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Implementing Inclusive Education in Early Childhood: The Roles of Social Support and Routines

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ABSTRACT

All children are entitled to equal access to education at every level. Inclusive education aims to provide equal opportunities for all students to receive high-quality educational services. This study seeks to explore the implementation of inclusive education using the Circle Inclusive Classroom Scale (CICS) in Central Java. This research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a survey with a total of 209 respondents in this study, consisting of 130 teachers and 79 school principals. Data collection was conducted through a Google Form utilizing an instrument adapted for the two components of the CICS. The data obtained through the CICS scale were analyzed using Microsoft Office Excel to determine scores and percentages of practices. Findings show that, in terms of the Social Environment aspect, most teachers have fostered a work environment characterized by empathetic, non-judgmental, and respectful attitudes, received various forms of support and facilities, built positive relationships, and obtained access to information. In the aspect of Structure and Routines, teachers acknowledged that experiences, standards, boundaries, and routines applied to children influence their learning process. This study contributes globally by providing empirical evidence on inclusive practice in ECE in a developing country context, thereby enriching cross-cultural perspectives and advancing the global discourse on inclusive education.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Keywords:
cics; early childhood education; inclusive education; social environment; structure and routines

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education for early childhood education represents a concrete manifestation of fulfilling children's rights to equitable, non-discriminatory education. In Indonesia, efforts to realize inclusivity in education have been regulated under the Ministry of National Education Regulation No. 70 of 2009 and the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 137 of 2014. However, field implementation remains less than ideal, particularly at the early childhood education level, which has its complexities regarding pedagogical approaches, resource readiness, and environmental engagement. This condition highlights that, despite the existence of regulatory frameworks, the gap between policy and practice continues to challenge inclusive implementation. Teachers often face limitations in knowledge and skills related to inclusive pedagogy, which makes it difficult for them to accommodate diverse learning needs effectively. In addition, facilities and learning environments are not always accessible or supportive for children with disabilities, which hinders equal participation. Parental and community involvement also play a crucial role, yet in many cases, the awareness and support from these stakeholders are still limited. Therefore, strengthening collaboration among educators, policymakers, and families is essential to ensure that inclusive education in early years can be realized more optimally.

Most studies on inclusive education at the early childhood education level have focused on policy aspects and technical challenges, such as teachers' limited understanding of differentiated instruction for children with special needs (Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020) and the availability of learning aids or infrastructure within institutions (Navas-Bonilla et al., 2025). On the other hand, psychosocial factors—for instance, social support from the environment and daily routines applied during learning activities—also play a crucial role in supporting the participation and development of children with special needs (Kyzar et al., 2020; Light-Shriner & Zarate, 2023; Woodcock & Hardy, 2023; Maknun et al., 2024). Social environmental support encompasses involvement from family, teachers, peers, and the community, forming the foundation for a learning environment that is welcoming and responsive to diversity (Fatmasari et al., 2024). Positive social relationships reinforce children's socio-emotional development, increase self-confidence, and expand their engagement in learning activities (Barton & Smith, 2015; Steed et al., 2024). In the context of inclusive education, positive social interactions also help reduce stigma and enhance the social functioning of children with special needs.

Meanwhile, daily routines in early childhood education settings function as a structure that provides a sense of security, regularity, and consistent learning opportunities for all children, including those with special needs (Barton & Smith, 2015; Di Marino et al., 2018). A clear educational structure includes classroom organization, daily routines, activity schedules, and systematic establishment of learning goals. This structure provides predictability and security, which is especially important for children with special needs (Lonigan et al., 2015). Inclusive classrooms with robust learning structures are more successful at encouraging the active participation of children with special needs, as these structures help children understand expectations and rules (Aftab et al., 2024). Well-planned and flexible routines provide a framework for activities that help children feel secure and adapt more easily (Lapidot-Lefler, 2025). Consistent daily routines enable children to prepare for transitions between activities, develop independence, and build an understanding of sequential activities.

