

The Challenges in Catering the Needs of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder in Indonesian Schools

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges faced by Indonesian schools in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through a narrative literature review framed by the Social Model of Disability. Despite national efforts to promote inclusive education, significant barriers remain: (1) insufficient support for educators, (2) inadequate government funding and operational guidance, and (3) widespread societal stigma. Teachers often lack the necessary training and resources to manage the diverse learning styles and behaviours of students with ASD, leading to increased stress and diminished outcomes for both educators and learners. Limited financial support further restricts the development of inclusive facilities, assistive technologies, and specialised programs aligned with inclusive curricula. Compounding these challenges is a lack of community awareness, resulting in misconceptions and harmful stereotypes of students with ASD in mainstream education. Synthesising current literature, this review highlights the need for targeted teacher training, greater government commitment to inclusive curriculum development, and broader community engagement. Addressing these systemic barriers is essential to creating equitable educational opportunities for students with ASD in Indonesia and advancing a more inclusive and socially responsive school system.

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Introduction

Inclusive education has become a key principle in global education reform, ensuring that all learners, regardless of ability, have equitable access to quality education. In Indonesia, inclusive education has gained momentum, yet many students with disabilities, particularly those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), continue to face systemic exclusion (Riany et al., 2016; Sheehy et al., 2020). Despite policy commitments, real-world implementation remains uneven and often inadequate.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterised by varying degrees of difficulty in social communication, interaction, and restrictive or repetitive patterns of behaviour (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 55; Kistoro et al., 2021; Riany et al., 2016). Autism prevalence estimates vary significantly across countries and time periods, with international figures ranging from 0.67% to 1%, while in Indonesia, estimates suggest 1.14% of the population may be affected (Sheehy et al., 2019). Sidjaja et al. (2017) and Daulay et al. (2025) reported that one in 833 children born between 1984 and 1991 had an ASD diagnosis, which rose to 1 in 50 children by 2013. As of 2017, only 30% of Indonesia's 1.6 million children with special needs received education, with just 18% enrolled in inclusive settings (Wibowo et al., 2022).

In response, Indonesia's constitutional mandate for special education is outlined in Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which affirms in Article 5(2) that individual with physical, emotional, mental, intellectual, or social disabilities have the right to receive appropriate educational support (Ediyanto et al., 2017; Kistoro et al., 2021). However, despite the policy to implement inclusive education, misconceptions persist, leading to the exclusion of autistic children who are often believed to require separate educational systems. The education system in Indonesia is divided into regular, inclusive, and special schools, each serving different student populations (Sheehy et al., 2020; Wibowo et al., 2022). Regular schools often restrict admission to students without behavioural difficulties and with typical cognitive and mobility functions, while students with more complex needs, such as those with unique communication and sensory impairments, are typically placed in "Sekolah Luar Biasa" (special schools), which focus on specific disability types (Sheehy et al., 2019). This is mainly due to the rooted systemic barriers, stigmatisation, and low awareness in the Education community. Barriers and segregation in Indonesian schools persist due to gaps in teacher preparedness, rigid curriculum design, inadequate inclusive strategies, and limited infrastructure (Latif & Paramita, 2023).

Identifying the challenges faced by students with autism in educational settings is essential to ensuring that all children receive equitable educational opportunities. As a response to these challenges, inclusive education seeks to eliminate social, economic, and ability-based distinctions among students, creating an environment where autistic children can learn and thrive alongside their neurotypical peers (Purbani, 2013). This narrative literature review explores the barriers to inclusion for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Indonesian schools, focusing on three key areas: (1) the role of educators and the barriers they face, (2) the government's role and commitment to inclusive education, and (3) societal attitudes and the persistence of stigma.

Methodology

This paper adopts a narrative literature review approach to explore the barriers to inclusive education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Indonesia. The review is guided by the Social Model of Disability as a theoretical framework to critically examine the institutional, environmental, and attitudinal barriers that hinder inclusion. Relevant literature was identified through a purposive selection of peer-reviewed journal, books, and other credible sources published between 2000 and 2025. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the research focus, particularly studies addressing inclusive education, autism in the Indonesian context, teacher preparedness, policy implementation, and social attitudes.

Rather than aiming for exhaustive coverage, this review prioritises depth of analysis over breadth, drawing on key themes across the literature to structure the discussion. The selected studies were thematically grouped into three major areas of inquiry: (1) the role and barriers faced by educators, (2) government commitment and policy challenges, and (3) societal attitudes and stigma. These themes were critically analysed through the lens of the Social Model of Disability to understand how systemic and cultural structures contribute to the exclusion of autistic students from mainstream educational settings in Indonesia.

Social Model of Disability

The Social Model redefines disability not as an individual deficit, but as a consequence of societal failure to accommodate people with impairments (Oliver, 1983). In contrast to the medical model, which locates the problem within the individual, the Social Model positions disability as arising from attitudinal, institutional, and environmental barriers that restrict participation and access (Goering, 2015; Graham, 2024; Oliver, 2023). This shift in perspective is particularly relevant when considering the experiences of autistic students, whose challenges often stem not from their neurodivergence but from environments structured around neurotypical norms (Thacher, 2024). Attitudinal barriers include the persistence of deficit-based views that portray autistic students as problematic or in need of fixing, rather than recognising their rights and potential (Oliver, 2023). Institutional barriers manifest in rigid school policies and professional practices that prioritise standardised approaches and bureaucratic limitations over inclusive, student-centred support (Oliver, 2023). Environmental barriers refer to inaccessible learning environments, such as sensory-overloading classrooms or a lack of visual supports, which can significantly hinder autistic students' engagement (Oliver, 2023). By using the Social Model, this paper shifts the analytical focus from perceived student deficits to the systemic and structural conditions that shape their educational experiences, advocating for inclusive reforms that support dignity, autonomy, and full participation.

