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Teacher perceptions of inclusive education training: Implementation of an inclusive elementary school mentoring program based on collaborative partnership

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Abstract

This research explores teachers' perceptions of inclusive education training (a collaborative mentorship programme). The research involved 90 general teachers of inclusive elementary schools who had attended inclusive education training organized by the education office in collaboration with a university in Bogor District, West Java, Indonesia. The data were collected through Google Forms and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results show three main themes: relevance, new knowledge and hope. The results of the training had a positive impact on teachers. Inclusive education training aims to improve the implementation of inclusive education in elementary schools and must be carried out continuously. The training has also increased teachers' competence and independence to develop instructional systems in inclusive classrooms. The mentoring program for inclusive elementary schools through training activities is a program that must be implemented continuously by all stakeholders including the government and universities in order to improve the quality of inclusive education in Indonesia.

Keywords: Collaborative, Elementary school, Inclusive education, Mentoring program, Partnership, University.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring teachers' perceptions of inclusive education training (a form of mentoring program) based on collaborative partnership.

1. Introduction

Elementary schools must provide an inclusive education service system that meets the needs of all students including those with disabilities. The educational system's resources such as the quality of teachers, facilities, infrastructure, funding and the support of all school community stakeholders determine the level of services provided (Asiyai, 2015; Zabadi, 2013). All stakeholders must collaborate and demonstrate unwavering commitment to meet the government's objective for the successful implementation of inclusive education in elementary schools (Mentz & Barrett, 2011).

The government has developed policies and support for inclusive education to provide maximum services to all students. In Indonesia, all school members must implement national rules and policies for inclusive education including at the elementary level.

However, many elementary schools still need help meeting established standards and regulations from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology. Common problems these schools face include a lack of understanding of inclusive education among school members, low competence of general teachers in handling students with disabilities during inclusive classes, inadequate facilities and infrastructure and a shortage of special assistance teachers.

These issues impact the effectiveness of inclusive education and make it difficult to achieve its goals (Rasmitadila, Humaira, & Rachmadtullah, 2022; Rasmitadila, Megan Asri, & Reza, 2022). Inclusive elementary schools face various challenges that are becoming more difficult to solve. The government must assist in finding solutions to these problems (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004). The necessity in Indonesia for primary schools to deal with SWD causes anxiety and burden. The government needs the assistance of other parties to support the implementation and improvement of inclusive education in Indonesia.

According to Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020, universities that provide prospective teacher education programmes must offer comprehensive courses that prepare and train teachers. This policy emphasizes the responsibility of universities to ensure that prospective teachers are competent to teach in inclusive elementary schools. The goal is to establish sustainable programs such as teacher training and to increase teacher competence in inclusive classroom learning. This training whether organized by the university or government is crucial to improve the knowledge and outlook of teachers through research (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020). Stakeholders may accomplish beneficial inclusive education implementation by forming a collaborative relationship based on support which is required to satisfy the government's educational objectives (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013; Yada & Savolainen, 2017).

The mentoring program provides training for elementary school teachers to promote inclusivity in their classrooms to enhance teacher competency in inclusive learning and offers various benefits such as improving their understanding of implementing inclusive education (Lindsay, 2003; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020).

As a teacher, it's essential to have expertise in handling SWD, understanding effective learning techniques for inclusive classes and creating innovative lesson plans and IEPs with support from mentors during training. Ongoing training is critical to improve teacher competence to meet students' diverse challenges and needs in inclusive classrooms (Caena & Redecker, 2019; Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2019).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Inclusive Elementary School Mentoring Program in Indonesia

The inclusive school mentoring program determines the success of implementing inclusive education that the university can implement as an institution providing prospective elementary school teachers. In particular, the inclusive primary school mentoring program is expected to improve the quality of inclusive primary schools especially the competence of human resources such as principals, teachers, staff and all school members in implementing inclusive education. Several mentoring program activities that can be carried out by related parties from ministries such as the education office and universities can be carried out by organizing training for inclusive elementary school teachers.

The mentoring programme is a relationship between mentoring activities, instructions, and encouragement with the aim of developing the competence of the program target individual. An environment must be created in mentoring activities to encourage positive relationships between mentor and mentee. Currently, inclusive elementary school mentoring programs in Indonesia are rarely carried out on a scheduled and continuous basis. The university's role in supplying prospective elementary school teachers who can serve in inclusive primary schools has yet to be fully realized.

It is clear in Article 5 (Number 3a) that there is a relationship between universities and the fulfilment of prospective teachers' quality in elementary schools according to government regulation No. 13 of 2020 respecting adequate accommodations for students with disabilities.

