

POWER RELATIONS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL LITERATURE ON DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES AGAINST CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a global and national mandate that aims to provide equitable access to education for all children, including children with special needs (ABK). However, its implementation is still colored by veiled discriminatory practices. This study aims to examine how power relations in educational institutions shape the experience of ABK in schools, as well as analyze how educational structures can reproduce social injustice. This research uses a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method based on a critical sociological perspective. The data source is in the form of secondary literature from journal articles, scientific books, research reports, and relevant policies in the period 2017–2025. Data was collected through systematic searches in various scientific databases and analyzed thematically and interpretively. The results of the study show that inclusive education is still fraught with unequal power relations through labeling, normalization, and institutional resistance to diversity. ABK is often marginalized because of non-inclusive normative standards. These findings affirm the importance of transforming the education system through a critical, reflective, and social justice-based approach. This research recommends curriculum reform, transformative teacher training, and structural support that ensures the full participation of children with disabilities in education.

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Introductions

Inclusive education is now recognized internationally and nationally as the right of all children, including children with special needs (ABK). Through the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Permendikbud No. 70 of 2009, inclusive education is positioned as a mandate to provide equal access to education. This is an important step to ensure that all children, regardless of their special needs, have the opportunity to learn in a supportive and non-discriminatory environment. The main goal of inclusive education is to remove existing barriers and promote the active participation of children and women in the learning process, as well as the provision of fair

and quality educational services. (Admalinda et al., 2023; Sania , 2019; Saad & Apsari , 2019) (Jamaluddin et al., 2022; São Paulo , 2019)

However, the implementation of inclusive education policies in many schools often faces serious challenges. Despite adequate regulation, practice on the ground shows that resistance, covert exclusion, and discrimination still occur. Children often receive different treatments, such as physical groupings and degrading social labels, as well as low academic expectations from teachers. This shows that there is a significant gap between the inclusive goals stated in the policy and the practical realities on the ground. Local social and cultural notices, as well as a lack of awareness and training among educators contribute to the sustainability of this discrimination. (Baharuddin & Said , 2020; Rahmi & Muqowim , 2022; Shirley , 2020) (Rani et al., 2018; Shofa , 2018)

Power relations in the context of inclusive education are indeed complex. Education is often seen as an arena for the reproduction of power and normalization, where existing structures, agents, and practices contribute to the process of identity formation and a number of social categories. Teachers, curriculum, and educational policies are considered dominant actors that enforce or even strengthen educational hierarchies, separating students based on often unfair norms. In this case, the ideal pedagogical offer is often hampered by an already built mindset, which makes the norm of "normality" difficult to dismantle. (Squirt et al., 2023; Rosyad & Ma'arif , 2020) (Sholeh , 2023; Shuaib & Mardia , 2023) (Atmosphere et al., 2020; Maa'ruf et al., 2023)

In practice, many schools have good implementation of inclusive education, but there are still obstacles in terms of resources, such as limited training for teachers and inadequate facilities. Research shows that without adequate support and training for educators, efforts to create an inclusive environment are often hampered. In addition, the importance of the presence of competent special supervisors cannot be overlooked, as they serve as an important link between ABK and an inclusive learning environment. (Hairit , 2024; São Paulo et al., 2023; Muchtar , 2018) (Shofa , 2018; Wardah , 2019) (Dewanti et al., 2020)

Overall, despite policies that support inclusive education, there is still a gap between aspirations and everyday realities in schools. This shows the need for continuous evaluation of policy implementation, as well as the need for comprehensive training for teachers and support for better resource allocation. For inclusive education to be truly effective, all parties must commit to overhauling existing structures and integrating the values of equality and nondiscrimination into every aspect of education. Thus, inclusive education is not only a label, but actually a fundamental approach in the broader education system. (Fauzi , 2024; Saad & Apsari , 2019; Sumarni , M.Si , 2019) (Jamaluddin et al., 2022; Shofa , 2018)

