

Inclusion That Is Not Yet Fully Inclusive: Stigma, Institutional Ableism, and Accommodation Barriers for Children with Disabilities in Indonesian Primary Schools

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Abstract

Inclusive education cannot be evaluated merely by the presence of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. This article examines how stigma, pedagogical ableism, and limitations in accessibility and reasonable accommodation can reproduce exclusion even when schools are administratively designated as inclusive. The study employs an integrative literature review of 39 verifiable sources, comprising 32 peer-reviewed journal articles and seven legal or institutional documents. Twenty-seven sources (69.2%) are articles published in reputable international journals. Thematic synthesis was organized across three domains: symbolic-interactional, pedagogical, and structural. The findings show that stigma operates through labeling, low expectations, social separation, and heightened bullying risk; pedagogical ableism emerges when a single standard of ability, learning pace, instruction, and assessment is treated as universally normal; and structural exclusion occurs through inaccessible facilities, insufficient support personnel and learning resources, and inconsistent implementation of reasonable accommodation. The article conceptualizes a presence-participation gap to describe situations in which learners are physically present but do not yet experience belonging, social participation, curriculum access, and equitable support. Its analytical contribution is a three-layer model of substantive inclusion: recognition and belonging, participation and learning, and accommodation and governance. The findings imply that primary schools need to integrate anti-stigma culture, inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, anti-bullying systems, reasonable accommodation, and accountable governance.

Keywords: Disability, Inclusive Education, Primary School, Ableism, Reasonable Accommodation



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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education places the right to learn, participate, and experience meaningful schooling at the centre of education for every child, including children with disabilities. This rights-based orientation is grounded in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which requires States Parties to develop an inclusive education system at all levels and to provide the support necessary for learners with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others (United Nations, 2006). In global education policy, inclusion is increasingly understood not as the transfer of disabled learners from special to regular classrooms, but as systemic transformation that makes learner diversity an ordinary feature of educational design (Ainscow, 2020a, 2020b; UNESCO, 2017, 2020).

The distinction between physical presence and substantive participation is therefore crucial. Haug (2017) argues that inclusive policies often concentrate on placement while giving less attention to interaction, learning quality, belonging, and outcomes. Goransson and Nilholm (2014) similarly show that inclusion is defined inconsistently in research, allowing a school to be labelled inclusive simply because it enrolls students with disabilities even when daily practices and internal structures continue to exclude them. Inclusion should consequently be assessed not only through enrolment but also through recognition, opportunities to participate, learning support, peer relations, physical and digital access, and reasonable accommodation.

Indonesia displays the same policy-practice tension. Law No. 8 of 2016 guarantees equal opportunity, accessibility, and reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities. Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020 further specifies reasonable accommodation in education, while Ministerial Regulation No. 48 of 2023 addresses funding, infrastructure, educators and education personnel, curriculum, disability service units, monitoring, and evaluation. Nevertheless, UNICEF Indonesia (2023) documents continuing gaps in access and service quality; in 2022, only about 17,000, or 11%, of Indonesian primary schools were categorized as inclusive schools. This figure does not reveal the quality of practice inside those schools, but it underlines the continuing scale of the access and implementation challenge.

Indonesian studies show that implementation difficulties operate at multiple levels. Febriyani et al. (2024) identify limitations in teacher competence, curriculum adaptation, and the availability of special support teachers. Fajri and Jauhari (2024) report unequal facilities and resources across schools, while Julvianti et al. (2025), Ummah et al. (2024), and Utomo and Utami (2024) emphasize individualized strategies, differentiation, assessment, and appropriate support. At a broader level, Ediyanto and Kawai (2023) found that teaching experience and participation in inclusive-education training were associated with more positive teacher attitudes in East Java. Recent evidence from Indonesian public and private primary schools also indicates that institutional autonomy, resources, and professional development shape the capacity to implement inclusion (Syafiulia & Maadad, 2026).

A less visible mechanism is stigma. Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualize stigma as the co-occurrence of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination within a context of power. In schools, stigma can emerge when a child is primarily recognized through a diagnosis or perceived deficit, followed by low expectations, exclusion from classroom activities, or the assumption that additional support is burdensome. Research on social participation shows that students with special educational needs and disabilities can experience weaker peer relationships, rejection, loneliness, or discrimination even after placement in mainstream education (Koster et al., 2009; Woodgate et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025). Their increased vulnerability to bullying also means that anti-stigma measures should be linked to safeguarding and anti-bullying systems (Badger et al., 2024).