This study offers a seldom-explored approach to portray the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood settings, namely by referencing the inclusive learning framework (Renfrewshire, 2023), which includes physical support, the role of social environmental support, motivation, and daily routines as integral components of successful inclusive education implementation (Bonati & Andriana, 2021; Xie et al., 2023). The research presents the results of inclusive education implementation from a different perspective, viewing it as an ecosystem involving the emotional, social, and cultural aspects of early childhood. Furthermore, this study emphasizes real field practices by combining social and pedagogical strategies to foster sustainable, inclusive learning. However, the implementation of inclusive environments still faces several challenges, including limited teacher competence in applying differentiated instruction, insufficient facilities and learning resources, a lack of systematic collaboration between families, schools, and communities, as well as difficulties in creating routines that are both flexible and consistent for children with diverse needs. These obstacles often lead to gaps between policy and practice, which hinder the realization of truly inclusive classrooms. Accordingly, this research is important to carry out as it not only provides empirical evidence of field practices but also highlights context-based solutions that can strengthen inclusive education. Thus, it is expected that this study will contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of context-based inclusive education in Central Java, particularly in early childhood education, an area that has so far received little in-depth exploration from the perspectives of social interaction and learning routines.

METHOD

This research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a survey as the primary method of data collection. The use of a survey is considered appropriate because it allows researchers to capture respondents' perceptions and experiences in a structured manner within a relatively short time (Creswell, 2014). The survey design employed was cross-sectional, meaning that data were collected from participants at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of the current implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education (ECE) institutions. By applying this approach, the study aimed to identify the actual conditions in the field, free from the influence of long-term external changes.

The main objective of the survey was to investigate the extent to which inclusive education practices have been implemented in ECE institutions in Central Java, especially those that accept children with special needs. More specifically, the study aimed to assess the quality of the social environment and the structure and routines within inclusive classrooms, in line with the dimensions of the Circle Inclusive Classroom Scale (CICS) (Renfrewshire, 2023). Through this focus, the research intended to highlight both strengths and challenges faced by schools, thereby providing valuable insights for improving the readiness and effectiveness of inclusive education.

The survey involved a total of 209 respondents, consisting of 130 teachers and 79 principals from early childhood education institutions across 35 regencies and cities in Central Java. The instrument used in this study was adapted from the Circle Inclusive Classroom Scale (CICS) developed by Renfrewshire (2023) and translated by an expert to ensure contextual and linguistic accuracy. From the CICS framework, two components were chosen as the focus of investigation: Social Environment and Structure and Routines. The instrument contained several indicators designed to measure accessibility, support, and consistency in classroom practices. Data were collected online using Google Forms, making it efficient and accessible for participants from diverse geographic locations.

The data collected were analyzed quantitatively and descriptively. The responses were tabulated and processed using Microsoft Excel to obtain the percentage distribution for each component measured. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to provide a clear and straightforward interpretation of the data, facilitating the identification of patterns and trends in the implementation of inclusive practices. The results were then compared to highlight differences and similarities across respondents, providing a deeper understanding of how inclusive education is being implemented at the early childhood education level in Central Java. Table 1 presents the scale for social environment, while Table 2 presents the scale for Structure and Routines.

Table 1. Scale of Social Environment

Aspect	Rating	Criteria Statements
Attitude	4	Staff and colleagues emphasize and value excellent attitudes. They are empathetic and non-judgmental.
	3	Staff and colleagues actively develop and model empathy and inclusivity. They are non-judgmental.
	2	There are several challenges related to negative attitudes and how to handle them.
	1	Staff or colleagues are belittling, judgmental, isolating, demeaning, or bullying.

Support and Facilities	4	Expert support uses a variety of methods such as direction, encouragement, and demonstration according to individual needs to encourage their independence over time.
	3	Appropriate support uses a variety of methods such as direction, encouragement, and demonstration according to individual needs to build their independence.
	2	Limited support uses only one method and does not according to individual needs to build their independence.
	1	Minimal and ineffective support without reflecting individual needs.
Social Relationship	4	The relationship are very good, supporting positive social interactions within the institution and wider community.
	3	Relationship and opportunities for social interaction are adequate. Institutional identity is strongly established.
	2	There are several obstacles that staff must face to encourage relationships and/or conflict reconciliation.
	1	Opportunities for relationship are limited.
Information Availability	4	Proactive provision of information, several formats, shared and easily accessible
	3	Information provided in a variety of formats
	2	Challenges with sharing information, information not always clear
	1	Minimal information or mixed messages; complexity or quantity inappropriate
Empowerment	4	Excellent promotion of independence, proactive seeking of child's voice
	3	Learners actively involved in the life of the establishment/leading learning; child's voice sought
	2	Child's voice inconsistently sought; practitioners do not use child's voice to enhance learning opportunities
	1	Child's voice not sought, lack of opportunities for independence, children's interests not considered