In the context of inclusive education, one major challenge that is often overlooked is the dimension of power that struggles in the process of its implementation. The discourse on inclusive education has focused heavily on technical aspects such as curriculum, facilities, and training without critically exploring how power relations can affect educational experiences and outcomes for children with special needs (ABK). Thus, a critical sociological study of inclusive education becomes urgent to highlight how injustices in the education system can operate through labeling, social exclusion, and spatial arrangements that separate children from their peers. By understanding inclusive education as an arena of power relations that needs to be dismantled, this study aims to offer a new perspective in looking at discriminatory practices that are often unaware of by education stakeholders. (Leijen et al., 2021; Shutaleva et al., 2023) (Maharani et al., 2024)

The aim of the research is to analyze discriminatory practices that may arise from complex power dynamics. Through a sociological approach, it is hoped to identify how education policies intended for inclusivity are often colored by conflicting interests, resulting in the realization of inequalities in educational administration. (Squirt & Pettinicchio , 2022; Shutaleva et al., 2023)

Further, this analysis is expected to be a starting point for discussing substantial reforms in inclusive education practices that focus on the empowerment of all learners and the elimination of stigma and exclusion that manifests in various forms. A new understanding of inclusive education that involves a critical analysis of discriminatory practices could contribute to the development of policies that are not only formally inclusive but also substantial in meaning and action. Thus, the mission of inclusive education will not only be a slogan, but also a real implementation that is committed to changing the existing social structure and providing fair treatment to children and children and upholding their human rights in order to get a decent and inclusive education. (Mauldin, 2021)

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach, precisely a systematic literature review method based on a critical sociological perspective, especially in the realm of the sociology of education and disability. As a literature study, this study does not involve the collection of primary data, but focuses on an in-depth review of relevant scientific literature on inclusive education, power relations in educational institutions, and discriminatory practices against children with special needs (ABK).

The main objective of the study is to identify how inclusive education practices can reproduce unequal power relations and result in hidden exclusion for children, as well as to analyze how critical sociological theories can be used to re-read the structures and ideologies underlying inequality in education.

The data source is secondary literature, including scientific journal articles, academic books, research reports, policy documents, and relevant conference proceedings. The literature is collected through systematic searches in various scientific databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and DOAJ. The keywords used include: "inclusive education and power", "disability and schooling", "sociology of special education", "institutional discrimination in education", "Foucault and education", and "critical disability studies".

The inclusion criteria include English and Indonesian literature published in the last eight years (2017–2025), as well as classical literature of high theoretical significance—particularly works by Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and figures in the study of critical disability. Literature that is only administrative, technocratic, or does not critically examine aspects of power relations are excluded from the analysis.

Data analysis utilizes thematic and interpretive approaches, through the process of identifying the main recurring themes in the literature. The focus of the analysis is directed at issues such as: normalization and marginalization of ABK, discourse on "normality" in education, mechanisms of symbolic exclusion, and resistance to inclusion in institutional practice. Critical sociological theory is used as a lens for interpreting findings, especially concepts such as body discipline, normative power, cultural capital, and hegemonic discourse in educational institutions.

By combining a systematic literature approach and a critical sociological theoretical framework, this study presents a conceptual analysis that maps how educational structures play a role in reproducing injustice against children, as well as providing a theoretical foothold for the formulation of inclusive policies that are more just and socially equitable.

Result and Discussions

Normalization and Discourse on "Normal Children" in the Education System

The normalization of the narrative of "normality" in education has implications for how curriculum, assessments, and classroom interactions are shaped and practiced, leading to the exclusion of those who are perceived as different, especially children with special needs (ABK). In many education systems, the curriculum is often designed based on one "normal" model as a reference, where all learners are expected to follow that standard. This creates a deep bias that directs a focus on a single assessment that does not accommodate the diversity of learning capacity, thus leaving ABK forced to adapt to norms that do not fit their unique needs. In this case, the dominance of the normality narrative serves as a social control that prioritizes general expectations and ignores the individual needs of students. (Ferizaldi & Fazlina , 2020; Nasbi , 2017)

Assessments in the education system often rely on standardized tests that are insensitive to variations in students' abilities. The applicable assessments usually prioritize academic results based on norms built by the dominance of the normality narrative, making students with special needs as parties who feel that they do not meet the set criteria. With this approach, evaluation is not able to capture the real potential of students, because it does not take into account the different ways of learning or the unique challenges faced by ABK. Consequently, students who do not achieve the expected results in this system are often considered under-capable, a stigma attached to them and potentially reducing motivation and confidence. (Iskandar et al., 2024; Utama, 2021)