The mentorship programme for inclusive elementary schools implemented by the university is a model with mutual needs and input (Rasmitadila, Humaira, Laeli, Rachmadtullah, & Jauhari, 2023). Both parties can become organizers which are as follows: 1) The university organizes inclusive education courses to increase the competency of inclusive prospective teachers, harmonize the theory and practice of inclusive education and offer special accompanying teachers. 2) Design activities that consist of seminars, training and regular assistance. 3) Conduct research on inclusive education by students and lecturers in inclusive primary schools as part of input needs analysis so that the quality of inclusive practices in inclusive primary schools is better in the form of internships, actual work lectures, school visits and producing scientific work. 4) According to teacher competence, inclusive elementary schools are job providers for graduates who will teach in inclusive primary schools.

As facilitators, both parties can: 1) Plan regular and ongoing assistance to inclusive primary schools. 2) Plan mentoring time with several options. 3) Plan mentoring materials such as student identification and assessment, inclusive education curriculum, inclusive lesson plans, PPI program for students with special needs, learning media, learning methods, inclusive learning assessment, inclusive facilities and infrastructure, handling students with special needs and inclusive class management. 4) Linking cooperation with other stakeholders establishes partnerships and benefits all parties such as the Office of Education and Culture and the community. 5) An inclusive elementary school is a place for universities to improve the development of inclusive education. Meanwhile, university mentors can: 1) Involve inclusive education experts such as psychologists or professors who will assist inclusive elementary schools. 2) Involve inclusive education practitioners such as lecturers who have long experience in inclusive education, communities and other non-commercial institutions and inclusive communities. Inclusive education researchers such as lecturers and students research inclusive education.

2.2. The Collaborative Partnership Mentoring Program

A collaborative partnership involves working together towards shared objectives through mutual trust, knowledge, power and assistance. This is achieved through effective teamwork (Murtagh & Burchinall, 2018). These factors serve as the foundation for successful collaboration (Bentley-Williams, Grima-Farrell, Long, & Laws, 2017) 1) It is important for successful relationships to recognize and accept each other's efforts and potential respect. 2) Both parties and organizations should participate and clearly understand their joint responsibilities related to the specific objectives they have developed together.

Transparency is essential in this process. 3) Both sides have built a supportive and nurturing environment that fosters a strong commitment to partnerships. 4) It is critical to analyse and evaluate partnerships on a regular basis to ensure that both parties achieve their intended goals.

3. Methodology

This study aims to determine the teacher's perception of inclusive training education given by private universities in the Province of West Java, Indonesia. Therefore, the researcher used a simple research design (SRD) to analyze field findings and apply theory to resolve issues (Bungin, 2020). SRD is a strategy for reflecting on research findings and applying theory to solve difficulties.

The SRD research procedure consists of five main steps which include: (1) Choosing the appropriate social context and formulating a straightforward research question. (2) Conducting a literature review. (3) Conducting research methods and collecting data. (4) Analyzing data. (5) Reporting research results.

3.1. Participant

The participants involved in this study consisted of 90 general teachers (GT) who had an average teaching experience ($N > 70$) of over ten years in public elementary schools that accept students with disabilities (SWD) as well as schools that the government has designated as inclusive schools.

3.2. Data Collection

Data was collected through a survey of 90 elementary school teachers who had taught in inclusive elementary schools in a three day training activity organized by the Education Office in collaboration with universities in Bogor District, West Java, Indonesia. Materials provided in training included an overview of inclusive education, identification, assessment and lesson planning, the practice of making lesson plans, individual educational programs (IEP), inclusive education curricula and learning.

The training began with a pre-test to find out the teacher's initial ability regarding inclusive education. On the third day, a post-test was given to determine the teacher's final ability after the training. After conducting the post-test, the mentor provides an evaluation form regarding implementing the training using Google Forms which contains five essay questions online for the teacher. The teacher immediately fills out the form and the mentor gets the information as a manuscript which will be analyzed in the next step.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data obtained were in the form of manuscripts which were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is suitable for identifying, evaluating and creating the main themes revealed by the research (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Galloway & Jenkins, 2009). The thematic analysis begins with reading each manuscript's content and assigning keywords as codes that are relevant to the topic. The second step is to create categories from the code that has been completed.

NVivo is the premier software for qualitative data analysis. All interview data were entered and given codes and categories. The researcher had previously developed and reviewed the codes several times in order to eliminate overlapping data, establish new categories and develop primary themes that meet the goal of the research. All themes generated were confirmed by researchers through justification and discussion among researchers resulting in high trust for the themes generated.

