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Inclusive Learning Beyond Policy: Discursive and Pedagogical Realities in Selected Religious Primary Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education continues to expand globally as a moral and pedagogical commitment to equitable participation; however, many mainstream schools still struggle to translate inclusive policy into sustainable classroom practice, particularly in institutions that adopt inclusion without formally established support systems. Addressing this underexplored gap, the present study investigates the discursive and pedagogical realities of combined classrooms in a selected religious primary school where students with special needs and regular students learn together within the same instructional environment. Employing a qualitative descriptive case study design, the research involved the principal, classroom and subject teachers, and students across primary grade levels. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, structured classroom observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed thematically through triangulated coding procedures. The findings reveal that inclusive learning was implemented through adaptive yet predominantly reactive strategies, including simplified instruction, repetition, individualized guidance, flexible seating arrangements, and emotional support. Nevertheless, teachers continuously negotiated tensions between diverse learner needs and standardized curricular expectations, while institutional limitations, inconsistent early identification, linguistic barriers, and uneven parental engagement complicated classroom implementation. The study demonstrates that inclusion in this context operates as a hybrid and transitional practice in which educational access precedes systemic readiness. This study contributes to inclusive education scholarship by foregrounding the intersection of discourse, pedagogy, and institutional negotiation in non-formally inclusive religious schooling. More broadly, the findings underscore the urgency of language-sensitive pedagogy, structured teacher development, and integrated support systems to advance sustainable and context-responsive inclusive education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a major concern in contemporary schooling, reflecting commitments to equity, social justice, and human dignity. Schools are increasingly expected to accommodate learners with diverse physical, cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and social needs within mainstream classrooms rather than segregated settings. This shift reflects the understanding that all children have the right not only to access education but also to participate meaningfully, interact with peers, and develop within supportive learning environments (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011; Abosi and Koay, 2008).

The inclusion of students with special needs consequently transforms teaching and learning processes. Teachers are required to manage diverse learner profiles, adapt instructional strategies, establish accessible classroom routines, and respond to students' social and emotional differences. Inclusive education therefore extends beyond physical placement in mainstream classrooms and requires broader pedagogical, institutional, and cultural changes in how schools understand participation, ability, and educational success (Ainscow, 2020; Sharma and Sokal, 2016; Smith, 2016).

In Indonesia, inclusive education is supported by constitutional and policy frameworks, including Article 31 paragraph 1 of the 1945 Constitution, Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, and Ministerial Regulation No. 70 of 2009 on inclusive education. These policies have encouraged regular schools to widen educational access for students with special needs. Nevertheless, increased access has not always been matched by institutional readiness. Studies in Indonesia continue to report challenges related to curriculum adaptation, teacher preparation, assessment practices, parental communication, and the availability of specialist support, while recent evaluations also reveal persistent gaps between policy expectations and classroom realities.

A growing body of research has examined inclusive education in mainstream schools, particularly the relationship between teacher competence, classroom practice, and institutional conditions that support or constrain implementation (Emam et al., 2025; Hove & Phasha, 2023; Majoko, 2019; Masunungure & Maguvhe, 2023). Teachers play a crucial role in determining whether inclusion results in meaningful participation or merely physical placement (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). Inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to provide differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, varied learning media, and responsive classroom management to support diverse learners without reinforcing labelling or exclusion (Hove & Phasha, 2022; Koutsouris et al., 2023; Majoko, 2019; Manalo & Chua, 2024). However, overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional time, and low parental involvement often restrict teachers' ability to provide individualized support (Emam et al., 2025; Hove & Phasha, 2023). Consequently, many studies emphasize the importance of sustained professional development and clearer institutional guidance to strengthen inclusive practice (Majoko, 2019; Masunungure & Maguvhe, 2023).

Despite positive attitudes toward inclusion, teachers frequently report feeling underprepared to implement differentiated instruction because of limited training opportunities, insufficient resources, and restricted planning time (Cody et al., 2023; Smets & Struyven, 2020). Research further indicates that teachers continue to require practical modelling, ready-to-use strategies, and ongoing professional support, while short-term training often improves only limited aspects of differentiation practice (Woolcott et al., 2021). Effective differentiated instruction requires systematic planning, purposeful classroom management, varied learning activities, and responsive assessment rather than ad hoc adjustments (Brigandi et al., 2019; Sofiana et al., 2024). Accordingly, sustainable inclusive teaching depends not only on teacher commitment but also on intensive and collaborative professional development supported by school-wide structures such as teacher collaboration and administrative support (Brigandi et al., 2019; Cody et al., 2023; Kaplan, 2022).