Using Foucault's perspective on the "gaze" or controlling view, we can understand more deeply how this view functions in organizing and shaping the reality of education. According to Foucault, the "normative gaze" not only assesses the qualities of individuals but also shapes subjects through control over their behavior and identity. In the context of education, the narrative of normality serves as a tool to control how students define themselves and be accepted by peers as well as society. Detrimental and discriminatory educational practices can arise when these views are set aside, causing students to feel that they have no place in a learning environment that is supposed to be inclusive and supportive. (Squirt et al., 2023)

This normalization mechanism is also seen in social interactions in the classroom, where stigma and stereotypes can be transmitted from teacher to student, creating an unsupportive environment for ABK. When teachers or other students view a crew member as inferior or uncomparable, this not only affects the perception of crew members but also potentially leads to biased interactions. It is important to rethink how interactions in the classroom can be carried out by paying attention to the principles of inclusion, where each individual is valued as he is without having to try to be affected by repressive norms of normality. (Squirt et al., 2023)

This condition shows the need for a transformation in the curriculum and teaching methodology to include a broader inclusive perspective. This includes adjustments in the curriculum that emphasize diversity, learning capacity and different ways of thinking. By enriching learning methods, teachers can help create a context where every student can feel valued and heard. Within the framework of inclusive education, an approach that values students' individual experiences and uniqueness can strengthen the success of ABK inclusion in education, where the boundaries between "normal" and "different" are becoming increasingly blurred. (Iskandar et al., 2024; Sumarni, M.Si, 2019)

In an effort to realize a more equitable education, dialogue about normalization and a controlling view based on norms must be critically confronted. Therefore, the need for training for educators to be aware of biases and norms that potentially exclude students must be an integral part of the education system in which we live. Through an inclusive pedagogical approach and a critical understanding of how the narrative of normality functions in educational settings, we can begin to build a truly inclusive space for all students, regardless of their abilities, thus benefiting society as a whole. (Baharuddin & Said, 2020; Düsseldorf & Kusumastuti, 2020)

Power Relations in Teacher-Child Relations

In the context of inclusive education, the power relationship between teachers and children with special needs (ABK) is significantly shaped by the teacher's ability to define and classify who is considered "problematic" and who is considered "capable of learning". Teachers often hold great authority in determining how students are viewed in a learning environment. For example, terms such as "hyperactive child" or "unruly child" are often used to label children who do not conform to expected behavioral norms, which in turn can result in a negative assessment of their potential. The designation of this label not only creates limits in teacher-student interaction but also reinforces a hierarchy within the classroom, where the teacher's power to define students' grades and capabilities is superimposed on a larger measure of the concept of "normality". (Squirt et al., 2023; Ibrahim & Winery, 2020)

This labeling process can be understood as an inevitable classification mechanism in the school environment. Teachers who use these labels are often unaware of the harmful impact of these terms, which can be a barrier to ABK educational opportunities. Labeling is not only a way to define students but also a control tool that can affect children's access to educational resources and the support they need. School systems that make these categories the standard for punishing student behavior create a culture that can ignore and tolerate discriminatory treatment of children who have different learning styles. (Squirt et al., 2023) (Squirt et al., 2023; Ibrahim & Winery, 2020)

By referring to the concept of power/knowledge developed by Foucault, we can see how the knowledge generated by teachers not only establishes the legitimacy of their authority but also regulates and controls interactions within the classroom. This knowledge is disseminated and strengthened through various educational practices that from the beginning can create stigma or low expectations for ABK. Teachers who are seen as a source of knowledge do not always realize that they play a role in shaping the social framework in terms of education; They are trapped in a broader institutional cultural pattern in which learning norms are determined without considering the individual needs of the students. (Wibowo & Claretta, 2023) (Thaibah et al., 2021)

