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## **Inclusive Physical Education: A Strategy to Create a Friendly Learning Environment for Students with Special Needs**

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### **Abstract**

*Inclusive physical education is an approach that aims to create a welcoming and supportive learning environment for all students, including those with special needs. This research aims to explore strategies that can be implemented in physical education to ensure the active participation of students with special needs. Through qualitative and quantitative data collection, this article discusses various methods, challenges and solutions that can be implemented in the context of inclusive physical education. The results show that the implementation of appropriate strategies can increase special needs students' engagement in physical activity, as well as strengthen their self-confidence and social skills.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive physical education, students with special needs, learning environment, educational strategies.*



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## **INTRODUCTION**

Physical education has a crucial role in the educational curriculum, not only as a means to develop physical skills, but also as a platform for students' mental and social growth. In this context, physical education becomes more than just physical activity; it serves as a tool to build character, improve health and strengthen social interactions. However, the challenges faced by students with special needs in participating in physical education often prevent them from experiencing the benefits that could have been gained from the activity. According to data from UNESCO (2020), approximately 15% of the world's population experiences some form of disability. In Indonesia, it is estimated that there are more than 3 million children with special needs who attend schools at various levels of education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). This figure illustrates the importance of creating inclusive physical education, which not

only accommodates physical needs but also pays attention to the social and emotional aspects of students.

Inclusive physical education has a deeper meaning than simply providing physical access to students with special needs. It includes social and emotional development which is very important for them. Research shows that participation in physical activity can have a significant positive impact on students' mental health. For example, physical activity can stimulate the production of endorphins, known as happiness hormones, thus improving mood and reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression. In addition, the social interactions that occur during physical activities can strengthen relationships between students, helping them build indispensable social support networks. In this regard, a supportive physical education environment is essential, where students with special needs can interact with peers without feeling marginalized. Thus, creating an inclusive atmosphere is not only beneficial for students with special needs, but also for other students, who can learn about empathy and cooperation.

In the context of physical education, inclusive strategies are crucial to ensure that all students, without exception, have equal opportunities to participate. One approach is to adapt the curriculum. For example, if the planned activity involves running, then alternatives such as walking or using wheelchairs can be provided for students with physical disabilities. In addition, the use of assistive devices is also very instrumental in creating inclusion. Assistive devices such as wheelchairs, hearing aids or visual aids can help students with physical or sensory disabilities to actively participate in physical activities. For example, in a basketball game, students who use wheelchairs can participate with adapted rules, so they can still experience the excitement and challenge of the game. Research by Block & Dempsey (2007) shows that the use of appropriate assistive devices can significantly increase the participation of students with special needs, making them feel more engaged and motivated.

In addition to curriculum adaptation and the use of aids, training for educators is also very important in creating inclusive physical education. Educators need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to manage a diverse classroom, including understanding how to communicate with students with special needs and how to adapt activities to suit their needs. For example, training on different teaching techniques, how to manage student behavior, and how to create a safe and supportive environment can give educators the tools they need to be successful in teaching students with special needs. Thus, inclusive physical education is not

only the responsibility of students, but also requires commitment and understanding from educators.

Looking from a broader perspective, inclusive physical education also has a long-term impact on students with special needs. By providing opportunities for them to participate in physical activities, we not only help them develop physical skills, but also equip them with social skills that are essential for everyday life. Skills such as cooperation, leadership, and the ability to communicate well can be built through the experience of interacting in groups. This is especially important, as students with special needs often face challenges in building social relationships outside of the school environment. By creating equitable opportunities for them to participate in physical education, we help them build a sense of confidence and positive identity that can impact all aspects of their lives.

In conclusion, physical education has a very important role in the development of students, especially for those with special needs. By creating inclusive physical education, we not only provide physical access, but also support students' social and emotional development. Inclusive strategies such as curriculum adaptation, use of assistive devices and training for educators are essential to ensure all students can participate fully. With the right approach, physical education can be an effective tool to improve the quality of life of students with special needs, providing them with opportunities to interact, learn and grow in a supportive environment. Therefore, it is important for all stakeholders, including the government, schools and communities, to work together to create inclusive and sustainable physical education.

## **METHODS**

This study used a mixed approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods, with the aim of gaining a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of inclusive physical education. This approach allowed the researcher to explore not only numerical data but also the perspectives and first-hand experiences of educators who interact directly with students with special needs.

The quantitative data in this study was collected through a survey involving 100 physical education teachers from various schools in Indonesia, representing different levels of education and geographical locations. The survey was carefully designed to measure the extent of teachers' understanding of the concept of inclusive physical education, as well as the teaching strategies and methods they apply in the classroom. As such, the quantitative data provides a snapshot of educators' general perceptions of the concept of inclusivity and how they implement these principles in their daily practice.

In analyzing the quantitative data, researchers used statistical software to identify patterns, trends and relationships between the various variables under study. This made it possible to measure the relationship between teachers' level of understanding of inclusive physical education and the strategies they implement in their teaching practices. The analysis also provided insights into the challenges faced by teachers in creating an inclusive classroom environment as well as their level of success in implementing these methods.