4. Result

This study shows the teacher's perception of implementing inclusive education training as part of the university's mentoring program for inclusive schools with three themes: relevance, new knowledge and hope.

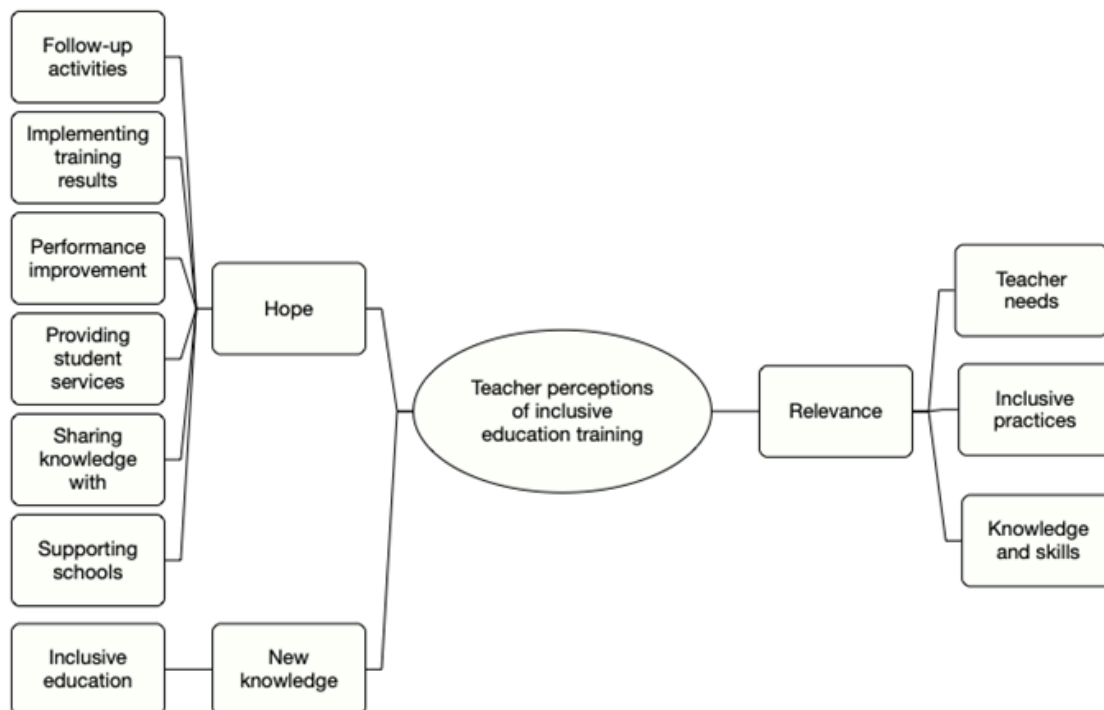


Figure 1. Thematic analysis of teacher perceptions of inclusive education training (NVivo 12)

Figure 1 explains the results of the data analysis which produces three main themes. Each theme relates to enhance teacher competency in training as part of a collaborative elementary school mentorship programme.

4.1. Relevance

The findings on the relevance theme consist of three sub-themes: teacher needs, knowledge and skills and inclusive practices. In the sub-theme of teacher needs, GT believes that the training output received by teachers is that what teacher needs to implement learning in inclusive classes. Some of the training outputs received by teachers such as information and experience about teaching in inclusive classes, the characteristics and handling of all students including SWD, managing inclusive classes, meeting the needs of SWD and making learning plans and IEPs, are very useful for teachers to put into practice in inclusive classes immediately. GTs believes that the mentors' guidance is highly relevant and greatly required by teachers particularly when dealing with challenges that have been a concern in inclusive classrooms. GTs expressed this opinion as:

"This training is very relevant to the needs because as a class teacher I do not have skills in educating or guiding students with special needs so now I know how to deal with them".

"This material is quite relevant to my needs as a teacher because I can find out the character of students based on their characteristics".

The second sub-theme, knowledge and skills acquired by GT through training are very helpful for GT especially in understanding the characteristics of SWD and class management. GTs believes that training will enhance their knowledge and abilities allowing them to boost learning in inclusive classrooms. One GT explains this opinion as:

"Material can be delivered to the situation in my school so that I gain knowledge on how to teach students with special needs and regular students".

Meanwhile, the third sub-theme, inclusive practices related to implementing all training materials obtained by GTs will be practiced in schools. GT is confident that besides being relevant and following school conditions, all material must also be practicable following the training material. One GT expressed this opinion as:

"The material is very relevant, the knowledge obtained according to reality or conditions at school can be implemented well".