Table 2. Structure and Routines

Aspect	Rating	Criteria Statements
Experience Levels	4	Experiences promote exceptionally appropriate and creative challenge and enjoyment with excellent engagement
	3	Experiences appropriate to allow for 'just right challenge', almost all learners engaged most of the time
	2	Experience demands are somewhat high/low, some boredom/stress
	1	Experience demands too high/too low, causing boredom/stress
Standards and Boundaries	4	Exceptionally clear expectations provided in a variety of formats
	3	Expectations provided in a variety of formats and almost always
	2	Challenges with expectations, some learner disengagement or
	1	Expectations unclear and inconsistent, learners disengaged or

Routines	4	Structured routines all exemplary, accommodates for individual preferences, high levels of consistency, promote sense of belonging
	3	Appropriate structured routine, offers consistency, good preparation for change
	2	Challenges with how routine is structured, variable consistency, some unpredictability
	1	Little or no routine or structure provided throughout the day/week, unpredictability

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected through the survey, administered to teachers and principals using the Circle Inclusive Classroom Scale, provides an overview of the implementation of inclusive education in early childhood education institutions in Central Java. The CICS comprises four components: Physical Environment, Social Environment, Motivation, and Structure and Routines. This study specifically focuses on the Social Environment and Structure and Routines components. The Social Environment encompasses aspects related to peer support, facilities, and access to information. A comfortable learning environment makes children feel accepted and valued within their community (Morin, 2020; Wentzel et al., 2010; Budianto, 2023; Parwoto et al., 2023; Husnaini et al., 2024).

The social environment in inclusive early childhood education plays a crucial role in creating a supportive learning atmosphere for all students, including children with special needs. The environment formed by peers, educators, education personnel, and parents is essential in fostering positive and equitable interactions. Strong social support enables children to feel accepted, valued, and secure as they participate in play and learning activities within the classroom. Yuliana et al. (2024) found that collaboration among teachers, parents, and peers significantly enhances the participation of children with special needs in learning activities. Furthermore, the presence of facilitators or supporting teachers who understand inclusion principles further reinforces the development of a supportive social environment. These findings are consistent with those of Rahmawati et al. (2025), who highlighted the importance of meaningful social interactions as a key indicator of the successful implementation of inclusive education at the early childhood level. It is crucial to assess the conditions of children's school environments to evaluate how conducive the social environment is for implementing inclusive education. The Social Environment aspect encompasses attitudes, support and facilities, social relationships, information availability, and empowerment as presented in Figures 1-5. Figure 1 presents the assessment results of the social environment aspect in early childhood education institutions in Central Java.