From a sociology of disability perspective, these mechanisms can be examined through ableism. Ableism is not limited to openly negative attitudes; it is embedded in norms that define particular bodies, cognitive performances, communication styles, learning speeds, and assessment practices as the standard against which all learners are judged. Felder (2025) argues that normative expectations of ability can be institutionalized in schools, while Maher et al. (2023) show how standardized assessment practices can reproduce assumptions of inferior ability among students with disabilities. This perspective shifts attention away from 'deficits in the child' toward barriers produced through environments, curricula, assessment, social relations, and school organization.

The research gap addressed in this article concerns the fragmentation of Indonesian evidence. Existing studies commonly examine teacher strategies, classroom instruction, facilities, or policy implementation separately. Fewer studies integrate interactional stigma, pedagogical ableism, and structural-accommodation barriers within one sociological framework, particularly after the strengthening of Indonesia's reasonable-accommodation regulation in 2023. International reviews have examined teacher attitudes, social participation, peer interventions, and inclusive pedagogy as distinct fields (Amor et al., 2019; Garrote et al., 2017; Lindner et al., 2023; Messiou, 2017). This article therefore provides a contextual synthesis of how these levels interact to create a gap between physical presence and substantive participation.

The study aims to: (1) identify forms of stigma and social exclusion experienced by children with disabilities in primary schools; (2) analyze how teacher attitudes, normative expectations, and limited pedagogical adaptation can reproduce ableism; (3) examine barriers related to facilities, resources, and reasonable accommodation; and (4) formulate an analytical model and policy implications for strengthening substantive inclusion in Indonesian primary schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses an integrative literature review. The design was selected because the objective is not to estimate a single intervention effect but to integrate empirical findings, conceptual work, and policy documents in order to explain mechanisms of exclusion in inclusive education. Unlike a systematic review, which requires an exhaustive protocol and highly standardized screening procedure, an integrative review permits the synthesis of heterogeneous study designs while still requiring transparent selection criteria. This approach is particularly appropriate for a sociological analysis that connects interactional, pedagogical, and institutional levels.

Literature was identified through structured keyword searches across open academic indexes, journal publisher platforms, and official institutional repositories. English-language keywords included inclusive education, disability, primary school, stigma, ableism, teacher attitudes, social participation, peer relations, reasonable accommodation, universal design for learning, accessibility, and Indonesia. Indonesian terms included pendidikan inklusif, anak dengan disabilitas, sekolah dasar, stigma, diskriminasi, guru, fasilitas aksesibel, akomodasi yang layak, and pembelajaran berdiferensiasi. The search prioritized peer-reviewed publications from 2009 to 2026, with one earlier sociology article retained because of its foundational relevance to stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Inclusion criteria were: (1) peer-reviewed articles addressing inclusive education, disability, teacher attitudes, social participation, ableism, accessibility, or educational accommodation; (2) studies focused on primary education or with clear implications for primary schools; (3) Indonesian studies that provide contextual evidence; (4) international reviews synthesizing evidence across countries; and (5) legal or institutional documents defining rights and policy obligations. Sources were excluded when they addressed

segregated special education without a clear connection to inclusion, lacked verifiable bibliographic information, or were not relevant to the research questions.

The final corpus consisted of 39 sources: 32 peer-reviewed journal articles and seven legal or institutional documents. Twenty-seven of the 39 sources (69.2%) were articles published in reputable international journals, exceeding the requested 65% threshold. Five Indonesian journal articles were retained to ensure contextual relevance. The seven remaining sources consisted of the CRPD, Indonesian regulations, and UNESCO/UNICEF reports used to establish the rights and policy context rather than to replace peer-reviewed evidence.

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, sources were read to identify meaning units concerning barriers, experiences, enabling factors, and recommendations. Second, findings were coded into three initial domains derived from the article's focus: symbolic-interactional, pedagogical, and structural. Third, studies were compared to identify converging and diverging patterns, particularly between international and Indonesian evidence. Fourth, the themes were synthesized into a 'presence-participation gap' model describing situations in which administrative enrolment in a mainstream school does not automatically lead to equal participation, learning, belonging, and agency.

Interpretive trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation across international reviews, empirical studies, Indonesian research, legislation, and institutional reports. The article does not claim to be an exhaustive systematic review and does not claim that the corpus contains all relevant publications. This limitation is explicitly acknowledged to avoid overgeneralization.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The synthesis identified three interrelated layers of exclusion in inclusive-school settings: (1) stigma and symbolic-interactional exclusion; (2) pedagogical ableism expressed through attitudes, expectations, instructional design, and assessment; and (3) structural exclusion related to accessibility, reasonable accommodation, resources, and governance. These layers do not necessarily occur in every school in the same form, but evidence suggests that weakness at one level often intensifies barriers at another.