Inclusive education is also shaped by institutional culture, leadership, parental involvement, and support systems. Early intervention and continuous support are essential for students with special needs, yet many schools continue to face limitations in facilities, procedures, and teacher understanding. Collaboration between schools and families is equally important because it supports students' academic, social, and emotional development (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018). Conversely, limited parental awareness and differing expectations may increase instructional challenges and teacher workload.

Although previous studies have contributed significantly to inclusive education research, most focus on formal inclusive schools, special education settings, or policy implementation. Less attention has been given to regular schools that are not formally designated as inclusive yet still admit students with special needs into mainstream classrooms. This gap highlights the need to examine combined classrooms in private school contexts where inclusive practices emerge through teacher initiative, institutional negotiation, and parental demand.

This study addresses that gap by examining the implementation of learning in combined classrooms at Elyon Christian School, Surabaya, where students with special needs and regular students learn together within the same instructional setting. Rather than focusing primarily on policy compliance, this study investigates how inclusion is enacted in daily classroom practice. It explores student admission and identification processes, teacher responses to diverse learner needs, instructional challenges, and strategies used to address those challenges. In doing so, the study provides a grounded understanding of inclusive education as a lived and context-dependent practice.

The significance of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature by showing how inclusion develops in transitional school contexts where access has been established but systemic support remains limited. Practically, it offers insights for teachers, school leaders, parents, and policymakers seeking to strengthen inclusive learning in mainstream classrooms. The study aims to describe the implementation of learning in combined classrooms, identify instructional challenges, examine factors contributing to those challenges, and analyze efforts made to address them.

This study further argues that inclusive education in combined classrooms should be understood as a process of institutional learning. Schools may initially rely on teacher flexibility and commitment, but sustainable inclusion requires structured systems of identification, planning, instruction, assessment, and collaboration.

Without such systems, inclusion risks becoming reactive, inconsistent, and dependent on individual teachers. Previous research consistently emphasizes that sustainable inclusion requires teacher training, differentiated instruction, specialist support, and active parental involvement. Examining a school in this transitional phase therefore provides important insight into the movement from educational access toward meaningful participation.

More broadly, this study contributes to discussions on how mainstream schools can move beyond admission toward effective inclusion. The case of Elyon Christian School demonstrates that inclusion requires early identification, teacher readiness, language-sensitive instruction, flexible classroom management, emotional support, institutional commitment, and sustained collaboration with parents. By documenting both the challenges and practices of combined classrooms, this study offers implications for more responsive policies, targeted professional development, and stronger support systems. Ultimately, inclusive education should be understood as an ongoing effort to create learning environments in which all students can belong, participate, and succeed.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive case study design to explore how learning is implemented in combined classrooms where students with special needs learn alongside regular students. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of complex educational practices as they unfold naturally in real classroom settings. In this study, the design enabled the researcher to examine how instructional processes, teacher responses, and institutional conditions interact in the implementation of inclusive education.

The research was conducted at one selected Christian School, Surabaya, an internationally oriented private school that accommodates both regular students and students with special needs within the same learning environment. The study focused on primary-level combined classrooms, specifically Grades 1, 3, 4, and 5, in order to capture variations in developmental stages and instructional demands across subjects.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in the teaching and learning process. The participants included the school principal, classroom and subject teachers, and regular students. The principal contributed insights into school policies, admission procedures, and institutional support systems. Teachers, who were responsible for conceptual, kinesthetic, and moral or religious subjects, shared their experiences in managing inclusive classrooms and adapting instruction. Regular students were included to provide perspectives on peer interaction within combined classroom settings. The inclusion of these participant groups allowed the study to capture both institutional and classroom-level perspectives. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and careful attention to the involvement of minors and students with special needs.

2.1 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, structured classroom observations, and document analysis. The combination of these methods enabled triangulation and provided a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive classroom practices.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, allowing the researcher to explore participants' experiences in depth while maintaining a consistent focus on the research objectives. The interview protocol was organized around several key themes, including student admission and identification, classroom implementation, instructional challenges, and institutional support.

Different sets of questions were tailored to each participant group. The principal was asked about school policies, admission processes, and institutional challenges in implementing inclusive education. Teachers were asked to describe their instructional practices, the difficulties they encountered, and the strategies they used to support students with diverse needs. Students were asked about their experiences of learning and interacting in combined classrooms. All interviews were conducted in a natural school setting, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in analysis.

Observation

Classroom observation was conducted to capture how inclusive learning was implemented in practice. The study used structured observation, guided by a predefined framework (Sukardi, 1985), which focused on instructional delivery, classroom interaction, student participation, and teacher responses to diverse learning needs.

Observations were carried out in Grades 1, 3, 4, and 5 across different types of subjects. These included conceptual subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Language, and Social Studies; kinesthetic subjects such as Physical Education and arts; and moral or value-based subjects such as Civic and Religious education. This range allowed the researcher to observe how inclusion was enacted across different learning contexts. Field notes were recorded systematically during each session, capturing both descriptive details and initial analytical reflections.

