



Pragmatic Inclusion as Maintenance Agency: How Indonesian Elementary Teachers Sustain Inclusive Education without Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

Various challenges encountered in implementing inclusive education policies in Indonesia stem from a mismatch between the policies and available resources. This study seeks to explain how classroom teachers negotiate inclusive education in resource-constrained Indonesian elementary schools by examining their diagnostic practices, adaptive pedagogical strategies, and enactment of maintenance agency in the absence of special education teachers at the Garut Integrated Islamic Elementary School. The research method used in this study is a qualitative case study to capture the complex dynamics. For data collection, the researchers used in-depth interviews, observations, and reviewed some documents such as lesson plans and student assignments. The researchers selected three classroom teachers as participants for the sample. Each teacher had five years of experience in an inclusive school, although without formal training in special education. The data were systematically processed using NVivo 12, followed by data analysis, from data condensation, display, to conclusions. The findings show that inclusive education is sustained through maintenance agency, as teachers employ pragmatic adaptations to preserve learning under systemic constraints. This study introduces maintenance agency as a contextually grounded perspective on teacher agency and underscores the importance of strengthening institutional support for sustainable, inclusive education.

Keywords: elementary school, pedagogical bricolage, pragmatic inclusion, teacher agency

1. Introduction

Based on research related to education conducted by education monitors, UNESCO stated that education is more than just access; it is about defining the quality of education that a person receives, and this applies to all students, regardless of their background and/or abilities (UNESCO, 2020). In Indonesia, this view is expressed through the Independent Curriculum policy, which emphasizes flexibility and student-centered learning (Rahayu et al., 2022). Implicitly, this policy demands that schools become more open and adaptable to diversity, shifting the focus of education from segregation to full inclusion. Therefore, inclusive education itself is fully supported through policies aligned with the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum, including flexible approaches, early diagnostic assessments, and differentiated learning that adapts to the unique needs of each student, including children with special needs.

Meanwhile, the implementation of inclusive schools has given rise to various phenomena. Although the number of schools implementing Inclusive Education continues to grow, this contrasts with the readiness of human resources, especially the availability of special assistant teachers assigned to assist regular teachers in developing and evaluating learning programs for students with special needs and collaborating in creating an inclusive environment. Based on previous research, many elementary schools, especially those implementing inclusive schools, add the status of an inclusive school only to fulfil administrative requirements, without adequate pedagogical facilities and infrastructure (Tarnoto, 2020). As a result, there is a fairly wide gap between policy and the reality of the school ecosystem, which is minimally prepared to implement and handle technology (Fitrah et al., 2025). This creates a state of local integration, where students with special needs are physically present but remain isolated in terms of learning.

This imbalance has led to the emergence of the phenomenon of inclusion without guidance, where tasks and responsibilities are shifted entirely to regular classroom teachers. Regular teachers in elementary schools implementing this inclusive education largely lack special education backgrounds. They are forced to play a dual role: acting as both a traditional teacher and an intervention specialist for students with special needs (Ridwan & Nadirah, 2024). This condition is made even more difficult by the existence of the Independent Curriculum, which requires teachers to implement differentiated learning. This concept requires precise diagnosis and complex learning modifications (Gusteti & Neviyarni, 2022). Differentiated learning becomes difficult without an adequate support system. Differentiated learning gives the impression of "teaching 28 ways to 28 students," which is practically impossible to realize. Ideally, teachers should map student needs based on three aspects (readiness, interests, and learning profiles) obtained from valid cognitive and non-cognitive diagnostic assessments with the help of a psychologist or Special Needs Teacher. In reality, teachers design their own measurement tools. Questions arise, such as whether a child is a slow learner or has not had breakfast, or whether a student is autistic or simply hyperactive. Differentiating these conditions requires psychological knowledge that not all teachers possess, a challenge compounded by the lack of transparency from parents regarding their child's condition upon enrollment; in some cases, parents themselves may not suspect that their child has a difference compared to their peers. Parents sometimes even refuse to accept that their child has a difference, insisting that their child's condition is the same as that of other students and does not require special treatment like children with special needs. This hinders the process of mapping student needs.

In addition to identifying and mapping student needs, teachers must navigate the challenges of differentiating content, learning styles, and assessment outcomes based on student needs. This poses significant challenges for teachers in establishing equitable graduation standards, especially when operating without specialized support in inclusive schools. Without systematic curriculum modifications and expert support, students with disabilities often experience locational integration, where they are physically present but remain socially and learningly isolated.

Recent research (2021-2025) shows that the gap between highly inclusive policies and minimal systemic support risks lowering teacher self-efficacy and triggering emotional exhaustion or burnout. Furthermore, while the Independent Curriculum provides freedom in learning, its implementation for slower-learning students requires a special approach in modifying teaching materials to suit the overall student experience, a skill many regular teachers lack.