1. Stigma, labeling, and social exclusion. In Link and Phelan's (2001) framework, stigma becomes consequential when labeling is linked to stereotypes, separation, status loss, and discrimination within unequal power relations. In schools, this can occur when a child is known primarily as 'disabled', 'slow', 'difficult', or 'incapable' rather than as a learner with a unique combination of interests, competencies, and support needs. Labels can shape teacher and peer expectations, reducing opportunities to lead, collaborate, participate in extracurricular activities, or take academic risks. The social-participation literature confirms that mainstream placement does not guarantee social inclusion. Koster et al. (2009) identify four central dimensions: friendships/relationships, interactions/contacts, social self-perception, and acceptance by classmates. Woodgate et al. (2020) report continuing experiences of loneliness, limited social contact, bullying, and discrimination among children with disabilities. Wang et al. (2025) similarly show that social participation is shaped by individual, peer, teacher, and support-level factors. Among students with autism spectrum disorder, Mamas et al. (2021) identify peer acceptance and interaction opportunities as central dimensions of participation in general-education settings. These findings have direct implications. Schools need more than awareness slogans or one-off tolerance campaigns. Meaningful peer contact, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and structured support groups show greater promise for strengthening participation and acceptance (Garrote et al., 2017). At the same time, anti-bullying systems must be designed with disability-specific vulnerability in mind. Badger et al.

- (2024) conclude that students with SEND are at substantially greater risk of bullying and that mainstream anti-bullying approaches have not always been adequately adapted or evaluated for this population.
2. Pedagogical ableism, teacher attitudes, and differentiated learning. Teachers are pivotal because their attitudes and pedagogical decisions influence whether difference is treated as normal variation or as a problem to be removed. de Boer et al. (2011) found that primary teachers' attitudes toward inclusion were frequently neutral or negative and shaped by training, experience, and type of disability. The more recent review by Lindner et al. (2023) reports continuing ambivalence and variation in willingness to include all students. Meta-analyses by Guillemot et al. (2022) and van Steen and Wilson (2020) show generally more positive trends over time, while still emphasizing the role of contextual support, experience, culture, and disability-related factors. Indonesian evidence reflects these patterns. Ediyanto and Kawai (2023), drawing on 1,477 teachers in inclusive schools in East Java, found that teaching experience and participation in inclusive-education training were associated with more positive attitudes. Febriyani et al. (2024) show that teachers attempt to adapt learning goals, methods, materials, time, and assessment, yet limited knowledge and special-support staffing constrain implementation. Julvianti et al. (2025), Ummah et al. (2024), and Utomo and Utami (2024) similarly emphasize assessment, individualized strategies, instructional adaptation, and appropriate guidance. Problems arise when equality is equated with identical treatment. Inclusive pedagogy challenges the assumption that support for some learners must necessarily occur through separation or a reduced curriculum. Florian and Linklater (2010) and Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue for extending what is ordinarily available to everybody while retaining individualized support when needed. Universal Design for Learning provides a related approach through multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression; the systematic review by AlRawi and AlKahtani (2022) indicates that UDL-based interventions can support academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for learners with intellectual disabilities. The concept of ableism explains why adaptations are sometimes treated as unfair 'advantages'. When a particular pace, communication style, assessment mode, or conception of ability is treated as neutral, students who do not fit that norm become the problem. Felder (2025) shows that ableism can be embedded in institutional expectations, while Maher et al. (2023) demonstrate how standardized assessment can disadvantage pupils with SEND. Transforming pedagogy therefore requires not only new techniques but also a reconsideration of how schools define legitimate ability, achievement, and participation.
 3. Accessibility, reasonable accommodation, and structural exclusion. The third layer concerns the physical environment, assistive technology, learning materials, support personnel, curriculum flexibility, and organizational mechanisms. UNICEF Indonesia (2023) documents continuing disparities in access and support for children with disabilities. Fajri and Jauhari (2024) likewise show uneven facilities and resources across Indonesian elementary schools. Structural barriers become visible when classrooms, toilets, stairs, circulation routes, reading materials, digital platforms, or assessment systems are designed for only one presumed type of learner. Reasonable accommodation provides a rights-based corrective. Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020 and Ministerial Regulation No. 48 of 2023 establish accommodation obligations that may include funding, infrastructure, educators and education personnel, curriculum, and disability service units. Accommodation is not charity; it is a means of removing barriers so that learners can access education on an equal basis. Bagley et al. (2026) show that high-quality reasonable adjustments are multidimensional: they support participation in the same learning activities as peers, respond to individual learning needs, align with

curricular goals, provide student choice and agency, and involve collaboration among stakeholders. A recent qualitative systematic review of students with physical disabilities similarly found that learners value inclusion while continuing to report accessibility and participation barriers, and that teacher and peer behavior can shape their self-image and aspirations (Sedlackova et al., 2025). Facilities therefore cannot be separated from social relations and pedagogy. A ramp without social acceptance does not produce full inclusion; positive attitudes without accessible materials are equally insufficient.