The mentor's training is tailored to the needs of GTs resulting in an understanding of information and skills related to inclusive education in general which may be practiced in class. The content that forms the emphasis of GT is mostly on handling learners, including how to identify students so that GTs may understand their characteristics. The understanding of GTs in understanding student characteristics impacts the service and assistance of all students especially SWD, in implementing inclusive classroom learning. Students with various features require resources tailored to their needs particularly SWD in order to attain optimal learning outcomes.

4.2. New Knowledge

The theme of new information is connected to the sub-theme of inclusive education which includes basic materials such as student handling, teaching, lesson plans and IEPs. GTs believes that the training materials provide new knowledge to them especially about inclusive education as a whole, handling of students related to their characteristics and services provided to students. GTs learns about student characteristics, identify student characteristics and explore student differences. GTs expressed this opinion as:

"This workshop gave me new knowledge about assisting students with special needs at school".

"With this activity, I can find out the characteristics of students with special needs and how to assist them according to their characteristics".

GTs believes the training material has offered new information about instructional design and approaches supplied by mentors for the instruction sub-theme such that teaching in the classroom is anticipated to accomplish goals that meet the requirements of all students. One GT expressed this opinion as:

"There are many lessons to be learned by making inclusive educators able to make learning designs according to the needs of students".

Meanwhile, GT stated that their knowledge about lesson plans for inclusive classes and IEP sub-themes increased because they needed to practice making certain lesson plans for inclusive courses including IEP for SWD. Before receiving training, GTs had not been able to design IEPs for inclusion classes, so the impact of services and assistance on SWDs could have been more optimal because GTs gave the same treatment to all students. This opinion is explained by one of the GT:

"I got a lot of knowledge from this workshop, including how to make lesson plans, IEPs and assessments so that I can practice them directly in class".

The new knowledge gained by the GTs in this training has increased their motivation to carry out learning in inclusive classes more optimally so that achieving instructional objectives becomes easier. GTs may create objectives for education that better meet the requirements of all students including SWD, with more accurate student management, effective lesson plans and IEP.

4.3. Hope

Findings on the theme of hope produce sub-themes of implementing training results, sharing knowledge with colleagues, supporting schools, providing student services, performance improvement and follow-up activities. GTs seek to incorporate the training results in inclusive courses in the sub-theme of training results. According to the GTs, all knowledge and experience gained can be put into practice to improve learning which has to follow inclusive class standards. One of GT's opinions is described below:

"My hope after attending this workshop is that I can apply the knowledge gained from this training to properly treat children with special needs".

GT explained the sub-theme of sharing knowledge with colleagues that they would share knowledge and all material about inclusive education with their colleagues at school especially about handling SWD and designing learning according to inclusive classes. GTs' colleagues can also practice what they have received in the training so that there are changes and improvements in teaching skills in inclusive classrooms. One of GT's opinions is described below:

"I can put the results of this training into practice and educate my colleagues so they know how to handle students with special needs".

GT believes that all school members including the administrator, parents, school committee and coworkers may support the information and experience gained throughout the training in its implementation for the school support sub-theme. GTs will communicate the training outcomes to all school members, parents and the community in order to get support. Therefore, one of the challenges that schools including teachers, experience in establishing inclusive education is the need for further knowledge of the inclusive education system by parents and society. Thus, socialization with parents and the community is required. GTs hope that all socialization parties commit to developing and implementing inclusive education optimally and sustainably. One of GT's opinions is described below:

"I will socialize about inclusiveness with parents, the environment and the community so that together we commit to implementing inclusive education on an ongoing basis".

The sub-theme of service to students, according to GTs is that the results of this training can increase understanding of the characteristics of students especially SWD and increase SWD assistance. According to GTs, the sub-theme of service to students is that the results of this training can raise understanding of the characteristics of students, particularly SWD and boost SWD help. GTs get identification and evaluation materials as part of this training which adds to GTs' knowledge and helps to reduce the obstacles that GTs have experienced. GT presents this opinion as:

"This training can improve my understanding, skills and service in dealing with all students including those with special needs".

According to GTs, the performance enhancement sub-theme is about motivation and answers to inclusion challenges observed in class. After attending the training, GTs are highly motivated to be able to implement all the knowledge and experience in their class. So, it is expected to improve their learning performance in inclusive classes. One of GT's opinions is described below:

"My motivation increases to learn more and know more about inclusive schools and to practice them in my class later".