Previous studies have mostly focused on inclusion under ideal conditions, where regular teachers and special education teachers work closely together. They often emphasize the importance of collaboration between classroom teachers and special education teachers as a key factor in the success of implementing inclusive education (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). Unfortunately, research examining how classroom teachers navigate the barriers to inclusion without dedicated mentor teachers remains limited. In fact, exploring how they survive and adapt in limited situations is crucial for understanding the authentic experiences of teachers in the field, particularly regarding inclusive education in developing countries. If these adaptation mechanisms are ignored, government inclusion policies could become mere paper tigers: snarling regulations but weak in implementation.

Therefore, this research is here to fill this gap by examining the role of teachers in inclusive schools that have minimal expert support (special assistant teachers), not only by recording complaints but also by exploring good practices as a pedagogical bricolage (Campbell, 2019) strategy that they themselves created to realize inclusion policies even without the presence of special assistant teachers. Based on the identified research gaps, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do classroom teachers respond to students' diverse learning needs in inclusive schools without Special Education Teachers?
2. What forms of pedagogical bricolage do classroom teachers employ to sustain inclusive learning under conditions of limited professional support?
3. How do classroom teachers exercise maintenance agency to sustain inclusive education despite systemic constraints?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Dynamics of Inclusive Education and Implementation Gaps

The discourse of inclusive education has undergone a significant shift from an administrative approach to a deep commitment that emphasizes a sense of belonging for every child. This dynamic evolution marks a transition from a medical model that views disability as a medical problem that needs to be cured through diagnosis and rehabilitation to a social model that states that disability arises from societal barriers and that schools must be transformed to support the participation of all students, thus encouraging schools to adapt their environment to build a culture of tolerance with a value-based approach such as equality, empathy, and respect for diversity,

rather than just integrating children with special needs (Ainscow, 2020). In Indonesia, this view has become the impetus for teacher training and policies such as the zero-rejection policy, which prohibits schools from rejecting students with special needs.

Inclusive education in Indonesia has evolved, which is reflected in the journey of segregative education, also known as special schools, which separates children with special needs from their peers with the assumption that their needs can only be met in a special environment, towards integrative, namely when children with special needs are placed in regular schools but are still required to adapt to the existing system, and finally to the inclusive model as a total educational reform with the view that the education system must adapt to provide facilities as a solution to the diversity of students.

Recent research by Woodcock et al. (2022) emphasizes that contemporary inclusive pedagogy is no longer about facilitating separate or different tasks for specific individuals. Instead, it involves creating a rich and flexible learning landscape that is accessible to all learners from the outset. Essentially, this paradigm shift represents a vital transition from mere integration, simply placing children in physical seats, to genuine inclusion, which ensures that every child has a voice and active participation.

Although various policies have been put in place to support the implementation of inclusive education, there remains a broken bridge between high-level policies and classroom realities. This implementation gap is not simply a technical failure; it is a human failure, rooted in several critical dimensions as follows.

Teacher anxiety and the need for empathetic support. Teachers are central actors in inclusive education practices, yet they often feel isolated in carrying out this role. Although many educators have a strong commitment to inclusion policies, they often suffer from efficacy anxiety, a feeling of doubt about their own abilities due to the perceived lack of adequate strategies and tools to support students with complex needs (Woodcock et al., 2022). Furthermore, in the post-pandemic era, teacher burnout rates have increased significantly (Pressley, 2021). This situation underscores the need for support beyond theoretical training alone, including empathetic collegial mentoring and a professional learning community capable of understanding and responding to the real challenges they face daily in the classroom.

Technology Assistance. On the one hand, technology does offer a solution for students who face communication barriers and struggle to absorb conventional materials. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of the second digital divide remains a real challenge in the field. Ok et al. (2020) highlighted that many students who rely heavily on assistive technology are being neglected due to cost factors and a lack of technical literacy among educators. Looking ahead to the 2024–2026 period, although the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) promises a more personalized learning system, Alfredo et al. (2024) warn of significant risks. Without structured equity efforts, there are concerns that this innovation will further isolate children in schools with limited facilities.