Documentation

Document analysis was used to support and enrich the data obtained from interviews and observations. The documents included school policy materials, curriculum descriptions, teacher and student profiles, assessment records, and photographs of classroom activities. These sources provided additional context and helped to verify findings, strengthening the overall credibility of the study.

2.2 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed the qualitative framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Throughout the process, the analysis was conducted systematically to ensure transparency, consistency, and close alignment with the empirical data.

In the first stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were organized and coded thematically. Open coding identified meaningful data units, which were then grouped through axial coding and refined into key themes using selective coding. This inductive process allowed patterns and relationships to emerge naturally from the data, while the principle of living in and living out was applied to retain only relevant information.

In the second stage, the coded data were organized into thematic displays consisting of structured narratives and categorized patterns. This facilitated comparisons across data sources and revealed relationships among themes such as admission procedures, classroom practices, teacher challenges, and institutional support.

The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions through iterative interpretation and continuous cross-checking of the data. Interviews, observations, and documents were repeatedly compared to ensure consistency and credibility, keeping the conclusions closely grounded in empirical evidence.

2.3 Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor of the study, four criteria of trustworthiness were applied: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was established through triangulation of multiple data sources and methods, including interviews, observations, and document analysis. Prolonged engagement in the field also allowed the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the research context.

Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and classroom practices, enabling readers to determine the relevance of the findings to other contexts.

Dependability was ensured through a transparent and well-documented research process. All stages of data collection and analysis were carefully recorded and reviewed by academic supervisors to maintain consistency.

Confirmability was achieved by maintaining an audit trail consisting of raw data, transcripts, observation notes, coding procedures, and supporting documents. This ensured that the findings were derived from the data rather than from researcher bias.

3. RESULTS

The results are presented in three interrelated themes that correspond to the study objectives. Each theme was developed through triangulation of interview data, classroom observation, and school documentation. Rather than functioning as separate sources, these three sets of data converged to show how Elyon Christian School identified, supported, and managed students with special needs in combined classrooms.

3.1 Admission Procedures and Early Identification of Students with Special Needs

A central finding of this study lies in how the school identified and placed students with special needs. At a procedural level, the admission system appeared inclusive, as all applicants were required to undergo the same registration process. Interview data from school leaders suggested that this approach was intended to ensure fairness and equal opportunity. However, deeper triangulation across interviews, observations, and school documents revealed that the actual decision-making process was more layered and situational.

The psychological assessment emerged as the most decisive stage in determining student placement. When the results indicated potential special needs, students were required to participate in a trial class before a final decision was made. This stage functioned as a bridge between formal assessment and classroom reality. As reflected in an interview excerpt:

INT-T01: Teacher- 12:14_ Excerpt 1

"We do not rely only on test results. In the trial class, we observe how the student responds to simple instructions, whether they can sit, listen, and follow the flow of the lesson, even for a short time."

This statement aligns closely with classroom observation data. During one observed trial session, a student required repeated prompts to stay engaged in a group activity. The observation record noted:

OBS-C1: Trial Class-09:32_ Field Note 1

"The student shifts attention frequently, requires direct eye contact and verbal cues from the teacher, and completes tasks only after step-by-step guidance is provided."

These data indicate that the trial class was not merely evaluative but diagnostic in a practical sense. It allowed teachers to simulate real classroom demands and assess whether the student could function within them. At the same time, school documentation further confirmed that trial class outcomes were formally considered in admission decisions:

DOC-A1: Admission Record- 2020 Intake_ Note 3

"Trial class performance is used to determine classroom readiness and support feasibility prior to final acceptance."

Taken together, these findings suggest that the admission process operated as both a student assessment mechanism and an institutional capacity check. The school did not only ask whether the student could learn, but also whether the existing classroom system could support that learning. This reflects an implicit filtering process, where inclusion is shaped by both student readiness and institutional limitation.

A contrasting pattern emerged for students who had been enrolled since early childhood levels. Interview data revealed that these students were almost always allowed to continue to primary education, even when later assessments identified special needs. This continuity was not solely educational, but relational and administrative. As one school administrator explained:

INT-P01: P-10:05_ Excerpt 2

"If the child has been here since playgroup, we usually continue. The parents have already trusted us for a long time, so we try to support the child as much as possible."

This perspective was supported by school enrollment documents showing long-term educational pathways and pre-paid progression systems:

DOC-A2: Enrollment File- Cohort Tracking_ Note 5

"Students progressing internally are prioritized for continuation to the next level regardless of updated assessment results."