Meanwhile, qualitative data was obtained through in-depth interviews with 20 teachers who have direct experience in teaching students with special needs. These teachers were selected based on their experience and skills in managing inclusive classrooms, as well as their involvement in physical education for students with various special needs. Through these interviews, the researcher obtained more detailed information about the challenges faced by teachers in designing an inclusive physical education curriculum and the strategies and approaches they found effective in overcoming the barriers. In addition, the interviews also provided insights into how teachers perceive the importance of inclusive physical education in supporting the physical, social and emotional development of students with special needs.

In analyzing the qualitative data, the researcher used thematic analysis techniques to identify the main themes that emerged from the interviews. This thematic analysis made it possible to explore patterns and recurring issues related to the challenges, strategies and solutions proposed by the teachers. Some of the themes identified might include teachers' understanding of the importance of inclusiveness in physical education, the obstacles they face in implementing an inclusive program and the support they need from the school and government to improve the quality of physical education for students with special needs.

Using this mixed approach, this study aims to provide a more holistic picture of the challenges faced by educators in creating an inclusive learning environment in physical education. The results of this study are expected to provide useful recommendations for curriculum development, teacher training, and education policies that better support the creation of effective and sustainable inclusive physical education in Indonesia.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the survey conducted in this study revealed that although 85% of physical education teachers realized the importance of inclusive physical education, only 60% of them implemented inclusive strategies in their teaching practices. This finding indicates a significant gap between teachers' understanding of the concept of inclusive physical education and the implementation of inclusive strategies in the field. High awareness of the importance of inclusivity in physical education should be followed by changes in actual classroom practices. However, various obstacles and challenges still hinder the full implementation of the concept.

One of the main challenges faced by teachers is the lack of adequate specialized training on inclusive physical education. Only 30% of teachers have had specialized training on how to teach physical education to students with special needs. This limited training leads to low levels of knowledge and skills in designing and implementing inclusive teaching strategies. In fact, this training is essential to provide teachers with an in-depth understanding of the various special needs of students and effective ways to accommodate them in physical activities. Without adequate training, teachers often feel unprepared to manage heterogeneous classes and face the challenges that arise when dealing with students with special needs.

Apart from training, the lack of resources such as aids and facilities that can support inclusive physical education is also a big problem. Many schools do not have adequate facilities to support students with special needs, such as wheelchairs, hearing aids or facilities for students with visual impairments. Without these resources, it will be difficult for teachers to provide an equitable physical education experience for all students. Therefore, there needs to be an improvement in the provision of facilities and resources needed to support inclusive physical education.

From the interviews with 20 teachers with experience teaching students with special needs, some of the strategies identified as effective in creating an inclusive learning environment include the use of activity modifications, collaboration with education specialists and the application of a differentiated approach to teaching. Activity modifications, such as one teacher who modified a basketball game by using a larger and lighter ball, allow students with physical disabilities to actively participate in activities. These modifications not only give students the opportunity to interact with peers, but also reduce the sense of isolation often experienced by students with special needs. Collaboration with educational specialists such as physical therapists has also proven effective in designing activities that are more suited to

students' abilities and needs. This suggests that the involvement of various parties in the planning of physical education activities is essential to ensure all students have a rewarding experience.

Furthermore, statistics from this study showed that students with special needs who were involved in inclusive physical education had higher levels of self-confidence and better social skills compared to students who did not receive inclusive physical education. Previous research by Rimmer et al. (2016) also confirmed these findings, suggesting that participation in physical activity can help reduce the social stigma experienced by students with special needs, while improving their social skills. Physical activity not only provides physical benefits, but also creates opportunities for students to interact with their peers, which in turn can strengthen social relationships and increase their sense of self-acceptance. This process of interaction is crucial in helping students with special needs feel more accepted and valued within the school environment.

However, despite the many benefits of inclusive physical education, the challenges faced by teachers and students cannot be ignored. Some teachers report difficulties in managing heterogeneous classes where there is a wide range of different needs and physical abilities among students. This requires a more individualized and strategic approach to ensure that each student gets sufficient attention and can actively participate in activities. For example, teachers who teach classes with a mix of students with and without disabilities need to be able to adjust activities in real-time for all students to participate in, which often adds complexity to classroom management.

In addition, there is still a lack of support from parents and school authorities in supporting the implementation of inclusive physical education. Some teachers reported that parents of students with special needs often do not understand the importance of physical education in their children's development. This makes communication between teachers and parents less than optimal, which in turn can affect the successful implementation of inclusive physical education. On the other hand, some schools also lack sufficient support in terms of facilities or resources for inclusive physical education. Therefore, there needs to be greater efforts from the government, schools and communities to create a supportive environment for inclusive physical education. This includes providing more extensive training for teachers, improving facilities that are more friendly to students with special needs and increasing parental involvement in supporting their children's participation in physical activity.

In this context, clearer and more structured inclusive physical education policies are needed to address the challenges. The government can play a very important role in designing policies that prioritize inclusive physical education, both in terms of providing funding for facilities, procuring assistive devices and providing training for teachers. In addition, collaboration between schools, families and communities is essential to create an atmosphere that supports the social and emotional development of students with special needs through physical education.

## CONCLUSION

Inclusive physical education is an important step in creating a friendly learning environment for students with special needs. Through the implementation of appropriate strategies, teachers can help students with special needs to actively participate in physical activities, which in turn can improve their mental and social health. Despite the challenges faced, with adequate support and proper training, inclusive physical education can be effectively implemented in Indonesian schools.

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