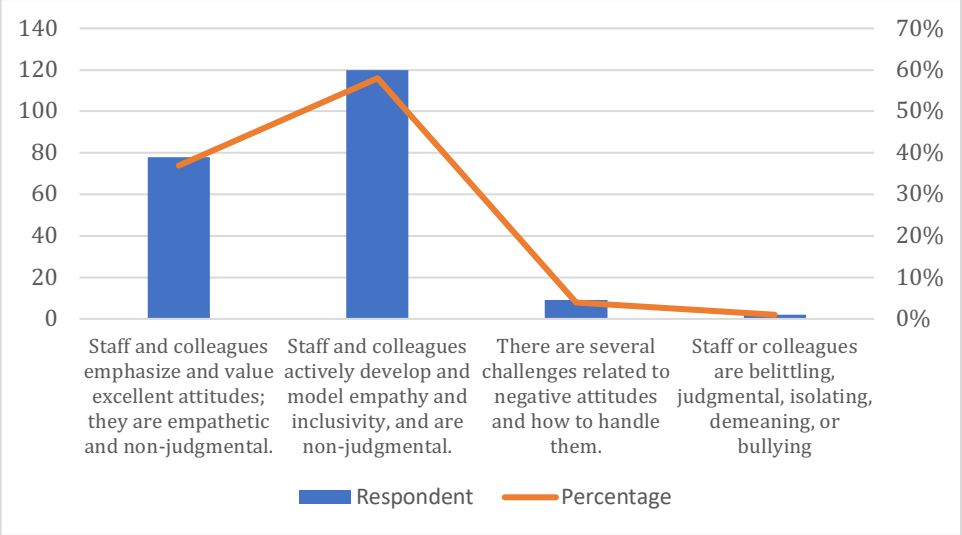


Figure 1. Attitude in Early Education Childhood Institutions in Central Java

The attitude indicator evaluates empathy, understanding, non-judgmental behavior, and respect for others as enacted by school community members (teachers, principals, and staff). Most early childhood education institutions in Central Java report that staff and colleagues actively foster and exemplify empathy and inclusivity, refraining from judgment. Teachers' attitudes of acceptance play a pivotal role in supporting the success of inclusive education. Such attitudes can be developed through teaching experience, training, and self-efficacy (Musyafira & Hendriani, 2021). Although some teachers and school principals still reject the participation of children with special needs in their institutions' educational services, this resistance is primarily due to the institutions' inability to provide optimal educational support. The limitation stems from teachers who have not yet acquired the necessary skills to teach in inclusive classrooms. These findings are reinforced by previous research regarding teachers' attitudes, which indicates that many are not yet open to inclusive education and still require further training to enhance their professional competencies, particularly in the context of inclusive classroom instruction (Diana et al., 2020; Scanlon et al., 2022; Čarnicka et al., 2023).

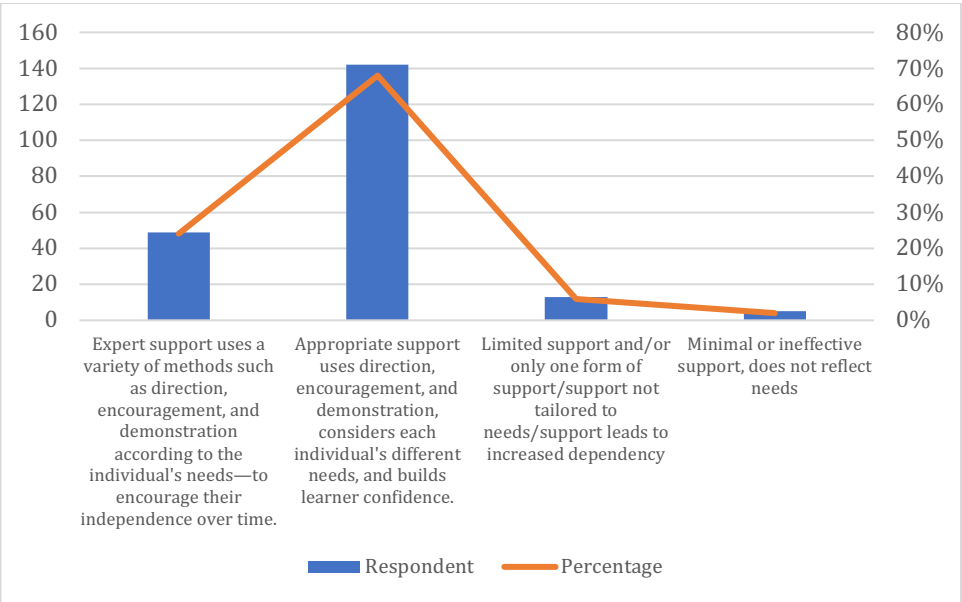


Figure 2. Support and Facilitation in Early Education Childhood Institutions in Central Java

The second indicator is support and facilitation. This indicator assesses verbal support, non-verbal support, physical assistance, and effective communication from various parties involved in implementing inclusive education at the early childhood level. Regarding support and facilitation, 68% of teachers and principals provided appropriate support by offering directions, encouragement, and demonstrations tailored to each individual's unique needs, thereby fostering students' self-confidence. Teachers create learning environments that are mutually supportive and reflective, adapting to students' needs so that children can develop optimally in both academic and non-academic areas (Díez-Palomar et al., 2021; Woolfson, 2024). Providing practical guidance for educators and learners is also aimed at creating inclusive learning environments (Hu, 2024).

Several research findings in early childhood education institutions indicate that teachers who actively provide clear instructions, demonstrate verbal enthusiasm, and consistently offer praise for the achievements of children with special needs can enhance these children's engagement and learning motivation (Rahimi & Karkami, 2015; Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Wahyuni, 2022). These verbal strategies foster an environment that explicitly supports the participation of all children through empowering communication.

In terms of non-verbal support, paying attention to educators' body language—such as maintaining eye contact, using friendly facial expressions, and making open-handed gestures—can enhance the emotional comfort of children within inclusive classrooms. This suggests that structuring non-verbal interactions in inclusive settings should serve as an informative and sensitive approach to inclusive support (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018; Kingsbury et al., 2020). Inclusive education can only be achieved through collaborative relationships among all stakeholders, employing various approaches to support the needs of each individual in the learning process (Wahid & Khulita, 2023; Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). Furthermore, inclusive education necessitates a comprehensive understanding of individual needs and diversity to enhance children's self-confidence (Juntak et al., 2023). This includes curriculum modifications, instructional strategies, and a supportive learning atmosphere, ensuring that all children—including those with special needs—feel accepted, respected, and have equal opportunities to learn, grow, and develop (Winarsih, 2017).