This condition reveals an important institutional dynamic. Admission decisions were influenced not only by assessment outcomes but also by prior relationships with families. As a result, two parallel admission logics coexisted. New students were evaluated more strictly through trial and observation, while continuing students were accommodated through institutional commitment. This dual approach introduces variation in how readiness is defined and managed.

Another significant finding concerns the inconsistency of early identification. Interviews and documentation indicated that structured psychological assessments were not systematically conducted for all students from the earliest stages. More formal evaluations were typically applied to transfer students rather than those who progressed internally. This created a situation in which some learning needs were identified only after classroom challenges had already emerged.

This pattern was clearly visible in classroom observations. In one language lesson, a teacher paused instruction and adapted her approach after noticing a student's difficulty:

OBS-C3: Grade 2 Language Class- 08:47_ Field Note 2

"The teacher stops the activity and re-explains instructions using simpler language. The student appears confused initially but responds after repeated demonstration."

This observation was reinforced by teacher reflections during interviews:

INT-T03: Teacher-13:22_ Excerpt 3

"Sometimes we only realize a student has specific needs after a few weeks or even months. At first, we think it is just adjustment, but later we see a pattern."

These data indicate that identification often occurred reactively rather than proactively. Teachers were required to diagnose and respond to learning difficulties during instruction without having a comprehensive profile of the student from the beginning. This situation places additional cognitive and pedagogical demands on teachers, as they must simultaneously teach, assess, and adapt in real time.

A further layer of complexity emerges when these findings are viewed collectively. The school clearly possessed mechanisms for identifying students with special needs, including psychological testing and trial classes. However, these mechanisms were not consistently integrated into a continuous and early identification system. Instead, identification occurred at specific entry points or in response to observable difficulties in the classroom.

In summary, the triangulated data reveal that the admission and identification process combined formal procedures with situational judgment and institutional considerations. The system allowed access and demonstrated flexibility, particularly for continuing students, but it also revealed inconsistencies in early identification and planning. The trial class served as a critical space where assessment, observation, and institutional decision making intersected.

At the same time, the lack of systematic early identification meant that teachers often entered the classroom without a complete understanding of student needs, requiring them to rely on adaptive and reactive strategies. This finding highlights a key tension between access and preparedness, which shapes the broader implementation of inclusive education within the school context.

3.2 Learning Support and Classroom Implementation in Combined Classes

The second key finding concerns how the school implemented learning after students with special needs were admitted into combined classrooms. Triangulated data from interviews, classroom observations, and school documentation indicate that the school had developed a range of practical support strategies.

However, these supports were not yet structured within a systematic inclusive framework. Instead, they emerged as situational responses to immediate classroom needs. The most frequently identified forms of support included remedial teaching, additional lessons for slower learners, counseling interventions, flexible seating arrangements, and the establishment of classroom rules negotiated between teachers and students.

Interview data revealed that teachers relied heavily on adaptive strategies based on their daily experiences in the classroom. One teacher explained:

INT-T05: Teacher-11:08_Excerpt 4

"We adjust as we go. If a student cannot follow, we repeat, simplify, or give extra time. There is no fixed method, so we depend on what works at that moment."

This perspective was strongly supported by observation data. In a Grade 4 mathematics class, the teacher was seen modifying instructions multiple times during a single lesson:

OBS-C5: Grade 4 Mathematics-09:15_ Field Note 3

"The teacher rephrases the question three times, writes key words on the board, and approaches one student individually to guide the problem-solving process step by step."

These data suggest that instructional delivery was highly flexible but also heavily dependent on real-time adjustments. Rather than following a differentiated lesson plan prepared in advance, teachers responded directly to emerging student needs during instruction.

Seating arrangement emerged as a particularly important strategy across all observed classrooms. Students who required closer supervision were consistently placed near the teacher or in areas with fewer distractions. Documentation of classroom layouts further confirmed that seating plans were intentionally modified to support attention and participation:

DOC-C3: Classroom Layout Plan- Grade 3_Note 2

"Students requiring closer monitoring are positioned within direct teacher visibility to facilitate guidance and minimize disruption."

Observation data reinforced this finding. In several classes, students with special needs were seen responding more effectively when seated close to the teacher, as they received immediate prompts and feedback. However, deeper analysis suggests that while seating adjustments improved short-term engagement, they did not fundamentally alter the structure of instruction. The strategy functioned as a management tool rather than as part of a comprehensive pedagogical design.

A similar pattern appeared across non-conceptual subjects such as physical education, arts, civic education, and religious lessons. Observation showed that students with special needs were more actively engaged when tasks were concrete, directly demonstrated, and repeated multiple times. In one physical education session, the teacher demonstrated a movement repeatedly while guiding a student individually:

OBS-C6: Physical Education- 07:50_ Field Note 4

"The teacher models the movement slowly and physically guides the student's posture. The student begins to follow after several repetitions and visual cues."

