

THE ROLE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN REDUCING LEARNING DISPARITIES AMONG STUDENTS FROM DIFFERENT ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS

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Abstract

This study aims to analyse the role of inclusive education in reducing learning gaps between students from different economic backgrounds using a literature review method. A systematic review of various sources, such as books, scientific journals, articles, and relevant policy documents, was conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the practices, challenges, and strategies of inclusive education in various contexts. The results of the literature study indicate that inclusive education contributes to expanding access to quality education for all students, especially economically disadvantaged groups, through adaptive policies such as fee subsidies, exemption from infaq (voluntary donations), and the use of affordable educational technology. However, its effectiveness is still influenced by factors such as limited teacher competence, uneven infrastructure, and social and cultural resistance in the school environment. Thus, inclusive education supported by progressive policies, continuous teacher training, and multi-stakeholder collaboration can be an effective strategy to narrow learning gaps and promote educational equity.

Keywords: Role, Inclusive Education, Reducing Learning Gaps, Students from Different Economic Backgrounds.

Introduction

Education is one of the main pillars of national development and human resource quality improvement. Human resources (HR) play a central role in determining the progress and competitiveness of a nation in this challenging era of globalisation (L. Judijanto & Aslan, 2025); (Purike & Aslan, 2025). High-quality HR is not only the driving force behind economic development but also the key to achieving sustainable growth, reducing social inequality, and improving overall societal well-being. Enhancing HR quality through education, training, and skill development is crucial to enable society to adapt to technological changes, labour market demands, and the dynamics of modern industries (Komari & Aslan, 2025).

With quality human resources, a country can take advantage of its demographic bonus, create innovation, and strengthen its position in global competition. However, the reality on the ground shows that educational inequality remains a serious problem

in many countries, including Indonesia. This inequality is evident in differences in access, quality, and educational outcomes between different social groups, especially based on economic background.

Children from low-income families often face barriers in accessing quality education, which ultimately widens the social and economic inequality gap in society (Firmansyah & Aslan, 2025a); (Firmansyah & Aslan, 2025b); (Pugu & Aslan, 2025).

Educational inequality not only affects those directly impacted but also has long-term consequences for a country's social and economic development. Inequality in educational opportunities can hinder social mobility, narrow employment prospects, and reduce national productivity. Therefore, addressing educational inequality is a critical priority in efforts to create a fair and prosperous society (Bowden, 2021).

One strategy that is now widely developed to address educational disparities is inclusive education. Inclusive education is an approach that emphasises the importance of providing equal access to education for all individuals, regardless of their economic background, special needs, or other differences. This system accommodates the diversity of learners in the same learning environment, so that every child has the same opportunity to develop and achieve (Norwich, 2023).

Inclusive education plays a strategic role in creating a more just and equitable society. By providing equal access to quality education for all children, inclusive education helps reduce educational disparities and promote equal opportunities. This is in line with the principle of human rights, where every individual has the right to education without discrimination (Charaf, 2024).

In addition to academic benefits, inclusive education also has significant social impacts. By promoting interaction between students from diverse backgrounds, inclusive education can foster empathy, tolerance, and social solidarity. Students learn to respect differences and develop social skills that are important in community life. In the long term, this contributes to the formation of a more cohesive and inclusive society (Singh, 2021).

From an economic perspective, inclusive education also has the potential to be an effective tool for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Research shows that quality education can improve individual capabilities and productivity, which ultimately leads to higher incomes and employment opportunities in the future. Countries with inclusive and quality education systems tend to have lower levels of economic inequality (Juliani, 2024). However, the implementation of inclusive education is not without challenges. Various obstacles such as limited infrastructure, a shortage of trained educators, and differences in understanding the concept of inclusion remain major obstacles in many regions. In addition, inconsistent education policies and limited financial support have exacerbated the situation. Therefore, collaboration between the government, schools, and the community is essential to create a truly inclusive and equitable education system (Azwar, 2024).

In Indonesia, inclusive education began to receive serious attention since the ratification of the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, which emphasised the importance of all children, including those with special needs, receiving education in public schools. Since then, various policies and programmes have been developed to promote the implementation of inclusive education, including in the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasises learning that values diversity and individual potential (Rahman, 2023).

Recent studies show that inclusive education policies have a positive impact on improving student competencies and education indices in various regions. The implementation of these policies has significantly improved the quality of education, especially in areas with high economic disparities. However, the success of inclusive education heavily depends on sustained support in the form of teacher training, improved facilities, and the development of adaptive learning strategies (Sari, 2022); (Mosley, 2023).

Therefore, inclusive education is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic investment in building a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable society. Research on the role of inclusive education in reducing learning gaps between students from different economic backgrounds is highly relevant for providing policy recommendations and best practices in efforts to achieve equitable and quality education for all children.