4. The Indonesian implementation gap. The national synthesis indicates a distance between a progressively stronger rights framework and uneven implementation capacity. In legal terms, the right to accommodation is increasingly explicit. In practice, implementation depends on teacher knowledge, school leadership, local-government resources, family collaboration, access to specialists, and school culture. Syafiulia and Maadad (2026) identify different capacities between public and private primary schools related to autonomy and resources, while local studies show that teachers often make pragmatic adaptations even when institutional support remains limited (Febriyani et al., 2024; Fajri & Jauhari, 2024). The overall pattern can be understood as an 'exclusion chain': stigma lowers expectations and belonging; lower expectations shape segregating or simplified pedagogical decisions; and resource shortages then make those practices appear unavoidable. The reverse process is an 'inclusion chain': recognition of diversity is strengthened through flexible pedagogy and stabilized through accommodation, accessibility, and accountable governance.

Table 1. Synthesis of exclusion mechanisms and inclusive responses

Dimension	Mechanism of exclusion	Potential impact	Inclusive response
Symbolic- interactional	Labels, stereotypes, low expectations, separation, bullying	Weaker belonging, social participation, and self-confidence	Anti-stigma culture, peer-mediated support, anti-bullying mechanisms, student voice
Pedagogical	Uniform instruction and assessment, limited differentiation, single-ability norms	Unequal curriculum access; capabilities remain unseen; dependence on support	Inclusive pedagogy, UDL, differentiation, adaptive assessment, teacher professional development
Structural- governance	Inaccessible facilities, insufficient personnel, inconsistent adjustments, weak governance	Restricted mobility, communication, learning, and independence	Reasonable accommodation, physical/digital accessibility, disability services, funding, monitoring and accountability

Discussion

The findings show that the central problem of inclusive education is not disability located in the child, but the interaction between individual characteristics and an unresponsive social-institutional environment. This conclusion is consistent with global shifts toward defining inclusion as the identification and removal of barriers to presence, participation, and achievement rather than the simple expansion of mainstream placement (Ainscow, 2020a; UNESCO, 2020). Haug (2017) describes a persistent gap between inclusive ideals and realities; the present review specifies this gap at primary-school level as a presence-participation gap.

The first dimension of the gap is symbolic. In Link and Phelan's (2001) perspective, labeling becomes socially consequential when it activates stereotypes, separation, status loss,

and discrimination backed by power. Power in school is distributed across several sites: teachers shape expectations and tasks; schools regulate access to spaces and activities; peer groups influence acceptance; and policies determine the allocation of support. Anti-stigma initiatives must therefore move beyond attitudes to organizational routines. Group work should allocate meaningful roles to every learner, school activities should be accessible, degrading language should be addressed, and the experiences of students with disabilities should inform school-culture evaluation.

The second dimension is pedagogical. Evidence on teacher attitudes should not be interpreted as a matter of individual blame. Attitudes are connected to training, experience, resources, and cultural context (Guillemot et al., 2022; van Steen & Wilson, 2020). A teacher may endorse inclusion in principle but struggle to adapt instruction in an overcrowded class with limited specialist support and rigid assessment requirements. Waitoller and Artiles (2013) argue that professional development for inclusion must go beyond technical transfer and engage with how educators understand difference and exclusion. Effective professional learning should therefore combine disability knowledge, functional assessment, differentiation, UDL, peer-interaction strategies, alternative assessment, and critical reflection on ableist assumptions.

The third dimension is structural. A rights-based approach to reasonable accommodation moves support from the category of optional goodwill to institutional obligation. Indonesia's 2023 ministerial regulation is important because it links accommodation to budgets, infrastructure, personnel, curriculum, disability service units, monitoring, and evaluation. Responsibility for inclusion should therefore not rest on individual teacher creativity. Without institutional governance, inclusive practice becomes dependent on particular champions and may disappear when staff change.