Barriers to inclusion implementation. Barriers to true inclusion are often implicit and difficult to detect. Even when a child is physically present, microaggressions, subtle, often unintentional, slights from peers or staff, can lead to feelings of inclusion or exclusion. UNESCO (2024). Closing this gap requires us to look beyond values and focus on building a culture of empathy and relational safety (Messiou, 2021). Often, the concept of inclusive education is viewed solely through a Western lens, which implicitly assumes abundant resources, a reality far from the circumstances in

many developing countries. In the Global South, the implementation of inclusion often faces systemic challenges, from overcrowded classrooms to limited basic infrastructure (Singal, 2019). This underscores the need for a paradigm shift within the inclusion model; we must have the courage to abandon rigid imported frameworks and begin to give a platform to local heroes, teachers and principals who continue to innovate with high dedication despite extremely limited resources. Recent literature findings (2024–2026) confirm that overcoming barriers to inclusion implementation is not simply a matter of adding new regulations or rules. It requires a fundamental redistribution of resources and a reinvestment in the human side of education. By adopting an intersectional approach to inclusion that links disability issues to racial, gender, and economic dimensions, we have the opportunity to create a more holistic education ecosystem. There, diversity is no longer simply a challenge to be managed, but a value to be truly upheld (United Nations, 2024).

2.1 Teacher Challenges in the Absence of Special Education Teachers in Indonesia

Amidst the dynamics of Indonesian education, the policy on inclusive schools, as outlined in Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 70 of 2009, often reaches schools with an unprepared support system. The absence of a special education teacher is a crucial missing link in this ecosystem. Without them, regular classroom teachers are forced to shoulder a double burden to meet the demands of the situation. This gap creates a stark contrast between the ideals of inclusion written on legal paper and the harsh reality faced in the classroom.

The majority of educators in inclusive schools in Indonesia initially lacked specialized training to address the complex diversity of disabilities. Without the presence of a special education teacher, who should act as a bridge, these teachers feel as though they are navigating uncertainty. Findings from Herlambang et al (2026) confirm this reality, where the absence of an adequate support system triggers a significant psychological burden, leaving educators feeling trapped in their inclusive roles without adequate preparation. Consequently, they not only experience emotional confusion but also face a profound crisis of professional competence in their daily teaching activities.

Without practical tools or a special counselor capable of translating clinical diagnoses into teaching strategies, teachers are often blind to their students' sensory and cognitive worlds. Recent research from 2021–2023 warns of the emergence of a phenomenon of "forced inclusion" that only creates a culture of "pseudo-inclusion." In this situation, students are physically present in the classroom, but they experience pedagogical isolation due to teachers' limitations in addressing their unique needs (Mumpuniarti et al., 2020).

A significant challenge faced by educators in Indonesia is developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Ideally, these documents should be the product of collaborative efforts with special education teachers. However, when compelled to work in isolation, teachers often perceive the IEP as an onerous administrative burden rather than a practical pedagogical guide (Hutapea & Marmoah, 2025). This situation is exacerbated by the absence of expert support in schools, which triggers a silent crisis in managing student behavior. Amidst the high student ratios in our classrooms, a sudden behavioral outburst from a special needs student often leaves teachers feeling completely helpless and out of control in public.

Establishing effective inclusive classrooms highly depends on the presence of a special education teacher capable of providing structured support. As emphasized by Wadria et al. (2025),

special education teachers play a vital role in bridging student needs with appropriate instructional strategies within the classroom. In the absence of an effective teachers' role, general classroom teachers often struggle to modify curricula and adaptively manage student behavioral dynamics. This situation forces educators to rely on reactive and unplanned disciplinary patterns, which ultimately diminishes the quality of social interactions in the classroom and strains educators' mental well-being due to the lack of systemic support for realizing ideal inclusive practices.

In Indonesia, the shortage of special education teachers is inextricably linked to the scarcity of contract educators and significant budgetary constraints. Many educational institutions lack the financial capacity to recruit specialized professionals, often necessitating a reliance on 'visiting teacher' models characterized by limited coverage and inconsistent presence. Academic discourse between 2024 and 2026 underscores that this systemic neglect imposes a disproportionate 'burden of heroism' on general classroom teachers. Relying solely on the individual sacrifices of educators to bridge gaps in support systems is not only unsustainable but also constitutes a form of inequity for both teachers and their students (United Nations, 2024).

2.2 The Role of Ecological Teachers and Pedagogical Bricolage

When formal support pillars, particularly the presence of special education teachers, are absent or even collapse, the massive burden of inclusion shifts from the system to the individual creativity of teachers. In Indonesia, this reality is reflected in the concepts of ecological agent and pedagogical bricolage. These terms capture a situation where teachers are not simply curriculum transmitters. Instead, they continually recreate learning opportunities every day, driven by extraordinary resilience and the use of whatever simple tools are available around them.