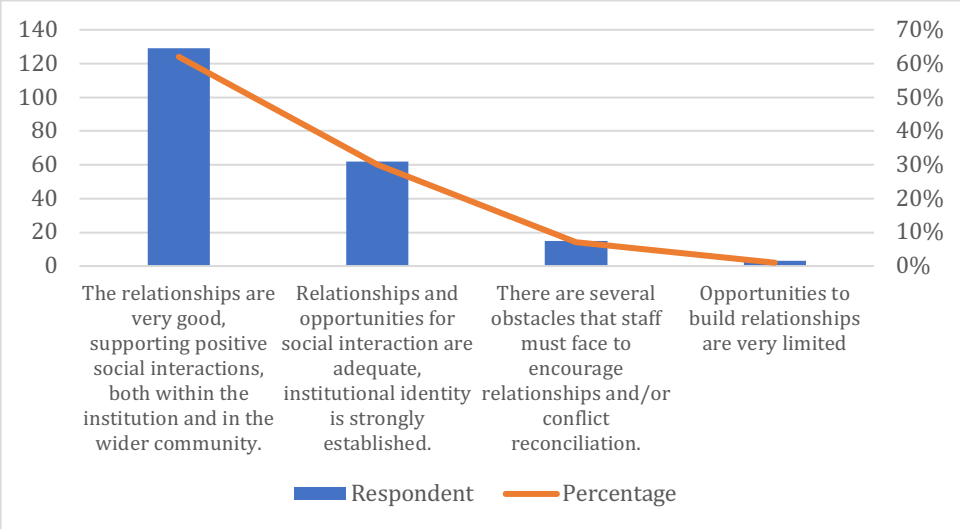


Figure 3. Social Relationships in Early Education Childhood Institutions in Central Java

The relationship indicator assesses the quality of connections among practitioners, the atmosphere of acceptance, sense of belonging, and opportunities for building positive relationships.

62% of teachers and principals in Central Java have established highly positive relationships, supporting positive social interactions within their institutions and in the broader community. High-quality social relationships among school community members facilitate the provision of attention to children and contribute to achieving educational goals (Rangkuti & Maksum, 2019).

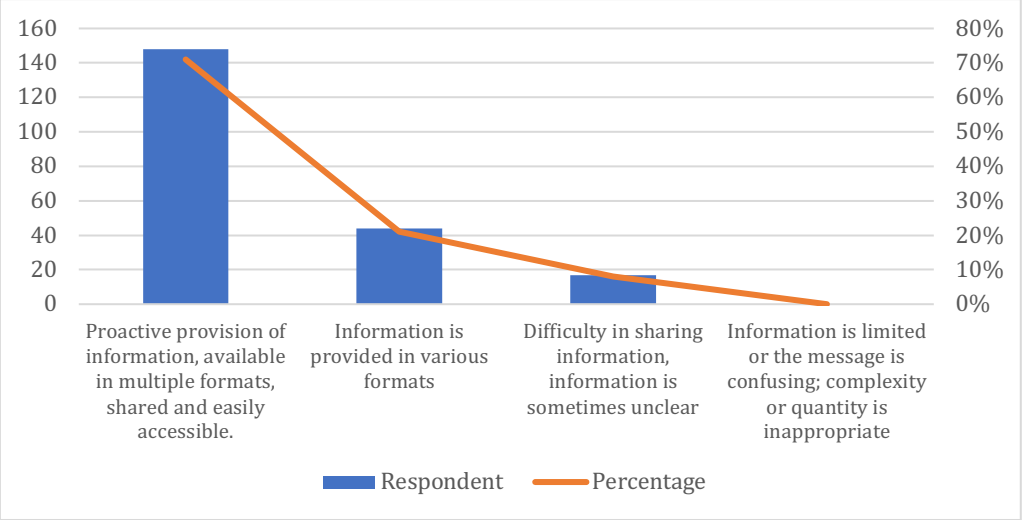


Figure 4. Information Availability in Early Education Childhood Institutions in Central Java

The fourth indicator pertains to the information availability that is easily accessible, clearly presented, and available in a variety of formats that parents and guardians, as well as students, can easily understand. In implementing inclusive early childhood education in Central Java, 71% of institutions have already provided information in multiple formats that is shared and easily accessible. The availability and accessibility of information for parents and guardians, as well as students, support the effective operation of inclusive education. Providing information in various formats is a preventive measure against participation barriers, especially for families with limited literacy or restricted access to certain technologies (Lingwood et al., 2020). To achieve comprehensive inclusion, all institutions must ensure that information is disseminated equitably and can be understood by the entire school community.

