

## The Role of Teachers in Slow Learner Student Learning Activities at Junior High School Level

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### Abstract

*This study aims to examine the implementation of inclusive education for slow learner students at SMPN 22 Surakarta, focusing on the role of teachers in designing, implementing, and evaluating learning that is tailored to the individual needs of students. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation studies. The results of the study revealed that teachers implemented various inclusive learning strategies, such as simplifying learning content, utilizing visual media, forming heterogeneous learning groups, and modifying the form and implementation of assessments. In addition, teachers actively build cooperation with parents through intensive communication to ensure the continuity of the learning process at home. These practices reflect the application of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principle and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory proposed by Vygotsky. This study concludes that the success of inclusive education is not only determined by the teacher's ability to adjust pedagogical strategies, but also requires policy support from the school, continuous professional training, and close collaboration between teachers and families*

**Keywords:** Slow Learner, Inclusive Education, Teacher Role, Junior High School, Differentiated Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

**Inclusive education** is an educational paradigm that provides equal opportunities for all students, including those with special needs, to learn together in the same educational environment. This system is based on the principle that every child possesses unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs. Therefore, the educational system must be designed and its programs implemented by considering this diversity.

In Indonesia, inclusive education has gained serious attention and legal support through various policies and regulations. According to the Regulation of the Minister of National Education No. 70 of 2009, inclusive education is defined as an educational system that provides opportunities for all students—including those with disabilities and those with exceptional intelligence and/or talents—to participate in the learning process within the same environment as their peers. This policy is reinforced by Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020 concerning Reasonable Accommodation for Students with Disabilities, which governs various aspects, including affirmative actions in admissions to educational institutions.

One group of students requiring specific approaches within the inclusive education framework is **slow learners**. A slow learner is defined as an individual who demonstrates low achievement in one or more academic areas but is not classified as intellectually disabled. Their IQ scores typically range from 70 to 90,

which does not meet the criteria for intellectual disability. The main characteristics of slow learners include delays in thinking, responding to lessons, and adapting to their environment, yet they are still considered within the normal range and exhibit greater capabilities than students with intellectual disabilities.

Data from 2020 reveal a significant gap in access to education for children with disabilities in Indonesia, including slow learners. Only 56% of children with disabilities complete basic education, compared to 95% of the general child population. This disparity highlights the importance of systematic efforts to enhance both the accessibility and quality of inclusive education for children with special needs. Although the concept of inclusive education has been widely accepted, its implementation in practice still faces numerous challenges. One major issue is the inability of teachers to adequately address the needs of slow learners, which can result in learning outcomes that fall short of expectations. Other challenges include limited openness to student admission, suboptimal support services, insufficient focus on the specific needs of children, unresolved student issues, violations of established norms, and assessment systems that are not fully proportional for students with disabilities.

Several schools in Indonesia have developed innovative programs to address these implementation challenges. *SMP Tumbuh Yogyakarta*, for instance, promotes school well-being by:

(1) applying the inclusive education concept, (2) creating a comfortable learning environment, (3) building open communication within the school, and (4) developing the competencies of school members. *SMP Negeri 15 Yogyakarta* has implemented the "Seven Charms of Inclusive Education" program, which includes: (1) open admission; (2) guided elaboration; (3) scaffolding; (4) need-based orientation; (5) problem-based orientation; (6) normative values; and (7) proportional assessment.

In the learning context, studies underscore the importance of the teacher's active role, especially in strategies such as lesson repetition and the use of instructional media like virtual laboratories and simple experiments, to improve the academic performance of slow learners. Appropriate learning accommodations can help overcome their difficulties and optimize their potential. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No. 48 of 2023 serves as a key guideline in providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities at all educational levels. This regulation emphasizes that all educational institutions must address the needs of students with disabilities and provide suitable accommodations to ensure their full participation in the educational process.

This study aims to explore the implementation of inclusive education for slow learners at *SMPN 22 Surakarta*, focusing on the strategies employed, the challenges encountered, and the efforts made to overcome these obstacles. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of inclusive education practices in junior high schools, particularly in accommodating the needs of slow learners.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the implementation of inclusive education for slow learner students at *SMPN 22 Surakarta*. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers responsible for slow learners, participant observation during the learning process, and documentation on March 18, 2025, and April 23, 2025.

Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019) model, which includes the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was tested through source triangulation by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on interviews with the special education support teacher, *SMPN 22 Surakarta* has identified 14 students as slow learners out of a total of 450 students. The distribution of slow learner students by grade level includes 5 students in Grade VII, 6 in Grade VIII, and 3 in Grade IX. This identification was carried out through assessments conducted by a team of experts from the Inclusive Education Resource Center (Pusat Sumber Pendidikan Inklusif/PSPI) of Surakarta, in collaboration with psychologists from Sebelas Maret University.

*SMPN 22 Surakarta* has implemented inclusive education since 2018, supported by policies from the Surakarta City Education Office and training provided by the Inclusive Education Resource Center. The implementation of inclusive education at this school refers to various regulations, including Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020 and Ministerial Regulation of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No.

48 of 2023. Based on interview and observation results, the implementation of inclusive education at SMPN 22 Surakarta encompasses the following aspects:

1. Learning Planing

Teachers carry out learning planning systematically by mapping the learning needs of students with special needs, particularly slow learners, based on the results of psychological assessments conducted by the Inclusive Education Resource and Service Center (PLDPI) and IQ classification. This step aims to ensure that the learning design aligns with each student's individual capacity and characteristics. In developing Lesson Plans (RPP), teachers modify learning materials by simplifying content without reducing the essential elements or competency objectives.

The needs mapping is conducted using IQ assessment results and recommendations from PLDPI, which then serve as the basis for designing the adjusted lesson plans. This practice aligns with the principles of differentiated instruction as described by Tomlinson (2019). Sari and Nugroho (2021) also emphasize the importance of initial mapping to identify the specific needs of each student (p. 47). One teacher stated: "I first map the student's needs based on the PLDPI assessment results and daily observations. Then I adjust the lesson plan, both in terms of content and delivery method." (Interview, March 18, 2025). This planning also includes allocating additional time during learning activities to provide slow learners with a broader opportunity to comprehend the material. Moreover, teachers form inclusive learning groups that combine regular students with students with special needs to encourage social interaction and collaboration. This approach adopts the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as outlined by Tomlinson (2019) and supported by UNESCO (2020) guidelines, which emphasize the importance of flexibility in addressing learners' needs.

2. Learning Implementation

In classroom implementation, teachers apply strategies for delivering material in simplified forms by using non-technical language and presenting the content gradually. The language used is adapted to be easily understood, supported by visual media, and accompanied by repeated explanations. The simplification of content is conducted without removing the essence of the applicable curriculum. This strategy aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes the importance of peer interaction and adult support through scaffolding to optimize students learning potential.

The teacher's approach also reflects the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as recommended by Friend and Bursuck (2019), which advocate for providing multiple representations of content to meet the needs of all students, including those who struggle to comprehend information. Observations showed that teachers actively monitored students' facial expressions and gestures as indicators of understanding. If students showed signs of confusion, teachers would not hesitate to re-explain the material using different methods, such as analogies related to daily life experiences. One teacher stated, "If I see they are confused, I don't immediately move on to the next topic. I try to repeat it in a different way or use examples from their everyday life." (Interview, March 18, 2025).

In addition, slow learner students were given accommodations such as extended time for completing assignments and exams, as well as one-on-one guidance outside of class hours. Teachers also broke down larger tasks into smaller segments to make them easier to understand and complete. The classroom environment was designed to support inclusive, low-pressure learning by avoiding comparisons among students, thereby encouraging a sense of safety and self-confidence. Observations also noted the formation of mixed study groups between regular and slow learner students, which enhanced both social interaction and academic collaboration. This approach is consistent with UNESCO's (2020) recommendations for creating participatory and supportive learning environments.