From an ecological perspective, agency is not simply an innate talent or fixed power of a teacher, but something that is achieved through dynamic interactions with the school environment (Priestley et al., 2026). For teachers in Indonesia, achieving this agency means finding the courage and extraordinary creativity to teach autistic or visually impaired students in crowded classrooms of 40 without expert assistance. Research by Kurniawati et al. (2017) and Wadria et al. (2025) reveals that this independence is rooted in a deep calling. This moral compass enables them to ignore the silence of government support and choose to focus on the children's immediate needs. The 2023–2025 literature confirms that despite the school ecosystem's inadequacies, teachers still achieve agency by shifting their perspective: from lamenting what is missing to imagining what is possible (Wadria et al., 2025).

The term "bricolage" essentially refers to the attempt to solve complex problems by utilizing whatever means, tools, or ideas are at hand (de Certeau, 1988). In inclusive schools across Indonesia, this phenomenon manifests as creative survival. Due to the lack of expensive assistive technology, teachers are forced to transform into pedagogical bricoleurs. Literature from 2022–2024 documents these poignant practices: from creating sensory aids from recycled cardboard to manually rearranging textbooks to keep up with students' reading rhythms. While it demonstrates incredible dedication, experts warn that this teaching style is a double-edged sword; it may save a child's future today, but it is secretly placing a massive psychological burden on the teacher's shoulders (Singal, 2019).

In Indonesia, the active role of teachers is rarely a solitary endeavor; it is highly communal. This is known as relational active role, it is the ability to reach out and leverage the strengths of others to solve shared challenges (Edwards, 2005). In the absence of these special education

teachers, teachers often apply the spirit of cooperation. Research by Kurniawati (2021) revealed that teachers in Indonesia often navigate implementation gaps through informal, underground networks. Through WhatsApp groups, they share behavior management tips or consult with local NGOs. This community-based collaboration serves as a vital safety net, creating inclusive solutions amidst minimal structural support from the state.

However, the literature for the 2024–2026 period also offers a grim warning. Relying on heroic individual agency is not a sustainable model. Rodhiyah et al. (2025) argue that if the education ecosystem remains unfavorable, with low wages, stifling administrative burdens, and a lack of special education teachers, even the most creative teachers will reach a saturation point. Indonesia must urgently shift from individual bricolage to systemic support, where inclusion becomes the nation's collective success, not the lonely struggle of exhausted teachers.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research uses a qualitative method with an intrinsic single case study design, with the main focus being to delve deeper into the unique phenomenon of teacher agency in an inclusive school environment without the assistance of a special assistant teacher, rather than simply testing hypotheses or drawing general statistical conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher chose SDIT Bina Insan as the sole research location because it serves as a critical case study, representing the gaps in the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia. This study aims to explore the dynamics of pedagogical bricolage and provide sufficient contextual detail so that readers can determine whether the findings apply to their own environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2020).

3.2. Participants of the Study

The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they possessed the required characteristics, based on various considerations and assessments. To ensure the unique character required for the case study, participants met the specific criteria, they are: 1) Teachers who currently manage a class with at least two students who have documented special educational needs, 2) Teachers who have not received consistent support from the special education teachers for at least one full school year, 3) A mix of beginner teachers (1-3 years) and senior teachers (10+ years) to observe how agency develops with experience, 4) Teachers who have demonstrated active efforts to modify materials or the environment, regardless of the success of those modifications, and 5) Willingness to engage in deep and honest dialogue about their feelings of inadequacy, frustrations, and hopes.

3.3. Instruments

To ensure that the findings truly reflect the lives of the participants and are not simply researcher bias, the trustworthiness protocol was implemented. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher returned the drafts to the teachers. This allowed the participants to recognize themselves in the data and clarify any misunderstandings regarding their lived experiences. Researchers engage in regular sessions with academic colleagues to discuss emerging themes. These critical friendships help challenge researchers' assumptions and ensure that analyses remain grounded in the raw data. Data were collected through three different lenses: in-depth semi-structured interviews, classroom observations of bricolage practices, and document analysis (e.g.,

modified lesson plans and student work). Transparent records of the research process, from raw field notes to final thematic categories, are maintained to ensure the reliability of the study.

3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis in this study follows the interactive model developed by Miles et al. (2014). This model views analysis as a continuous and simultaneous flow of three main activities: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. The first stage is data condensation, where the researcher carefully selects, focuses, simplifies, and abstracts the raw data from field notes and interview transcripts. This process is more than simply "reducing" the data; it is an attempt to "distil" the essence of the teachers' voices. The researcher identifies key moments of empowerment and collaboration, eliminating irrelevant details while retaining the emotional weight and context of each participant's struggles (Miles et al., 2014).