This aspect creates a circle of control that is difficult to break, where teachers who act with good intentions can still contribute to injustice to ABK. This mechanism can be seen in how various educational programs try to formulate policy-based solutions without touching the root of the problem—that is, a view that has strengthened the dominance of knowledge and understanding of ABK in schools. In many cases, teachers feel pressured to comply with certain policies, so they focus more on compliance than on researching more inclusive and diverse ways to support students who struggle with those challenges. (Squirt et al., 2023; Wuryandari , 2022)

It is important to create a learning environment where teachers are empowered to see each child from a broader perspective. Comprehensive training for teachers on inclusion and diversity can help improve their views—providing insight into how to leverage more inclusive pedagogical approaches, rather than just applying exclusive labels and classifications. Thus, this will not only change the way we teach, but will also change the way students with special needs see themselves in the context of education. (Saad & Apsari , 2019; Watulingas & Sandalwood , 2020)

Overall, deconstructing and redefining the power relationship in education between teachers and students has the potential to drastically change the learning experience of ABK. By applying this critical lens, we can begin to elaborate and empower a more equitable system, in which every student, regardless of label or classification, can thrive in an environment that supports and values a diversity of learning capabilities. Finally, this approach aims to build a learning space that is not only inclusive but also encourages the active participation of students from all backgrounds, thereby freeing them from existing barriers. (Düsseldorf & Kusumastuti , 2020; Cardon et al., 2023)

Cultural Capital and Obstacles to ABK Participation

The successful participation of children with special needs (ABK) in the education system depends not only on their cognitive abilities, but also on their cultural capital, including family support, communication methods, and social background. The importance of these factors lies in how they affect children's access to inclusive education and how they are treated in it. For example, crew members who come from financially constrained families tend to face more challenges in creating conditions that support their active participation compared to peers with more established social backgrounds. These limitations make it difficult for them to balance their family's educational and financial needs, which often exacerbates the impact of pre-existing social stigma. (Aminasya & Syriac , 2025)

Families from lower economic backgrounds typically experience greater exclusion in school due to the dominant normative habitus. This habitus includes social mindsets and practices that are formed in a particular cultural context and can encourage discriminatory judgments of ABK. When children with special needs do not behave in line with established social expectations or curriculum, they are easily discriminated against and seen as "problems" rather than as potential individuals. This is very dangerous because it creates a stigma that can hinder their ability to fully participate in the education they need. (Ancient , 2020)

This mismatch between individual habitus and school habitus often worsens the situation of children from poor families. They not only struggle to meet academic expectations but also deal with larger social norms that are perceived as "normal". For example, the inability to communicate in a way that is considered "appropriate" in the classroom can result in them feeling isolated and choosing not to participate, even though they have the potential to actively contribute to learning. As a result, their educational process is hampered, and the gap in understanding between teachers and students is widening. (Ancient , 2020)

Family socio-economic conditions have a significant effect on communication between children and teachers. ABCs from poor family backgrounds may not have the ability to speak or interact in the way expected in an educational setting. This not only hinders their participation but can also cause them to feel unwanted or unwelcome. This inability to communicate is often rooted in a lack of rich interaction within families, which can reduce the learning experience at home and affect the way they interact socially at school. (Darmanto & Watch , 2024) (Wardani & R , 2023)

Family support also plays an important role in determining how able ABK is able to participate in school activities. Families with higher incomes can often provide better resources, such as additional education or access to other education-related fulfillment services, to support their child's development. Conversely, disadvantaged families

may not be able to access the same things, leading to the child's helplessness in school, both academically and socially. (Ikhwanisifa et al., 2024)

Limitations in access to relevant knowledge about disability and inclusive education can be a problem. Families with a poor understanding of how to support ABK in their education tend to reinforce negative stigma, which in turn can affect communication and interaction in the school environment. Minimal social support, both from family and community, can make the educational process more difficult for children, strengthening their marginalized position in the education system. (Fahrul & Ahmad, 2023)

It is clear that to increase the participation of children with children in education, it is important to develop a holistic approach that ensures that not only education policies support integration, but also the support of families and social circles of children with children is strengthened. By educating parents about the importance of being involved in their child's education, as well as creating an inclusive environment at school, we can increase the opportunities for children to participate fully and actively in the learning process. At the same time, we must refresh the public's understanding of ABK as individuals who can develop if given the right opportunities and support. (Rahmayanti et al., 2022)