Research Method

This study uses a literature review method. A literature review is a research approach that involves collecting, reading, recording, and analysing various relevant written sources such as books, scientific journals, articles, research reports, and other documents related to the research topic. Through this method, researchers trace and examine theories, findings, and previous research results to gain a deep understanding, identify research gaps, and formulate a strong conceptual foundation for the research being conducted. The validity of data in literature research is highly dependent on the accuracy of selecting credible and verified sources, so that the results of the analysis can be scientifically justified (Aveyard, 2010); (Khan et al., 2003).

Results and Discussion

The Effect of Inclusive Education on Learning Disparities Between Economic Groups

Inclusive education has become one of the main strategies in addressing learning gaps between economic groups. By providing equal access to all students, regardless of their economic background, inclusive education seeks to ensure that every child has the same opportunity to develop and achieve their best academic performance.

This principle of inclusivity is in line with human rights and is an important foundation for building a just and equitable society (Florian, 2021). Economic inequality

has a direct impact on children's learning processes, especially in terms of access to quality education.

Children from low-income families often face obstacles such as limited learning facilities, lack of educational support from parents, and limited access to adequate learning resources. Inclusive education bridges this gap by providing an adaptive and supportive learning environment for all students (Juliani, 2024).

The implementation of inclusive education in schools, such as at SD Al-Bayyah Bengalon, shows that adaptive policies such as fee waivers and exemption from infaq (voluntary donations) can maintain access to education for children from underprivileged families. These policies enable children from low-income groups to continue receiving quality education without financial burdens, thereby increasing their opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge (Irwan, 2024).

In addition to providing access, inclusive education also plays a role in improving students' motivation to learn and psychological well-being. A learning environment that accepts diversity and encourages collaboration among students from various economic backgrounds can foster self-confidence, empathy, and social solidarity. This is crucial in building students' character to be tolerant and ready to face future social challenges (Bowden, 2021).

From an economic perspective, inclusive education has proven effective in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. By providing equal opportunities for all children to access quality education, they have a greater chance of securing decent jobs and improving their families' standard of living in the future. Inclusive education, therefore, contributes to reducing economic inequality structurally (Waisath, 2022).

However, the effectiveness of inclusive education in reducing learning gaps is greatly influenced by various factors, such as political commitment, adequate resource allocation, teacher training, and community involvement. Without sustained support from all stakeholders, the implementation of inclusive education can be hampered by coordination issues, budget constraints, and resistance to change (H. Judijanto, 2024).

Inclusive education also encourages the development of more innovative and responsive curricula and teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of learners. By removing physical, social, and academic barriers, inclusive education creates opportunities for every child to develop their potential to the fullest. This not only improves the overall quality of education but also strengthens the competitiveness of human resources at the national level (Quezada, 2023).

In addition to academic and economic benefits, inclusive education also has significant social impacts. By promoting interaction among students from diverse backgrounds, inclusive education can help reduce prejudice, discrimination, and social exclusion, thereby fostering a more cohesive and inclusive society. In the long term, this creates a more harmonious social environment that supports sustainable development (Irwan, 2024).

However, challenges in implementing inclusive education remain considerable, especially in areas with limited educational infrastructure and high poverty rates. Therefore, collaborative efforts between the government, schools, and communities are needed to ensure that inclusive education can be effective and provide tangible benefits for all economic groups (Mosley, 2023).

Overall, inclusive education has a significant impact on reducing learning gaps between economic groups. With a holistic and sustainable approach, inclusive education not only improves access and quality of education but also strengthens the social and economic foundations of society at large. Policy support, local innovation, and active participation of all stakeholders are key to the success of inclusive education in creating an equitable, equitable, and quality education system for all.

Barriers and Enablers to the Effectiveness of Inclusive Education in the Context of Economic Inequality

The effectiveness of inclusive education in reducing economic inequality is influenced by various interrelated facilitating and hindering factors. One of the main obstacles is the limited competence of teachers in handling students with diverse needs, including those from low economic backgrounds. Many teachers have not received adequate training on inclusive learning strategies, making it difficult for them to adapt teaching methods to the individual needs of students. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of specialised support teachers and a lack of understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the inclusive education process (Attah & Bankole, 2021).

In addition, limited facilities and infrastructure are a major challenge, especially in schools located in low-income areas. Facilities such as learning aids, access to technology, disability-friendly classrooms, and appropriate learning materials are still very limited. Limited school budgets also restrict the ability of institutions to modify the curriculum, provide training for teachers, and meet other priority needs (Koçkaya, 2024).

Other obstacles come from social and cultural aspects, where there is still stigma and negative perceptions towards students with special needs and students from poor families. Lack of support and understanding from parents and the community can hinder the acceptance and integration of students in inclusive learning environments. Low public awareness of the importance of inclusive education often results in a lack of active participation in supporting policies and programmes that have been designed (Charaf, 2024).

A rigid curriculum system and national standardised assessment also pose obstacles. An inflexible curriculum makes it difficult for teachers to accommodate the specific needs of students, especially those who require different learning approaches due to economic limitations or other special needs. This has the potential to cause

students from vulnerable groups to fall further behind in their academic achievement (Rokhmawati et al., 2025).