In the data presentation stage, the filtered information is organized into a systematic narrative or thematic matrix. This step is crucial for making the invisible visible. By mapping the relationship between limited support (ecology) and creative solutions devised by teachers (bricolage), researchers can facilitate a deeper understanding of the patterns of agency emerging at SDIT Bina Insan. This presentation serves as a visual bridge that allows researchers to draw meaningful conclusions more effectively. The final stage is the conclusion, which involves deriving meaning from the presented data. Researchers look for patterns, explanations, and logical flows that illustrate how teacher agency is achieved amidst constraints. To ensure the validity of these findings, a verification process is conducted through ongoing comparison with the original transcripts and discussions with colleagues. This ensures that the final themes are an honest representation of the realities experienced by the teachers, not simply the researcher's subjective interpretations.

The organization of codes and themes in this study was supported by NVivo 12 software. This tool serves as an efficient digital filing cabinet for storing, categorizing, and cross-referencing large amounts of qualitative data. While NVivo significantly assisted in managing the complexity of coding, the researcher remained the primary meaning-maker. The researcher ensured that human nuances, such as a sigh, a pause in speech, or a glimmer of hope in a teacher's story, were not lost or distorted by the digital process.

4. Results

In this part, the researchers present the findings of inclusive education at SDIT Bina Insan, Garut. The data presented is a synthesis of various data collection techniques, including three months of participant observation, in-depth interviews, analysis of pedagogical documents (lesson implementation plans and teacher journals), and audio-visual documentation.

4.1. Responding to Diverse Learning Needs without Special Education Teachers

Without the presence of a special education teacher or school psychologist, the identification of students with special needs at SDIT Bina Insan occurs in a diagnostic vacuum. Although there should be a standardized assessment, the reality on the ground shows that there is a humane, pragmatic, and intuitive mechanism.

4.1.1 Pedagogical Intuition and Field Experience

The teachers at SDIT Bina Insan do not rely on formal IQ scores, but rather rely on intuition developed through years of experience observing student development. Based on the observation data, it was found that the researcher observed a first-grade teacher paying special attention to Student A, who kept running around the classroom, stopping frequently to pay attention to Student A running in circles. At the same time, the other twenty-eight students sat still. The teacher then wrote in her teaching notebook: "Student A has different behavior, requires different attention to learn," a label that resulted from observation rather than from medical records.

In the interview, Participant 1 explained:

"Honestly, I don't have the tools to measure as psychologists do. But as a teacher with more than 10 years of experience, I have a hunch and can differentiate between students who are lazy to learn and students who have difficulty learning and are unable to understand the material. Because if a child is lazy to learn, just a little motivation will be able to make the child more enthusiastic about learning. But this child (Student A) often daydreams, and his gaze is blank. When spoken to, he doesn't respond. I have an intuition and say that this child is special, and that is the benchmark for me to identify this student A."

4.1.2 Comparison with peers serves as a standard of normality

Without a standardized curriculum, teachers use the class average as a benchmark to validate their intuitions about students perceived as different. Based on the observation was done. It was found that for 40 minutes, the teacher observed the students and made physical comparisons as many as 14 times between the regular group and children indicated as having special needs, to monitor the differences in speed in completing the task.

In the Interview, Teacher 2 said:

"I saw that his friends could already hold a pencil properly, while he was still holding it (in a fist). His friends could sit still for 10 minutes, but he kept running around. That comparison convinced me that he was a special needs student (ABK). I didn't know if it was ADHD or Autism; I didn't understand the terms. All I knew was that he was different from the other 28 kids in my class. So, I treated him differently." (Participant 2)

4.1.3 Digital Bricolage

It was found that the teachers use Google for digital validation when they sense an unnamable symptom, turning to the digital world for validation. They attempt to match the symptoms they see in class with health articles, then jump to one-sided conclusions. Related to the documentation data, the researchers found evidence in the form of a screenshot of a health article on a teacher's cell phone, which showed a search for children covering their ears when there is noise. This served as evidence for the teacher when speaking with parents.

Interview insight from Teacher 3 argue *"At that time, he often threw tantrums and covered his ears when there was noise. I was confused. Finally, I searched on Google with the keyword 'children don't like loud noises'. An article about the characteristics of autism and sensory issues appeared. I thought, 'Why are these similar?' So, I came to the temporary conclusion that he might have symptoms of autism. I conveyed this to his parents based on these findings, because the school does not provide psychological testing facilities."* (Participant 3):

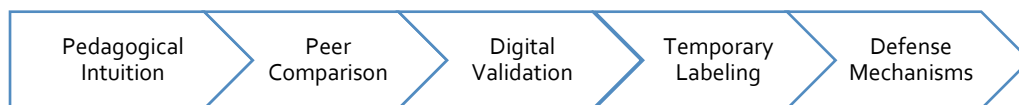


Figure 1. The teacher's intuitive diagnostic flow in determining special needs labels

The figure above demonstrates a shift in assessment at this school from clinical to situational assessment. This is done to provide a label to justify why the student requires special treatment (lesser assignments, lower grades, etc.). This serves as a defence mechanism for teachers to avoid feeling guilty when the student fails to meet national or school curriculum targets.