GTs encourage continued follow-up activities for the sub-theme of follow-up activities so that the difficulties of inclusive education which are always dynamic, obtain the proper answer, particularly in dealing with students in inclusive courses. Teachers increasingly have the latest experience and knowledge in inclusive education with sustainable training. This opinion is explained by GT below:

"I hope that this workshop will always be held on an ongoing basis so that it can produce solutions to the problems that teachers experience in schools".

5. Discussion

This study explores classroom teachers' perceptions regarding implementing inclusive education training which is part of the elementary school mentoring program based on the university-school collaborative partnership (USCP). Researchers identified three main themes in this study: relevance, new knowledge and hope. The first theme, relevance relates to the experience gained by GTs including the material and all the practices carried out by GTs in training are very relevant to the needs of teachers in carrying out learning in inclusive classrooms. This need is supported by the knowledge and skills acquired by GTs during the training. GTs need to practice them in inclusive classroom learning. The relevance of training materials to teacher needs is significant for inclusive classroom teachers (Boyle, Anderson, & Allen, 2020; Kuyini, Yeboah, Das, Alhassan, & Mangope, 2016; Opoku, Cuskelly, Pedersen, & Rayner, 2021). Relevant material and experience can provide valuable input and experience for teachers in solving complex problems often faced by teachers in inclusive classrooms (Oleson & Hora, 2014). Understanding the characteristics and identifying students who require special skills is one of the most important and difficult problems for teachers to solve. This difficulty impacts the quality of learning obtained by all students,

especially students with special needs because of the limitations teachers have in understanding the characteristics of students (Duque, Gairal, Molina, & Roca, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

The second theme, new knowledge results from research that positively impacts GTs. All training material has improved teachers' understanding and competency, so they are expected to be capable of handling difficulties in the inclusive classroom. All training materials can develop when they face learning problems and handle students in inclusive classes (Allam & Martin, 2021; Carr, 2013; Paju, Rätty, Pirttimaa, & Kontu, 2016). It is essential in teacher training to provide a minimum of standard content that may be developed by the teacher so that when the teachers confront challenges in class, they can find solutions independently through discussions with colleagues through cooperative research to solve inclusive problems independently based on standard material that teachers already have in training (Cunsa & Savicka, 2012; Mitchell, 2013; Westwood, 2018).

The third theme "hope" is the GTs' future hope with particular aims for the training results already attained which affect all school members. The implementation of inclusive education in schools can be built on a shared commitment to the success of inclusive education. The involvement of the whole school community is the first step in achieving the success of inclusive education in elementary schools (Kozleski, Yu, Satter, Francis, & Haines, 2015; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014; Mintz, Seleznyov, Peacey, Brown, & White, 2021). Apart from the involvement of school members, school committees and the community, there is also an understanding among fellow learning implementers, namely colleagues. Research results must be disseminated to colleagues so that the quality of learning together can be improved for the better through services and assistance to all students including those with special needs (Masika & Jones, 2016). Increased understanding of inclusive education will impact the service and assistance of all students and teacher performance (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Savolainen, Engelbrecht, Nel, & Malinen, 2012; Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012).

Inclusive education training is a mentoring program based on a university-school collaborative partnership that can help teachers solve their problems effectively (Rasmitadila, Megan Asri, et al., 2022). The inclusive school assistance program carried out by the university and in collaboration with the government is a form of positive support (Hameed & Manzoor, 2019; Kivirand, Leijen, Lepp, & Tammemäe, 2021; Pillay et al., 2015). It requires mutual input and needs from all stakeholders to implement inclusive education in Indonesia. Teachers anticipate that ongoing training will continue including the dissemination of research findings by universities as capital for inclusive primary schools to organise learning in inclusive courses (Alquraini, 2012; Gross et al., 2015).

6. Conclusion

This research aims to explore the opinions of classroom teachers in inclusive elementary schools regarding implementing inclusive education training which is part of the university's mentoring program. The results of the training have a positive impact on teachers. Inclusive education training for teachers is a strategy to improve inclusive education in elementary schools although it has yet to be evenly implemented in other regions of Indonesia. The results of training must continue to be carried out continuously so that problems faced by teachers in inclusive classrooms can be solved with a solution based on the standard rules given during the training. In addition, the training has increased teachers' competence and independence to develop an instructional system in an inclusive classroom.

7. Implications

The mentoring program for inclusive elementary schools through training activities is a program that must be implemented continuously by all stakeholders including the government and universities to improve the quality of inclusive education in Indonesia. For academics, the results of this research can be the basis for developing training programs and can re-design programs that enable teachers to solve inclusive education problems independently. The government can work with universities to organize joint training and make it a national program so that the quality of teachers is evenly distributed in all regions of Indonesia.

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