3. Evaluation and Follow Up

The evaluation of slow learner students was conducted adaptively through simplified test formats, the use of more accessible vocabulary, and flexible timing. Teachers avoided complex compound sentences and technical terms in assessments, and instead gave instructions explicitly and at a slower pace to facilitate understanding. This differentiated evaluation approach involved

modifying question structures and allowing extra time, aiming to accommodate the individual needs of slow learners. This method enabled students to demonstrate their learning achievements without excessive pressure, according to their own pace and learning styles. Observational data indicated that most slow learner students responded positively to this evaluation model, as shown by increased accuracy and completeness in their work. Beyond academic aspects, teachers also monitored students' social and emotional development, such as concentration ability, peer interaction, and self-confidence. To support continuity in student development at home, teachers established intensive communication with parents through various media, including face-to-face meetings, WhatsApp groups, and phone calls. This practice is in line with Putri (2023), who found that "active partnerships with parents increase the effectiveness of interventions," as parental involvement can reinforce home-based learning strategies and speed up students' adaptation processes. Teachers also provided concrete recommendations to parents regarding supportive activities at home, such as content review, establishing study routines, and giving praise as a form of positive reinforcement. However, there were variations in parents' understanding and involvement. While most showed enthusiasm and strong commitment after receiving explanations from teachers, some still required a more personal approach and additional education. Teachers continued to build awareness that slow learners need consistent emotional support and a gradual, non-instant learning process. This collaboration illustrates the concept of school-home partnership as explained by Horne and Timmons (2022), which emphasizes the importance of a symbiotic relationship between schools and families in supporting inclusive education.

#### 4. Impact on Slow Learner Students

Observational and documentation data indicate that teacher interventions during the learning process have had a positive impact on the development of slow learner students. Three main indicators reflect this progress:

##### a. Academic Improvement

Evaluation results from assignments and tests show increased student comprehension of the subject matter. Although their learning pace remains slower than that of regular students, slow learners demonstrated consistent academic achievement and significant gradual progress.

##### b. Active Participation in Classroom Activities

Students began to show the confidence to ask questions and engage in group discussions. The strategy of forming inclusive study groups, combining regular students with slow learners, has proven effective in increasing their motivation and self-confidence in participating in learning activities.

##### c. Increased Self-Confidence

Verbal encouragement from teachers and a supportive, inclusive classroom atmosphere contributed to improved student self-confidence. They became more open in expressing opinions and more comfortable in sharing the challenges they faced during the learning process.

#### 5. Challenges Faced By Teachers

In implementing inclusive education for slow learners, teachers played an effective role through adaptive planning, implementation, and evaluation. However, this effectiveness is not without challenges. One major obstacle is the high administrative workload, which makes it difficult for teachers to provide optimal individual guidance. This reflects the need to balance administrative responsibilities with pedagogical duties to avoid divided attention.

In addition, the lack of professional training specifically addressing strategies for teaching slow learners hinders the development of teachers' capacity. General training provided so far does not fully address the specific needs within the context of inclusive education. The limited availability of visual aids and learning resources to support differentiated instruction is also a

significant challenge, considering slow learners require more concrete, visual, and gradual materials. Teachers have expressed the need for stronger policy support from the school administration, such as the provision of ongoing specialized training, assistance from special education professionals, and reduction of administrative burdens. These forms of support are seen as strategic steps to strengthen teacher capacity in creating a more inclusive, targeted, and individualized learning process.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study demonstrate that teachers play a crucial role in creating effective inclusive learning for slow learner students. This role is realized through planning based on student needs assessments, instructional delivery that emphasizes content simplification and visual approaches, and evaluation aligned with students' cognitive abilities. Teachers also foster a supportive classroom atmosphere and implement collaborative learning strategies through mixed-group arrangements, which have been shown to enhance student participation, independence, and self-confidence.

Beyond the classroom, teachers establish active partnerships with parents to ensure continuity between school-based and home-based learning processes. These practices reflect the application of global inclusion principles such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the scaffolding approach within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). However, the effectiveness of the teacher's role continues to face several challenges, including heavy administrative workloads, limited specific professional training, and a lack of learning facilities that meet the needs of students with special needs. Therefore, sustainable improvement in the quality of inclusive education requires more concrete policy support from schools, strengthening of teachers' professional competencies, and the development of a structured collaboration system between schools and families.

## **DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST**

The authors declare no known financial conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

## **DECLARATION OF ETHICS**

The authors declare that the research and writing of this manuscript adhere to ethical standards of research and publication, in accordance with scientific principles, and are free from plagiarism.

## **DECLARATION OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS**

The authors declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence and other assistive technologies were not excessively utilized in the research and writing processes of this manuscript.

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