4.2. Pedagogical Bricolage for Sustaining Inclusive Learning

In facing learning situations with limited support from special teachers, teachers at SDIT Bina Insan act as bricolers, employing various methods to ensure that children with various learning disabilities are not completely isolated from the instructional process. These include:

4.2.1 Peers as Informal Special Education Teachers

Teachers use regular students who are already good and effective learners as tutors for students with special needs to help lighten the heavy class load. From observation, the data shows that the researcher observed the teacher intentionally placing a high-achieving and patient student next to a student with special needs. The student was observed guiding his friend's hand in holding a pencil, acting as a daily special education teacher.

The data from the interview shows that Participant 2 claimed:

"I was alone facing 28 children... So, I used the 'Peer Tutor' strategy. I placed the child who was identified as having special needs to sit with the brightest and most patient student... So that friend became his daily special companion teacher."

4.2.2 Spontaneous Modification

The Crossover strategy often makes it difficult to develop a formal Individualized Education Program (IEP). Instead, modifications occur on the spot during the evaluation process. Documentation analysis, taken from lesson plans, proves that although the formal RPP documents appear standard and uniform, evidence of modification was found on the physical exam sheets. Researchers found that teachers selectively eliminated questions with a high level of difficulty for the students with special needs.

Interview results, Participant 3 proposed:

"Honestly, if I have to make two lesson plans... I can't do it. So, during the test... I go to his desk, then I cross out 5 difficult questions. I say, 'Just do numbers 1 to 5...'"

4.2.3 Resource Bricolage

To bridge the cognitive gap, teachers engineer the environment by transforming objects around the school into concrete learning media. From the observation and artefact data, it is shown that the researcher documented a Sensory Box prop made from cardboard snack boxes filled with pebbles collected from the school yard.

Interview insight, Participant 1 noted:

"He doesn't understand the concept of division if it's just numbers... Eventually, I pick up pebbles from the yard, or sometimes use his pocket money... If I wait for teaching aids from the education department, they never come."

4.3. Exercising Maintenance Agency under Systemic Constraints

Being a lone warrior in inclusive education is emotionally demanding. Teachers are caught in a deep dilemma, between moral dedication to service and mental exhaustion due to limited competencies and systemic support.

4.3.1 The Burden of Silence and Guilt

In the recording of session 07, a reflective moment was revealed when a teacher whispered to herself after the lesson was over, "My energy is drained today, I am so tired." This shows the teacher's emotional exhaustion.

Interview insight, Participant 1, stated:

"Sometimes I feel guilty (sinful). Today I kept getting angry because he (the student with special needs) was running around while I was explaining. After school, I regretted it, 'Poor him, he doesn't know anything.' But in class, my emotions were drained. I was mentally exhausted, not just physically. I'm not a psychologist; I didn't know how to calm him down other than with a loud voice."

4.3.2 Informal Collegial Support

The teacher's lounge serves as a cathartic space where formal supervision is replaced by shared empathy. Researchers observed that the break room functioned as a "safe space." There, fatigue was validated through sharing snacks and venting, creating a sense of shared destiny.

Interview insight, Participant 3 mentioned:

"If I report to the Principal, the answer is usually 'be patient, ma'am, this is a field of reward.' That doesn't solve my problem when a child throws a tantrum. So, my way of relieving stress is to talk to a friend at the next table. We laugh about the day's events. It's precisely those casual conversations during break that make me strong enough to go back to class the next day."

Table: Data Triangulation Matrix

Problem Domain	Evidence from Observation	Evidence from Documentation	Evidence from the Recording
Identification	Observing the blank stare compared to the class average.	Diary notes about different behavior.	Discussion about Google search results.
Class Management	Peer-mediated benchmate support.	Seating chart designed for peer-to-peer assistance	The teacher directs classmates to help their friends.
Pedagogy	Use of pebbles/seeds for counting.	Handwritten marginal notes on standard lesson plans	A voice explaining concepts with pocket money.
Evaluation	The teacher whispers simplified tasks.	Exam sheet with crossed-out questions	Directing students to skip difficult material.
Welfare	Heartfelt outpouring in the lounge.	Notes about "Pahala" (rewards) in the school memo	A tired sigh and self-reflection after class.