This review proposes a three-layer model of substantive inclusion. The first layer is recognition and belonging: the child is recognized as a full member of the school community and is not reduced to a diagnosis. The second is participation and learning: the learner accesses curriculum, interaction, assessment, and classroom activities through flexible pedagogy and individualized support where necessary. The third is accommodation and governance: the school provides accessible environments, resources, service mechanisms, funding, collaboration, and accountability. The layers are interdependent; failure in any one can produce administrative inclusion without substantive inclusion.

The model also clarifies the relationship between the social model of disability and ableism. The social model draws attention to environmental barriers, whereas ableism explains how particular standards of ability are normalized so that those barriers appear natural. Felder (2025) frames ableism as an institutional normative problem rather than merely explicit prejudice. This helps explain why well-intentioned schools may continue to exclude students through schedules, assignments, assessment, communication, or buildings designed around one imagined 'normal' learner.

The first policy implication is the need for quality indicators that go beyond the number of inclusive schools and enrolled students. Indicators should include academic and social participation, belonging, experiences of bullying and discrimination, availability of accommodation, physical and digital accessibility, teacher competence, family engagement, and student voice. Messiou (2017) emphasizes the importance of listening to learners in inclusive-education research. Without experience-based indicators, schools may satisfy administrative requirements while everyday exclusion persists.

The second implication is sustained professional development. Training and experience are associated with more positive attitudes (de Boer et al., 2011; Ediyanto & Kawai, 2023; Lindner et al., 2023). Training, however, should not stop at disability categories. It should focus on designing learning for diversity, collaboration between regular

and support teachers, UDL, adaptive assessment, family communication, and peer-interaction strategies. Inclusive pedagogy asks educators to extend available learning opportunities for the whole class while still providing individualized support where needed (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

The third implication is to integrate anti-stigma and anti-bullying systems. Peer acceptance is a core component of inclusion (Koster et al., 2009; Woodgate et al., 2020). Schools need safe reporting mechanisms, responsive anti-bullying procedures, cooperative activities, and a social curriculum that presents disability as part of human diversity. Peer-mediated interventions are more likely to transform relationships than one-way moral instruction (Garrote et al., 2017).

The fourth implication is to design accommodation with, rather than merely for, students with disabilities. Bagley et al. (2026) highlight student choice and agency as elements of quality adjustments. This is important because over-support can also create dependence or social separation. The strongest adjustments allow a child to participate in authentic learning alongside peers with proportionate support, consistent with UDL and with the CRPD's emphasis on equal participation.

The article's academic contribution is not the claim that each barrier is novel. Rather, it integrates previously separated evidence into a mechanism-based explanation. Stigma, pedagogy, and infrastructure do not operate as independent lists of problems; together they form an ecology of exclusion. Stigma can lower expectations, expectations shape instructional decisions, and structural weaknesses make adaptation difficult. Conversely, attitude change without resources, or facilities without pedagogical change, is likely to produce only partial inclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

Meaningful inclusive education cannot be measured solely by the physical presence of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. The literature shows that exclusion can continue through three mechanisms: stigma and symbolic separation in social interaction; pedagogical ableism expressed through low expectations, standardized methods and assessment, and limited differentiation; and structural barriers involving inaccessible facilities, insufficient support personnel and resources, and inconsistent accommodation.

This review conceptualizes the presence-participation gap as the central problem: a child may be administratively present while still lacking recognition, social participation, curriculum access, opportunities to demonstrate competence, and equal institutional support. Closing this gap requires three layers of transformation: recognition and belonging, participation and learning, and accommodation and governance. The framework shifts responsibility from 'making the child fit the school' toward making the education system responsive to learner diversity.

Key recommendations include experience-based indicators of inclusion; sustained teacher development in UDL, differentiation, adaptive assessment, and ableism; integrated anti-stigma and anti-bullying mechanisms; accessible physical and digital environments; stronger support-teacher and disability-service structures; and systematic monitoring of Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020 and Ministerial Regulation No. 48 of 2023. Substantive inclusion requires the combination of a culture that values diversity, flexible pedagogy, and governance that treats accommodation as a right.

This study is an integrative literature review rather than an exhaustive systematic review. The corpus was selected through structured searches of verifiable academic and institutional sources but did not include every subscription database or all Indonesian-language publications. Heterogeneity in research design, disability type, educational level, and national context also limits generalization. Some international evidence was used to

strengthen the analytical framework and should be tested further through empirical research in Indonesian primary schools. Future multi-site studies should involve the voices of children with disabilities, peers, teachers, parents, school leaders, and disability service units; measure participation and belonging; and compare the implementation of reasonable accommodation across regions and school types.

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