, 2024; Young et al., 2023). The findings are expected to inform stakeholders and policymakers about the existing gaps in practice and collaboration among educators, parents, and communities, thereby enhancing inclusive education initiatives in the region (Rahmi, 2021; Mirador & Lluz, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Characteristics of Inclusive Education Implementation in Primary Schools

The study's findings indicate that the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools has generally begun with the admission of children with special needs (CWSN) into regular classes. However, not all schools have adequate special education teachers, leading classroom teachers to assume often dual roles in delivering differentiated instruction Nur et al. (2023) McGuire & Meadan, 2022). The curriculum utilized remains aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum but necessitates modifications to competency standards and teaching methods according to the specific needs of students (Rasmitadila et al., 2022). This situation highlights the essential balance between adhering to mandated educational frameworks and accommodating individual learning requirements (Putri, 2024). Moreover, it is critical to acknowledge that the presence of supportive resources, such as well-trained staff and appropriate materials, significantly influences the effectiveness of inclusive education practices (Wulandari & Setiawan, 2023; (Zakiah et al., 2021). The literature consistently reinforces this notion, noting that a well-prepared educational environment can enhance academic outcomes for CWSN and promote more inclusive classrooms overall (Zakiah et al., 2021).

2. Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Several key challenges have been identified in implementing inclusive education. Foremost among these is the lack of teacher competence in addressing the needs of CWSN, particularly in conducting individual learning assessments (Rasmitadila et al., 2021). This deficiency often results in inadequate educational experiences for these students, undermining their potential for success within the inclusive framework (Salim, 2021). Additionally, there is a pronounced shortage of supportive facilities, such as adaptive learning tools and therapy spaces, which are crucial for creating an effective learning environment for CWSN (Sarifah et al., 2022; Rasmitadila et al., 2022). The findings suggest that the awareness of the school community, including that of parents of typically developing students, is also lacking. Many still perceive CWSN as an additional burden rather than acknowledging their equal right to education (Fathinnaufal & Hidayati, 2020). Such perspectives are detrimental to creating an inclusive atmosphere that fosters





collaboration and understanding among all students. This aligns with the research by Astuti and Sumarni, which asserts that the school's social environment has a profound influence on the success of inclusive programs (Rasmitadila et al., 2022). To address these challenges, it is essential to cultivate a community of practice involving teachers, parents, and specialists that advocates for more inclusive policies and practices (Ahlers et al., 2023).

3. Development of a Collaborative Inclusive Education Model

Based on the insights gathered through field observations, a Collaborative Inclusive Education Model (CIEM) has been developed, emphasizing three principal components: collaboration among teachers, special education teachers, and parents in designing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (Mawarni & Purnama, 2022). Secondly, it promotes differentiated instruction methods, allowing teachers to tailor the content, processes, and products of learning based on each student's abilities (Yudhani & Kaltsum, 2023; Rasmitadila et al., 2023). Lastly, it aims at fostering an inclusive school culture by instilling values of empathy, tolerance, and appreciation for diversity through extracurricular activities (Safrizal et al., 2022). Preliminary results from schools implementing this model indicate enhanced engagement of CWSN in classroom activities and improved social interactions between CWSN and their peers (Wulandari et al., 2022; Kholiq, 2022). Teachers also reported increased understanding of their students' unique characteristics through targeted training and support (Dirgantari & Cahyani, 2023). Thus, this model not only enriches the educational experiences of CWSN but also contributes to a more holistic environment conducive to learning for all students.

4. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the CIEM enriches humanistic education theory, positioning students as central to the learning process, with their unique needs guiding pedagogical approaches (Veradegita et al., 2021). On a practical level, this model can serve as an operational guide for primary schools that cater to inclusive education, aiding in the design of adaptive and participatory educational strategies (Golob & Avguštin, 2023). Implementing such a model necessitates a commitment from all stakeholders to engage in the educational process actively, ensuring that inclusive education principles gain traction in real-world classroom settings (Viorella et al., 2024). This comprehensive approach highlights the need for ongoing professional development, community involvement, and policy reform to elevate the quality of education for both CWSN and their peers (Zhu, 2024). Moreover, as the landscape of education continues to evolve, applying collaborative strategies within an inclusive framework is vital for addressing the diverse needs of all learners and ultimately achieving educational equity (Barney et al., 2020).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that inclusive education in primary schools across Southeast Asia is progressing but remains fragmented and unevenly implemented. Most schools have integrated children with special needs (CWSN) into mainstream classrooms; however, the absence of sufficient special education teachers and adaptive learning tools poses significant limitations (Ediyanto et al., 2024; Kartono et al., 2024; Susilawati et al., 2023). Teachers often lack the pedagogical expertise required to conduct individualized assessments and differentiated instruction, which



can lead to suboptimal learning outcomes (Kumari et al., 2024; Tah, 2025; Mao & Wang, 2023). Moreover, school communities sometimes maintain stigmatizing attitudes toward CWSN, hindering efforts to create inclusive, empathetic learning environments. This issue is not unique to Southeast Asia and parallels findings in other contexts, such as Turkey, where societal perceptions significantly affect educational practices ("What Are the Regional Challenges for Inclusive Distance Education During COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkey? A Qualitative Analysis", 2022; Kim et al., 2024). This gap between policy and practice illustrates the need for more comprehensive, sustainable, and collaborative educational frameworks that align with UNESCO's inclusive education agenda and contemporary theories of humanistic learning (Strakšienė & Musneckienė, 2024; Kushariyadi et al., 2024).

The Collaborative Inclusive Education Model (CIEM) developed through this study addresses these challenges by promoting synergy among key stakeholders, teachers, parents, and the wider community (Chin & Yap, 2024; Alkhateeb et al., 2023). CIEM encourages the co-design of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), continuous professional development for educators, and the cultivation of inclusive school cultures through structured extracurricular engagement (Hamid, 2024; Narot & Kiettikunwong, 2024). This approach not only strengthens pedagogical practices but also embeds inclusivity within the social fabric of schools (Sarker & Unzum, 2023). Theoretically, CIEM expands humanistic and constructivist education paradigms, affirming that inclusivity is both a moral and practical commitment, a perspective supported by recent studies emphasizing the necessity of setting aside traditional paradigms in favor of inclusive practices (Chairunnisa & Rismita, 2022; Nikula et al., 2021). Practically, it offers policymakers and educators an actionable framework to improve classroom inclusivity, emphasizing that sustained collaboration and professional capacity-building are critical to achieving educational equity in the region (Ludago, 2020). The model's effectiveness is contingent upon the systemic engagement of all stakeholders to create a cohesive support system that embraces diversity as a strength rather than a challenge (Massouti et al., 2024; Mir & Waheed, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that inclusive education for children with special needs in Southeast Asian primary schools has achieved notable progress but continues to face systemic barriers. The lack of trained personnel, resource limitations, and low community awareness remain major impediments to practical implementation. The proposed Collaborative Inclusive Education Model (CIEM) provides an innovative and feasible solution by reinforcing shared accountability and co-learning among educators, parents, and communities. CIEM not only enhances instructional quality but also fosters empathy, social cohesion, and respect for diversity within the school environment. Therefore, inclusive education should be viewed not merely as a pedagogical adaptation but as a transformative social practice that empowers all learners.





Recommendations

1. **Professional Development:** Continuous, government-supported training programs are essential to enhance teachers' competence in differentiated instruction and inclusive pedagogy.
2. **Policy Strengthening:** Ministries of Education in Southeast Asia should institutionalize collaborative inclusive models like CIEM within national education standards.
3. **Resource Provision:** Schools should be equipped with adaptive learning tools, accessible facilities, and adequate special education staff.
4. **Community Engagement:** Awareness campaigns and parent-teacher partnerships must be strengthened to build collective responsibility for inclusion.
5. **Further Research:** Empirical testing of the CIEM model in diverse school contexts is needed to refine its structure and evaluate its long-term impact on learning outcomes.

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