This observation aligns with teacher reflections:

INT-T07:Teacher-12:41_ Excerpt 5

"They understand better when they can see and repeat. If we only explain, they get lost. So we show, repeat, and guide until they can follow."

These findings indicate that successful participation depended on concrete instruction, repetition, and direct guidance. However, these strategies were implemented more intuitively and responsively rather than being systematically designed and integrated within a structured differentiated instruction framework. Teachers tended to rely on immediate classroom experiences and situational adjustments to address students' needs, instead of applying carefully planned instructional modifications that consistently accommodated diverse learning profiles.

Another important dimension of classroom support involved emotional and behavioral regulation. Interview and documentation data revealed that students who became overwhelmed or disruptive were sometimes temporarily removed from the classroom and referred to counseling support. This practice was not framed as punishment, but as a way to help students regain emotional stability. One teacher noted:

INT-T08: Teacher-10:56_Excerpt 6

"When a student cannot control their emotions, we take them out for a while. It is not to exclude them, but to help them calm down and be ready to learn again."

School documentation confirmed this approach as part of student support procedures:

DOC-S1: Counseling Log- Term Rec_ Note 7

"Students showing behavioral escalation are guided to counseling support for emotional regulation before returning to class activities."

This finding suggests that the school recognized emotional readiness as an essential component of learning. However, similar to other strategies, counseling interventions were typically applied after disruptions occurred, indicating a reactive rather than preventive approach.

A deeper analysis across all data sources reveals a consistent pattern. The support strategies implemented by the school were largely compensatory. Remedial teaching and additional lessons were provided after students had already fallen behind academically. Counseling was initiated when behavioral challenges had already disrupted classroom learning. Seating arrangements and instructional adjustments were used to manage immediate difficulties rather than to redesign learning experiences from the outset.

This reactive orientation becomes clearer when examining how teachers described their instructional planning. One teacher stated:

INT-T09: Teacher- 14:03_ Excerpt 7

"We do not have a special plan from the beginning. We see what happens in class, then we adjust. Sometimes it works, sometimes we try something else."

This statement reflects a broader pattern in which inclusion was implemented through continuous adaptation rather than through structured design. Teachers acted as problem-solvers in real time, but they lacked a stable framework that could guide inclusive instruction consistently across subjects and grade levels.

The school's institutional position further explains this condition. Data from interviews and documents indicate that Elyon had not formally established itself as an inclusive school. As a result, inclusive practices were developed informally and depended largely on teacher initiative. The school demonstrated willingness and commitment to support students with special needs, but it did not yet have a fully developed system to guide implementation. This created what can be described as a hybrid practice, where inclusion existed in everyday classroom activities but was not fully institutionalized.

In summary, the triangulated findings show that learning support in combined classrooms was present, practical, and responsive, but not yet systematic. Teachers actively adjusted instruction, managed classroom dynamics, and provided additional support based on immediate needs. Students benefited from these efforts, particularly through individualized attention, repetition, and emotional support. However, the absence of structured planning and institutional alignment meant that inclusion relied heavily on improvisation and teacher experience. This condition highlights a critical transition stage, where inclusive practice is visible and meaningful, yet still evolving toward a more coherent and sustainable model.

3.3 Difficulties and Contributing Factors in the Implementation of Combined Classrooms

The third and most prominent finding concerns the difficulties encountered by teachers and the factors shaping those difficulties in combined classrooms. Across interviews, observations, and documentation, these challenges appeared as consistent and recurring patterns rather than isolated cases. Teachers were required to manage diverse learning needs while simultaneously meeting uniform curriculum targets. This dual demand created tension between instructional expectations and classroom realities.

Interview data clearly reflected this struggle. One teacher expressed:

INT-T10: Teacher_ 13:11_ Excerpt 8

"It is difficult to balance the class. Some students move fast, but others need more time. If I slow down, the others get bored. If I continue, some students are left behind."

This dilemma was directly observed during classroom instruction. In a Grade 3 science lesson, the teacher attempted to maintain lesson pace while assisting a student individually:

OBS-C7: Grade 3 Science-10:02_Field Note 5

"The teacher explains the concept to the whole class, then pauses to assist one student who appears confused. Meanwhile, several other students begin to lose focus and engage in side conversations."

These data illustrate the fragmented nature of classroom management in mixed-ability settings. Teachers frequently shifted between whole-class instruction and individualized support, often at the expense of overall classroom flow. Immediate strategies such as repetition, closer supervision, and seating adjustments were commonly used, but these approaches addressed symptoms rather than underlying structural challenges.