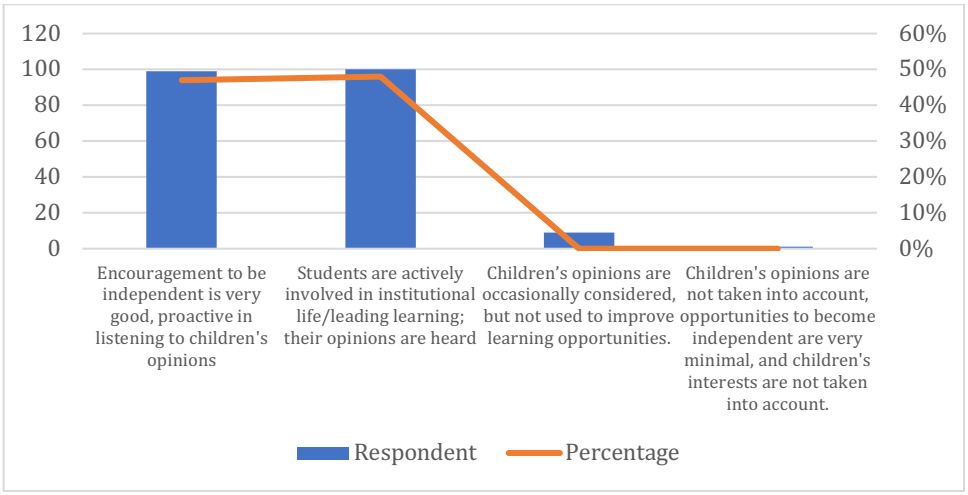


Figure 5. Empowerment in Early Education Childhood Institutions in Central Java

The final indicator within the social environment aspect is the empowerment of students to foster independence, center learning on the students, and respond to their needs and opinions. As many as 47% of teachers and principals have provided strong encouragement for independence, actively listening to children's views, and 48% have actively involved students in institutional life, leading learning activities and soliciting students' opinions. These findings are consistent with those of Darma et al. (2015), who noted that inclusive education is implemented through various models tailored to meet students' needs.

Social support in inclusive education includes not only interpersonal relationships but also systemic support provided by colleagues, the availability of supporting facilities, and access to relevant information (Hehir et al., 2016). All three are critical in determining the success of inclusive programs in early childhood education institutions. Support from colleagues promotes professional collaboration that reinforces mutual strengths. The availability of inclusive facilities—such as diverse learning media, assistive tools for children with disabilities, and flexible classroom arrangements—is pivotal in facilitating the active participation of children with special needs (Azzahra et al., 2022). Moreover, access to information and training constitutes an aspect of environmental support that is often overlooked, yet extremely vital. Teachers risk applying ineffective or counterproductive methods due to inadequate access to information. Therefore, early childhood institutions must provide ongoing training, discussion forums, and inclusive teaching materials as part of their professional support systems.

Effective social environmental support in inclusive education must be multidimensional, involving relational, structural, and informational elements. The absence of these components can hinder the inclusion process and diminish the quality of children's learning experiences. In other words, strengthening the social environment is not limited to attitudes and empathy alone, but also relates to human resources, physical infrastructure, and knowledge management within an integrated system. Structure and Routines is an aspect related to implementing structured activities and providing routines that support child development. Instruction that supports children will help optimize their abilities (Siahaan, 2022; Febriyani et al., 2024). The routines and values implemented in schools have a significant impact on children's development (Ren et al., 2022; Maag et al., 2023; Selman & Dilworth-Bart, 2024), making this aspect particularly helpful in evaluating the implementation of inclusive education (Schuelka, 2012). Figures 6-8 present the data collected on implementing inclusive education at early childhood education institutions for the Structure and Routines component.