The table above shows how all the different information, from what was seen in the classroom to what was found in the teachers' personal notes, actually tells the same story. Essentially, it's a reality check confirming that even though these teachers lacked specialized expertise to assist them, they managed to create their own ingenious systems to survive. For every major problem they faced, such as not having sophisticated testing equipment or specialized teaching aids, they found "homemade" solutions, such as using Google or picking up pebbles from the yard. This demonstrates that even though they were working in a "vacuum," their creativity and passion filled the gap.

5. Discussion

5.1 Redefining Inclusion in the Global South: From Normative Compliance to Pragmatic Agency

The results of this study refute the assumptions in the global discourse on inclusive education, namely that inclusive education is shaped by the experiences of educational systems and the availability of resources. Contemporary international research consistently links successful inclusion to active collaboration across disciplines, with the presence of specialist professionals and a systematic pedagogical infrastructure designed to support differentiated learning (Ainscow, 2020). In this context, the role of teachers is conceptualized as a transformative innovation that aims to expand access to learning and improve measurable learning outcomes (Pantic & Florian, 2015; Priestley et al., 2026).

However, empirical evidence from SDIT Bina Insan shows that these assumptions are difficult to maintain in a structurally constrained environment. The absence of special education teacher, limited practice-oriented supervision, and the rapid implementation of the Independent Curriculum collectively create what can be conceptualized as a skills vacuum. "This situation reflects systemic challenges in the Global South, where education policies are often imported without adaptation to local realities, thereby outpacing institutional readiness and the available professional support structures (Kamenopoulou & Karisa, 2023). Under such conditions, inclusion cannot be achieved merely through administrative procedural standards; rather, it requires attention to specific contexts and the development of teacher competence based on practical field needs.

The teachers' actions in the field are not indicative of professional incompetence; rather, they represent an active negotiation regarding the very essence of inclusion. Instead of being trapped by rigid normative compliance, they elevate the principles of social justice as their primary foundation. When structural limitations constrain demands for individual differentiation, teachers strategically prioritize student engagement, emotional well-being, and the stability of the learning environment. Consequently, the paradigm of inclusion at the school shifts: from an idealistic pursuit of technical standards toward functional participation practices that are more congruent with classroom realities.

The concept of Pragmatic Inclusion that emerged from this study extends the literature on inclusive pedagogy by highlighting adaptation as a legitimate professional response to constraints. While dominant frameworks emphasize optimal differentiation supported by expert collaboration, pragmatic inclusion reflects a rational pedagogical compromise rooted in contextual realities. Teachers continually balance curriculum mandates with classroom survival strategies, echoing

findings about contextualized curriculum implementation processes where policy interpretations become localized and negotiated.

The main theoretical contribution lies in identifying the Agency of Care. Existing agency studies largely conceptualize agents as innovation-oriented or transformative professionals' action (Priestley et al., 2026). In contrast, the agency observed in this study functions primarily as a system stabilizer. Teachers mobilize professional judgment not to redesign institutional structures but to prevent the collapse of instruction due to resource imbalances. Therefore, the agency becomes a mechanism for maintaining participation rather than generating innovation.

These findings contribute to the international debate by demonstrating that agency in the Global South should not be evaluated solely through innovation metrics derived from resource-rich systems. Instead, an agency can operate as a professional survival mechanism embedded in an unequal policy ecology. Thus, inclusion emerges as a contextually rational practice, not a deviation from global standards.

5.2 Street-Level Bureaucracy: Professional Discretion, Moral Harm, and Covert Exclusion

Practices such as intuition-based diagnosis supported by online searches and spontaneous assessment modifications illustrate how teachers function as frontline policy actors, translating abstract inclusive mandates into workable classroom practices. From the perspective of street-level bureaucracies, discretionary adaptation becomes inevitable when policy ambitions exceed operational capacity (Lipsky, 2010). In this case, teachers do not just implement policies; they interpret, simplify, and reconstruct them in response to the immediate demands of the classroom.

Recent policy implementation research also shows that teachers increasingly act as the primary interpreters of reforms when institutional guidance fails to address the issues. In the absence of specialized expertise, discretionary professional judgment becomes the primary mechanism for implementing inclusive education policies. The use of Google-based diagnostics, peer comparisons, and intuitive behavioral interpretations reflects pragmatic attempts to compensate for the missing diagnostic system. However, the findings also reveal a paradox embedded in policy autonomy. While flexibility allows for pedagogical improvisation through bricolage strategies, autonomy granted without competency support results in significant psychological distress. Teachers simultaneously bear responsibility for inclusive success while lacking diagnostic authority, professional certification, or training in behavioral intervention.