Language emerged as a critical factor contributing to learning difficulties, particularly in lower grades. Observation in Grades 1 to 3 showed that many students struggled to understand instructions delivered in the language of instruction, which affected their ability to follow tasks and participate in classroom routines. In one observed language lesson:

OBS-C8: Grade 2 LangClass- 08:25_Field Note 6

"The teacher gives verbal instructions, but one student remains passive. After the instruction is repeated with gestures and simpler wording, the student begins to respond."

Teacher reflections reinforced this observation:

INT-T11: Teacher-11:47_ Excerpt 9

"Sometimes the problem is not that they cannot learn, but that they do not fully understand the language we use. Once we simplify it, they can follow better."

This finding suggests that learning barriers were not solely cognitive. They were also linguistic and contextual. When students lacked access to the language of instruction, their difficulties manifested as inattention, hesitation, or behavioral disruption. This indicates that classroom challenges were layered, involving the interaction between language, cognition, and classroom expectations. Moreover, Institutional readiness emerged as another significant factor. Interviews revealed that the school was still developing its understanding of inclusive education and often perceived it as requiring extensive resources and complex arrangements. One administrator stated:

INT-P02: P -09:40_Excerpt 10

"We want to support all students, but sometimes we feel we are not fully prepared. Inclusive education needs more structure, more training, and more support systems."

This perspective was supported by documentation related to staffing and facilities:

DOC-S2: School Profile- Infrastructure Note_ Note 4

"School facilities are designed for general student use and do not include specialized infrastructure for students with physical or sensory needs."

Observation data further highlighted the practical implications of this limitation. Teachers were seen managing all aspects of inclusion independently, without consistent assistance from specialized staff:

OBS-C9: Grade 5 Classroom- 09:55_ Field Note 7

"The teacher provides instruction, manages behavior, and supports individual learning needs simultaneously, without additional classroom assistance."

These findings indicate that inclusion was largely teacher-driven rather than system-supported. The absence of specialized personnel and structured support systems placed significant demands on teachers, contributing to the recurrence of similar challenges across grade levels. Further, Communication with parents also emerged as a critical factor influencing classroom implementation. Interview data suggested that effective inclusion required strong collaboration between school and home. However, this collaboration was not always consistent. Teachers noted that differences in understanding often affected student progress:

INT-T12: Teacher- 14:20_ Excerpt 11

"Some parents expect the school to handle everything, while others are still unsure about their child's condition. Without the same understanding, it becomes harder to support the student consistently."

This issue was also reflected in school communication records:

DOC-P1: ParentMS-Term Report_ Note 6

"Teachers report varying levels of parental engagement and awareness regarding student learning needs and support strategies."

These findings suggest that inclusion extended beyond classroom practice. It depended on alignment between school expectations and parental understanding. When such alignment was absent, gaps emerged between what the school could provide and what parents expected, creating additional pressure on classroom implementation.

A deeper interpretation of these findings reveals that the core challenge was not simply the presence of students with special needs in regular classrooms. Rather, it was the gap between educational access and educational readiness. The school had successfully opened access by admitting students with diverse needs, but the systems required to sustain that inclusion were still evolving. Teachers relied on personal initiative, experience, and improvisation, while institutional structures remained limited.

This condition explains why inclusion in the school appeared both meaningful and fragile. It was meaningful because students with special needs were actively participating in mainstream classrooms. At the same time, it was fragile because this participation depended heavily on individual teacher effort, informal strategies, and limited structural support. Without stronger institutional alignment, these practices risk remaining inconsistent and difficult to sustain.

In summary, the triangulated findings highlight three major patterns. First, teacher difficulties were continuous and rooted in the challenge of balancing diverse learning needs within a uniform curriculum. Second, barriers were multidimensional, involving language, cognition, classroom dynamics, and emotional regulation. Third, institutional and relational factors, including limited support systems and inconsistent communication with parents, significantly influenced classroom implementation. These findings indicate that the school had progressed toward inclusive practice, but the transition from access to fully supported inclusion had not yet been achieved.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that inclusive education in the combined classrooms of the selected school remains emergent rather than fully institutionalized. Although students with special needs are granted educational access, the pedagogical, organizational, and support systems required to sustain meaningful participation remain limited. This "access–implementation gap" supports previous research showing that many schools admit learners with special educational needs without being adequately prepared

to adapt curricula, allocate resources, or provide sustained professional support (González, 2019; Guerrero et al., 2024). Similarly, earlier studies report that teachers often support inclusion conceptually but feel underprepared to implement specialized instructional strategies and assessments in practice (Aguirre et al., 2023; Yacsahuache et al., 2021). Inclusive education therefore extends beyond physical placement and requires curricular adaptation, collaborative teaching, continuous professional development, and institutional leadership supported by adequate resources (Anta et al., 2023; Chingo et al., 2024; Guerrero et al., 2024).