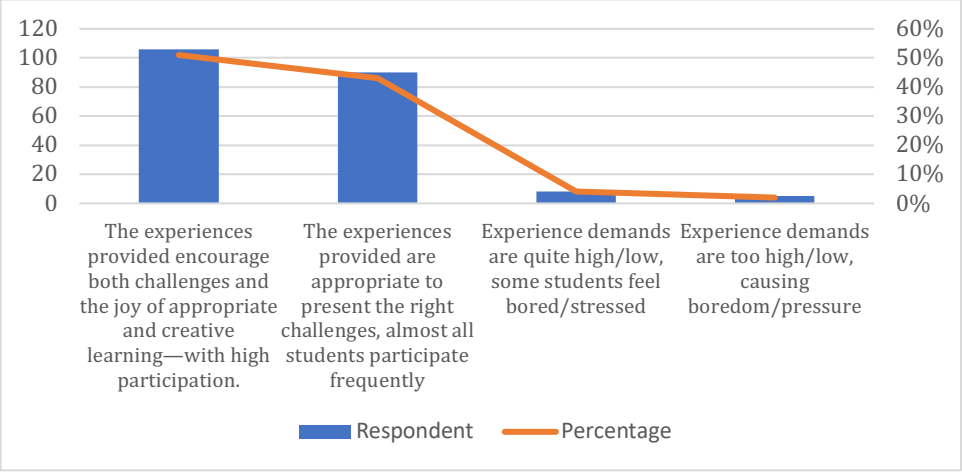


Figure 6. Experience Level in Early Education Childhood Institutions in Central Java

This indicator pertains to the learning experiences provided to students, which are tailored to their abilities. A total of 51% of teachers and principals have delivered experiences that encourage both appropriate challenges and joyful, creative learning with high participation rates. Additionally, 43% have offered experiences well-suited to presenting just the right level of challenge, with almost all students frequently participating. These findings indicate that more than half of educators and education personnel have begun implementing differentiated instruction principles, ranging from adapting learning processes and content to aligning learning activities with students' needs, interests, and readiness levels. Adaptation and modification of activities are also necessary to accommodate play and learning activities for every child, including those with special needs (Diana et al., 2022; Khotimah et al., 2023).

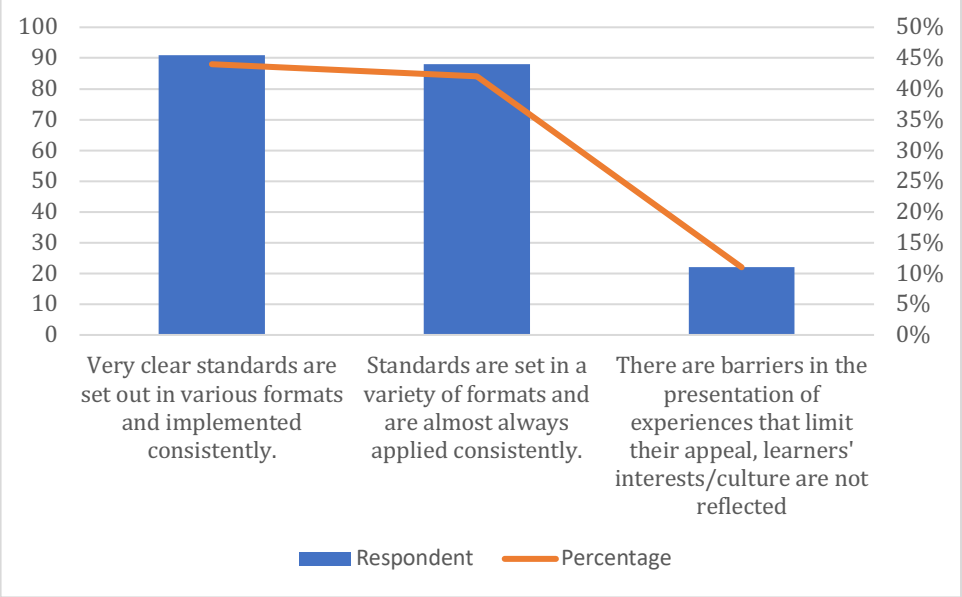


Figure 7. Standards and Boundaries in Early Education Childhood Institutions in Central Java

The second indicator within the Structure and Routines aspect is standards and boundaries. This indicator assesses the clarity and consistency of the standards and boundaries applied in inclusive education, as well as their impact on students (Julien, 2025). Teachers and principals (42%) reported implementing standards in various formats that are almost always applied consistently. Meanwhile, 44% indicated that the standards are clearly articulated in multiple formats and implemented consistently.