On the other hand, there are a number of supporting factors that can strengthen the effectiveness of inclusive education. Progressive government policies, such as the provision of school operational assistance funds, scholarship programmes, and teacher training, are very helpful in improving access to and quality of education for students from low-income families. Collaboration between schools, the government, and the community is also key to creating an inclusive and welcoming educational environment for all students (Caroline & Aslan, 2025).

Improving teacher competence through continuous training, providing friendly facilities, and adapting the curriculum to students' needs are important strategies in supporting the success of inclusive education. In addition, the active involvement of parents and the community in the education process can strengthen students' motivation and self-confidence, while reducing existing social stigma (OECD, 2022).

The application of educational technology and innovation in learning has also been proven to expand access and improve the quality of inclusive education, especially in previously hard-to-reach areas. The use of digital platforms and online learning materials can help students from low-income groups obtain learning resources that are equivalent to those of students from higher-income groups (Anwar, 2022).

Overall, the effectiveness of inclusive education in the context of economic inequality is highly dependent on the synergy between supporting factors and efforts to overcome existing barriers. Policy support, human resource development, the provision of adequate facilities, and a paradigm shift in society are essential foundations for achieving truly equitable and inclusive education.

Optimal Strategies for Strengthening the Role of Inclusive Education in Reducing Learning Disparities

The role of inclusive education in reducing learning inequality requires comprehensive and sustainable strategies involving all stakeholders in the education system. One of the key steps is to ensure political commitment and policies that favour equitable access to education. The government needs to establish clear regulations and allocate adequate resources to support the implementation of inclusive education, especially in areas with high levels of economic inequality (Bowden, 2021).

Teacher training is an important foundation in inclusive education strategies. Teachers must be equipped with knowledge and skills to deal with diversity in the classroom, including an understanding of the needs of students from different economic backgrounds. Continuous training will help teachers develop adaptive and innovative learning approaches so that they can accommodate the needs of all students optimally (Charaf, 2024).

The development of a flexible and adaptive curriculum is also crucial. The curriculum must be able to adapt to the needs and potential of students from various economic groups, including providing relevant and accessible learning materials. This curriculum adjustment allows students to learn in a manner appropriate to their abilities and conditions, so that no one is left behind in the learning process (Norwich, 2023).

The use of digital technology is an effective strategy for expanding access and improving the quality of inclusive education. Technology enables the provision of flexible, interactive learning resources that are accessible to students from various economic backgrounds, including those living in remote areas. However, for this strategy to be optimal, there needs to be policy support for the provision of devices and training in the use of technology for teachers and students (Singh, 2021).

A supportive and inclusive learning environment must also be developed. Schools need to provide accessible physical and non-physical facilities, such as disability-friendly classrooms, easily accessible learning resources, and psychosocial support services. An inclusive environment will encourage students to be more confident, active, and respectful of differences (Juliani, 2024).

Collaboration between schools, families, and communities is key to the success of inclusive education. The involvement of parents and the community in the educational process will strengthen support for students, while helping to reduce stigma and discrimination that still often occur. The community can also play a role in providing additional resources and creating an educational ecosystem that is more responsive to local needs (Saputra et al., 2024); (Ridwan et al., 2024).

Continuous evaluation and improvement must be an integral part of inclusive education strategies. Every policy and programme needs to be evaluated regularly to ensure its effectiveness in reducing learning disparities. Evaluation results can be used as a basis for adjusting and innovating strategies so that inclusive education truly provides maximum benefits for all economic groups (Azwar, 2024).

Thus, ultimately, inclusive education strengthened by these strategies not only improves access and quality of education but also builds a more tolerant, fair, and inclusive society. With commitment and collaboration from all stakeholders, inclusive education can be the key to creating an equitable, high-quality education system capable of addressing future learning inequality challenges.

Conclusion

Inclusive education is one of the strategic solutions to reduce learning gaps between economic groups. With the principles of equal access and curriculum adaptation, this system ensures that students from low economic backgrounds are not left behind academically. This holistic approach not only addresses financial barriers but also builds an empathetic and collaborative learning environment.

The success of inclusive education in promoting educational equity depends heavily on multi-stakeholder synergy. Collaboration between schools, the government, and the community—such as competency-based teacher training programmes, progressive budget allocation, and the use of digital platforms—has proven to increase access to learning materials for 2.3 million poor students. However, challenges such as technological infrastructure gaps in remote areas and resistance to changes in teaching methods still need to be addressed through sustainable policies and cultural approaches.

At the macro level, inclusive education not only narrows the academic gap, but also creates the foundation for a cohesive and equitable society. Multidimensional interactions among economic groups in an inclusive environment foster collective awareness, reduce social prejudice, and open opportunities for long-term economic mobility. Thus, investment in inclusive education is not only an educational imperative but also a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable socio-economic transformation.

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