The findings further reveal that the admission process for students with special needs is shaped more by situational judgment and institutional capacity than by standardized inclusive procedures. Psychological assessments and trial classes function as mechanisms to evaluate whether students can adapt to classroom expectations and whether the school can realistically support them (Ancapichún and Jiménez, 2023; Hines et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2024). Although these assessments support diagnosis and monitoring, previous studies warn that excessive reliance on classification may unintentionally limit instructional flexibility and inclusive participation (Ancapichún and Jiménez, 2023). The present findings therefore reinforce the importance of collaborative approaches involving teachers, counselors, psychologists, and families to support students' long-term academic and emotional development (Kearney et al., 2024; Lindström et al., 2021; Tougas et al., 2022). Admission procedures should consequently prioritize formative assessment and individualized support rather than functioning primarily as screening mechanisms.

The inconsistency of early identification practices identified in this study also reflects broader implementation challenges within inclusive education. Students progressing internally were less likely to undergo systematic reassessment than newly admitted students, resulting in delayed recognition of learning needs. This finding supports studies showing that inclusive classroom practice frequently diverges from formal policy because of limited personnel, insufficient assessment systems, and uneven teacher competence (Azzahra & Dhona, 2023; Ujianti, 2021). Weak identification systems may delay intervention and intensify instructional difficulties for both students and teachers (Stiawan, 2019; Ujianti, 2021). The "dual admission logic" identified in this study also extends previous findings that even self-identified inclusive schools may continue to apply selective practices that indirectly restrict inclusion for certain learners (Ruhaena & Moordiningsih, 2019). Moreover, because inclusive implementation is strongly influenced by teacher readiness and parental involvement, school–family relationships significantly shape how inclusion is enacted in practice (Azzahra & Dhona, 2023; Ruhaena & Moordiningsih, 2019).

Another important finding concerns classroom support, which appears adaptive yet predominantly reactive. Teachers frequently modify instruction, classroom organization, and student support strategies in response to immediate classroom difficulties. Practices such as repetition, simplified explanation, flexible seating, and remedial instruction reflect differentiated teaching approaches intended to accommodate diverse learner needs while maintaining participation (Çelik, 2019; Johnson & Erasmus, 2024). Flexible seating arrangements and adaptive classroom environments have similarly been identified as important components of inclusive pedagogy because they help sustain learner engagement and participation (Chan-Anteza, 2020; Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). However, research also emphasizes that inclusive teaching becomes more effective when responsiveness is supported by professional development, collaborative structures, and institutional planning rather than relying solely on improvisation (Johnson & Erasmus, 2024; Mofield et al., 2023). Co-teaching and collaborative planning models, for example, may help transform reactive accommodations into more systematic forms of differentiation (Gardesten, 2023; Mofield et al., 2023).

The predominance of reactive strategies in this study indicates the absence of a stable pedagogical framework that systematically embeds differentiation into lesson design. Preventive and scaffolded instructional approaches have been shown to improve engagement, reduce behavioral difficulties, and support learning outcomes when integrated proactively into classroom planning (Begley et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2024; Lindström and Roberts, 2022; Ploessl et al., 2022). The findings therefore reveal a gap between responsive classroom practice and long-term instructional planning. Teachers actively adapt during lessons, yet these adaptations are often spontaneous rather than systematically designed from the outset.

This condition highlights the importance of teacher preparedness and sustained professional development. In the absence of formal guidance and institutional frameworks, teachers rely heavily on experience-based strategies and personal initiative to sustain inclusion. Although this demonstrates strong teacher agency, it also reveals structural weaknesses in institutional support systems (Lakkala et al., 2021; Makoelle, 2020; Nthibeli et al., 2022). Previous studies consistently emphasize that effective inclusive practice requires collaborative professional learning, interprofessional teamwork, and whole-school approaches rather than isolated teacher effort (Lakkala et al., 2021). Persistent tensions between inclusive policy and classroom realities further indicate the need for context-sensitive reforms that integrate inclusive pedagogy into everyday teaching practice and school culture (Carrim and Bekker, 2022; Kohout-Diaz, 2023).

The findings also identify language as an important barrier to participation and learning, particularly in lower grades. Difficulties experienced by students were shaped not only by cognitive factors but also by limited understanding of the language of instruction. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that language proficiency strongly influences academic participation and that linguistic barriers are often misinterpreted as cognitive limitations (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2021; Menken and Sánchez, 2019; Parra and Proctor, 2022). Translanguaging and multilingual instructional approaches have been shown to strengthen participation, conceptual understanding, and literacy development by allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires (Bonacina-Pugh et al., 2021; Carrim and Nkomo, 2023; Ndhlovana and Charamba, 2023). The present study therefore extends previous research by demonstrating how language barriers intersect with inclusive practice in combined classrooms and emphasizing the importance of language-sensitive pedagogy.