The establishment of clear standards and boundaries in various formats—such as visual cues, oral instructions, gestures, and other aids—and their consistent application in inclusive classrooms have proven to be foundational in creating a safe, fair, and predictable learning environment for all students. The clarity of boundaries helps children understand what is expected of them and reduces anxiety. When boundaries are communicated visually through rule charts, schedules, and symbols, it becomes easier for children to process information and make more appropriate behavioral decisions. Consistency in enforcing boundaries also strengthens the development of positive discipline, accelerates the internalization of values, and fosters the early development of self-regulation skills. Thus, clear and consistent standards and boundaries not only support the effective functioning of inclusive classrooms but also serve as indicators of child-centered teaching practices that promote

inclusivity and cultivate independence and social responsibility in children (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

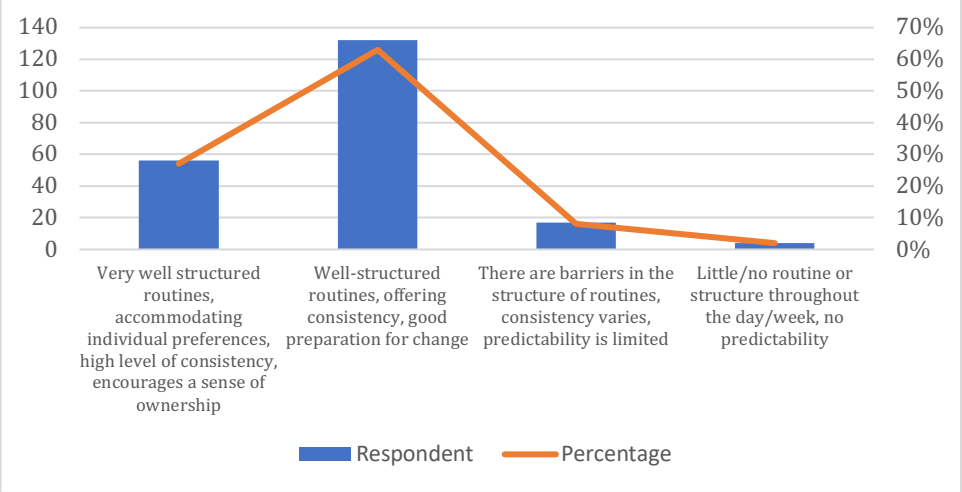


Figure 8. Routines in Early Education Childhood Institutions in Central Java

The routines indicator pertains to the implementation of structured, consistent, and predictable routines. A total of 63% of teachers and principals have successfully implemented well-organized routines, offering consistency and adequate preparation for transitions. However, some teachers and principals still have not carried out routines effectively or, in some cases, do not yet have specific programs in place at their schools. Systematic, adaptive, and student-centered educational practices have positively impacted students' learning motivation (Ginting et al., 2024; Sedek et al., 2024).

Well-structured routines that are flexible in accommodating individual needs, implemented consistently, and provide space for children's participation in inclusive classrooms have proven to be a fundamental foundation in creating a fair, responsive, and supportive learning environment for all children (Department of Education, 2024). This approach enhances engagement and behavioral regulation, while strengthening children's sense of ownership and autonomy within the inclusive community. Furthermore, the findings also offer more specific implications for stakeholders. For teachers, the results underscore the need to enhance their competence in differentiated instruction, classroom management, and the utilization of adaptive learning resources to support diverse learners. For the government, the study highlights the importance of policies that ensure adequate funding, provide accessible facilities, and implement systematic professional development programs to build inclusive capacity at the early childhood level. Meanwhile, for parents, the research emphasizes the value of active collaboration with schools, consistent support at home, and involvement in creating inclusive attitudes within the community. Together, these implications demonstrate that inclusive education requires a multi-stakeholder commitment to translate policy into meaningful practice.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that the implementation of inclusive education for early childhood in Central Java, as measured through the Circle Inclusive Classroom Scale (CICS) focusing on the aspects of Social Environment and Structure and Routines, falls into a relatively high category, indicating that schools have made significant progress in fostering inclusive practices. However, both aspects still require improvement, particularly in strengthening support and facilities, developing routines that are responsive to individual needs, and maintaining consistency to build a stronger sense of ownership among children. The application of these findings is expected to provide a basis for

schools, parents, and the government to collaborate in designing more supportive policies and practices, which in turn will enhance the quality of inclusive early childhood education and ensure that every child receives equitable learning opportunities.

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