This condition is in line with international evidence linking the demands of inclusive education with emotional exhaustion and energy burnout, which remains inadequate (Hascher & Waber, 2021). Participants often described feelings of guilt, emotional exhaustion, and moral distress when disciplinary responses conflicted with empathy for students with special needs. Such experiences reflect what can be interpreted as moral injury, where professional values collide with structural limitations.

Importantly, discretionary adaptation introduces risks conceptualized as exclusion within inclusion (Slee, 2018). Even if students remain physically present in regular classrooms, learning accessibility can be compromised when adaptations prioritize classroom management over cognitive engagement. Simplified exams, spontaneous curriculum reductions, and peer-mediated learning support serve as short-term protective mechanisms but can inadvertently normalize lower academic expectations.

In line with arguments emphasizing inclusive pedagogy as a matter of instructional accessibility rather than mere placement, pragmatic inclusion functions simultaneously as both a safeguard and a risk. Discretionary policies adopted by teachers serve to prevent immediate disruptions and maintain classroom order; however, without structural reinforcement, these policies risk perpetuating long-term inequalities. Therefore, the novel contribution lies in conceptualizing pragmatic inclusion as a double-edged mechanism that maintains short-term system stability while simultaneously revealing the unseen risks of instructional exclusion.

5.3 Relational Agency and Social Capital as Collective Safety Nets

The emergence of the teachers' lounge as a place for emotional venting and impromptu consultations highlights the importance of relational agency amidst institutional constraints. Relational agency enables professionals to mobilize shared expertise through collaborative interactions when formal structures fail to provide adequate pedagogical guidance (Edwards, 2005). International studies increasingly recognize communities of practice as an important mechanism for navigating complex professional demands in uncertain educational environments (Forbes, 2022). When supervision emphasizes administrative compliance rather than instructional guidance, informal collegial interactions become the most accessible and trusted support mechanism.

In this study, social capital served as an emotional buffer, reducing the risk of burnout associated with inclusive teaching responsibilities. Casual conversations allowed teachers to collectively reinterpret difficult experiences, exchange coping strategies, and reaffirm their professional identities. Similar findings highlight peer collaboration as a protective factor supporting teacher well-being and resilience during periods of institutional stress. Nonetheless, this study makes an important argument: relying on individual resilience and informal solidarity is a fragile national strategy. Coping mechanisms should not be mistaken for sustainability. International research consistently shows that prolonged emotional labor without institutional recognition undermines career continuity and accelerates resignation (Hascher & Waber, 2021).

Therefore, relational agency serves as a temporary collective safety net, not a structural solution. Transforming informal solidarity into institutional mechanisms such as the deployment of mobile specialists, mentoring-based supervision models, or collaborative workload redistribution will shift responsibility from individual resilience to systemic accountability. Without such transformation, inclusive education risks remaining a silent struggle supported by teacher sacrifice rather than institutional commitment.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that inclusive education implementation within resource-constrained Islamic primary school contexts cannot be adequately interpreted through normative benchmarks derived from highly resourced educational systems. The absence of special education teachers, limited pedagogical supervision, and accelerated curriculum reform generate a significant gap between inclusive policy ambition and classroom implementation capacity. Rather than reflecting professional inadequacy, teachers actively renegotiate inclusion through adaptive and contextually rational practices. Inclusion is interpreted not solely as optimal differentiation but as the preservation of participation, emotional belonging, and classroom stability. The concept of Pragmatic Inclusion, therefore, expands theoretical understandings of inclusive education by positioning inclusion as situated professional praxis shaped by structural realities.

The central novelty contribution of this study lies in identifying the *Maintenance Agency*. Unlike dominant agency frameworks emphasizing innovation or transformation, teacher agency in this context functions as a stabilization mechanism sustaining instructional continuity amid systemic imbalance. Teachers exercise professional judgment to prevent implementation collapse rather than redesign institutional structures. Findings further demonstrate how discretionary practices position teachers as street-level bureaucrats responsible for translating policy into practice. While discretion enables adaptive responses, it simultaneously generates ethical dilemmas and risks of hidden exclusion when survival-oriented classroom management strategies compromise accessibility. Relational agency and collegial solidarity emerge as essential emotional and professional safety nets mitigating burnout risks. However, dependence on informal coping mechanisms cannot substitute for institutional responsibility. Sustainable inclusion requires systemic redistribution of expertise through flexible specialist deployment, mentoring-based supervision, and equitable workload restructuring.

Theoretically, this study contributes a Global South perspective that reconceptualizes teacher agency as contextual professional praxis within unequal policy ecologies. Practically, the findings emphasize that inclusive education will remain dependent on individual sacrifice unless structural investment accompanies policy expansion. Sustainable inclusion must therefore transition from heroic individual adaptation toward collective institutional responsibility.

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