Institutional readiness also emerged as a central factor shaping inclusive implementation. The absence of specialized personnel, limited teacher preparation, and insufficient support systems constrained the school's capacity to respond systematically to diverse learner needs. Similar findings have been reported in studies of inclusive schools where limited staffing, inadequate infrastructure, and weak policy support reduce institutional readiness for sustainable inclusion (Gusti, 2021; Hermawan et al., 2024). Research further indicates that teacher readiness depends not only on individual competence but also on organizational support, infrastructure, and professional development opportunities (Hermawan et al., 2024). Instructional innovation and sustainable inclusion therefore require continuous institutional investment, leadership support, and organizational planning (Prastiawati, 2023).

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that inclusion may initially emerge through practical teacher initiatives even before formal institutional systems are fully established. Teachers in this study frequently developed informal support mechanisms, adapted instruction independently, and assumed multiple roles to sustain classroom participation. This supports previous research showing that inclusive practice often begins through teacher-driven initiatives before evolving into formalized systems (Gusti, 2021). Nevertheless, reliance on individual effort alone has significant limitations. Inclusive practices that depend primarily on teacher commitment rather than coordinated procedures and institutional structures are difficult to sustain consistently across classrooms and grade levels. Previous studies similarly show that weak institutional integration may produce forms of "micro-exclusion" despite positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion (Gusti, 2021). Broader systemic barriers, including limited funding, insufficient resources, and entrenched attitudes, also continue to constrain inclusive implementation in many developing contexts (Hermawan et al., 2024). Sustainable inclusion therefore requires strong leadership, distributed organizational processes, and institutional coherence that extend beyond individual teacher initiative (Irada, 2024; Prastiawati, 2023).

Parental involvement further complicates inclusive implementation. Differences in parental understanding, expectations, and acceptance of students' needs frequently create additional challenges for teachers. While some parents actively support learning and collaborate with schools, others remain uncertain about their children's conditions or expect schools to manage all aspects of support independently. This finding confirms previous studies identifying parental attitudes and school–family collaboration as essential components of inclusive education (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018). However, the present study extends earlier research by showing how misalignment between school practices and parental expectations may directly affect instructional consistency, student progress, and teacher workload.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by examining inclusive education within a non-formally inclusive private school setting. Its novelty lies in exploring combined classrooms where inclusion operates informally through everyday practice rather than through fully institutionalized policy frameworks. This context reveals a hybrid model characterized by strong teacher commitment and classroom flexibility but limited institutional coherence and structural support.

The implications of this study are both practical and theoretical. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of systematic teacher training in differentiated instruction, classroom management, and language-sensitive pedagogy. Schools should also establish structured early identification systems, strengthen collaboration with parents, and gradually develop institutional support mechanisms to sustain inclusive practice. Theoretically, the study reinforces the understanding that inclusive education is dynamic, context-dependent, and shaped by institutional realities rather than policy alone. The case examined in this study demonstrates how inclusion may emerge progressively through practice while simultaneously revealing the limitations of informal approaches. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of inclusion as both a process and an ongoing institutional goal.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. It focuses on a single school context, limiting broader generalizability, and it does not extensively explore the perspectives of students with special needs themselves. Future studies should therefore examine multiple school settings and include

stronger representation of student and parent perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive practice.

Future research should also investigate the integration of language support within inclusive classrooms, particularly in multilingual educational contexts. Further studies are needed on structured intervention models that bridge reactive and preventive approaches, as well as on collaborative teaching frameworks, professional development systems, and whole-school strategies that can support more sustainable and systematic inclusion.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of learning in combined classrooms at the selected private school reflects a transitional model of inclusive education in which access has been successfully opened, yet systemic readiness remains limited. The key findings reveal that student admission procedures combine formal equality with situational judgment, resulting in delayed and inconsistent early identification of students with special needs. Classroom implementation is characterized by flexible and responsive teaching strategies, such as repetition, simplified instruction, and individualized support; however, these practices are largely reactive rather than systematically planned. Furthermore, persistent challenges arise from multiple interconnected factors, including limited teacher training, language barriers in early grades, insufficient institutional support, and inconsistent collaboration with parents.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on a hybrid inclusive context, where inclusion is practiced without being formally institutionalized, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how inclusion operates in everyday classroom realities rather than in idealized policy frameworks. The implications of this study highlight the urgent need for structured teacher professional development, early and continuous student assessment systems, strengthened school–parent partnerships, and the gradual development of institutional support mechanisms to sustain inclusive practices. Future research is recommended to explore comparative studies across different school types, the integration of language-sensitive pedagogy in inclusive classrooms, and the development of systematic intervention models that move inclusive education from reactive accommodation toward proactive and sustainable implementation.

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