Resistance to Inclusion: The Burden of Teachers and Technical Discourse

Many teachers in today's education system tend to interpret the concept of inclusive education as an additional burden, rather than as a fundamental principle of social justice. This view is developing, especially in the context of the training they receive, where the focus is more on the technical and administrative aspects than on the in-depth understanding of inclusion as an important social value. As a result, a lack of understanding of the importance of inclusion creates resistance to the implementation of inclusive practices in the classroom, which should provide space for all students, including those with special needs. (Ayanoğlu & Arastaman , 2023; Tracy-Bronson, 2024)

The dominance of technical approaches in teacher training often leaves out the critical reflection aspects necessary to evaluate the impact of inclusive education. Training that is limited to such mechanisms and procedures tends to ignore in-depth discussions of what social justice and inclusion mean. This certainly exacerbates teachers' perception that inclusive education is an additional task that distracts them from their primary responsibility in delivering quality education. In this view, teachers feel faced with increasing demands and pressure to adhere to established standards in the absence of appropriate pedagogical support. (You et al., 2019)

Criticism of the logic of efficiency and standardization in the education system explains how this can hinder inclusive transformation. Well-structured educational models often pursue efficiency goals without considering the diverse individual needs of students. When prioritizing efficiency prioritizes statistical achievement and academic outcomes, the need to produce an inclusive and supportive learning environment sinks in. This creates an unbalanced perspective, where students with special needs are often marginalized, exacerbating the conditions of injustice that inclusive education itself seeks to address. (Gomez- Najarro et al., 2023)

Standardization-focused systems often lead teachers to rely more on one-size-fits-all teaching methods, which are clearly not effective for all kinds of student needs. In this context, teachers' resistance to inclusion can be considered as a response to their dissatisfaction with an education system that is incapable of addressing the challenges faced by students with special needs. Efforts to create an inclusive environment are hampered, as faculty feel that they do not have the training, resources, or freedom to do so in the way they consider most effective. (Osi & Osi , 2022)

The success of inclusive education is not purely the responsibility of individual teachers, but also requires structural support from schools and the education system as a whole. Teachers must feel professionally equipped to face the challenges of teaching in inclusive classrooms, which requires training that not only touches on technical aspects but also builds a broader understanding of the value of social justice in education. By understanding inclusion as a shared mission, the challenges faced can be faced collectively, reducing the burden felt by individual teachers. (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova , 2017) (Palacios et al., 2022)

Reform at the policy level is very important to support this paradigm shift. A more inclusive and prioritised approach to social justice should be at the heart of teacher education, where professional development and training include elements of critical reflection and a deep understanding of as well as a commitment to inclusion. In this way,

teachers are expected to change their view from inclusive education as a burden to an opportunity to contribute to a more equitable and inclusive educational community. (Maynard et al., 2019)

Facilitating this transformation is not only important for the welfare of students with special needs (ABK), but also for the professional development of the teachers themselves. When teachers feel that they are part of a larger social mission, they become more motivated and involved in the implementation of inclusive education. Thus, the ultimate goal of inclusive education is not only a formal form of policy, but an integral part of an educational philosophy that prioritizes social justice and equality for all students. (Khan et al., 2017)

Conclusion

This study concludes that inclusive education practices in Indonesia still face significant structural and cultural barriers, especially in terms of power relations that take place in the school environment. Although inclusive policies have been enforced nationally, their implementation often reinforces discriminatory practices against children with special needs (ABK) through the process of normalization, labeling, symbolic exclusion, and inequality of access to educational resources. Teachers, curriculum, and evaluation systems contribute to the enforcement of "normality" norms that corner ABK as deviant parties.

Using a critical sociological perspective, this study shows that power relations in education are not only explicit, but also hidden in the policies, language, and social structures that govern daily education. Inclusive education is often interpreted technically and administratively without critical reflection on social justice values. Therefore, the transformation towards true inclusive education must involve a deconstruction of the dominant narrative of "normal children", curriculum reform, reflective teacher training, and family and community support. True inclusion can only be realized if the education system is willing to listen, adapt, and respect the diversity of all students equally.

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