Literature Review

Educators' Role and Barriers

Teachers in Indonesia are expected to play a central role in implementing inclusive education by employing adaptive pedagogy, building deep understandings of student needs, and engaging in continuous professional development. This expectation is legally grounded in Indonesian Law No. 14/2005 on Teachers and Lecturers, which defines teachers as professional educators responsible for guiding, instructing, and evaluating students across all formal education levels (Fildzah, 2020). In practice, inclusive teaching requires educators to

adapt instructional materials to align with students' cognitive, emotional, and sensory profiles, employ strategies based on natural learning systems, and develop accessible media that can support all learners, including those with autism and other disabilities (Rasmitadila et al., 2022). Teachers must also identify diverse learning characteristics, foster strong student relationships, and apply inclusive methods such as scaffolding, modelling, and collaborative learning (Kurniawati, 2021; Ummah et al., 2024). In addition to academic differentiation, teachers are expected to address non-academic development through culturally relevant content, including religious education tailored to students' beliefs (Kistoro et al., 2021). These expectations reflect a comprehensive vision of inclusive practice in Indonesia that relies on teachers being responsive, reflective, and equipped to meet the varied needs of every learner.

In classrooms serving students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), several teaching methods have been implemented by Indonesian teachers, such as Discrete Trial Training (DTT) and differentiated instruction (DI) to accommodate complex behavioural, cognitive, and sensory needs (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). This often involves designing Individualised Education Plans (IEPs), using co-teaching models such as shadow or parallel teaching, and implementing visual-based strategies aligned with structured routines (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). Moreover, DI is widely applicable in every educational level, including higher education, where it can help to reduce anxiety by simplifying texts, adjusting workloads, and using tools like "green cards" to help ASD students anticipate class activities (Sandra & Kurniawati, 2020). Additional approaches, such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), have proven effective in supporting communication and behavioural development through repetition and one-on-one interaction (Kistoro et al., 2021). While these strategies aim to promote equity, participation, and academic success, their application is often hindered by limited resources and systemic inconsistencies, making inclusive implementation difficult to scale and sustain.

Although several inclusive pedagogies have been introduced, the practical application of inclusive frameworks remains a significant challenge for many Indonesian educators. Evidence suggests that the lack of specific competencies and training related to autism leaves many teachers ill-prepared for inclusive practice (Fildzah, 2020). This experience often leads to low confidence and difficulties addressing the cognitive and behavioural needs of students with ASD (Junaidi, 2020; Sheehy et al., 2019). Moreover, with class sizes of up to 35 students and limited physical space, collaborations between general teachers and special education teachers are lacking, resulting in fragmented or minimal support (Kantavong et al., 2017; Kurniawati, 2021; Latif & Paramita, 2023). These pressures contribute to withdrawal or passivity, as some teachers assume that inclusive teaching is the sole responsibility of specialist staff or believe it is unfeasible under current conditions (Ummah et al., 2024). Consequently, frameworks like IEPs are often viewed as aspirational but impractical, reinforcing systemic exclusion of students with autism from full classroom participation.

From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, these challenges do not arise from the characteristics of students with autism but from the societal barriers that prevent their full inclusion. The absence of mandatory autism-related training, the lack of assistive technology, inadequate infrastructure, and unrealistic workload expectations all represent institutional and environmental barriers that hinder the development of inclusive learning environments (Fildzah, 2020; Latif & Paramita, 2023; Rasmitadila et al., 2022). While only 15.1% of Indonesian teachers are certified in special education, most others rely on informal learning networks such as *Kelompok Kerja Guru* (KKG), which lack expert guidance (Kantavong et

al., 2017; Utami, 2025). Teachers also face logistical challenges, including limited time for planning, overcrowded classrooms, and inconsistent collaboration with support staff (Kistoro et al., 2021). These conditions reinforce reliance on individual empathy rather than structured, evidence-based methods (Utami, 2025). Nonetheless, research consistently shows that Indonesian teachers hold broadly positive attitudes toward inclusion, viewing it as morally important and emotionally rewarding (Kurniawati et al., 2012). This suggests a strong foundation upon which inclusive reform can be built if it is accompanied by adequate policy support, investment in teacher capacity, and the removal of structural barriers that currently prevent inclusive education from being a practical reality.

Government's Role and Policy Challenges

Government commitment is crucial to the successful implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia due to the complex challenges faced by schools, which cannot often resolve issues independently and are left without long-term solutions (Rasmitadila et al., 2023). Framed through the lens of the Social Model of Disability, the government's role becomes essential in eliminating institutional barriers that exclude students with disabilities from full participation in education. A key area requiring government attention is curriculum reform and financial support for schools. Current curricula and assessment models are inflexible and do not accommodate the diverse needs of students with disabilities, often forcing them to follow standards that do not reflect their learning profiles (Latif & Paramita, 2023). Additionally, inclusive education relies on adequate facilities, infrastructure, and strong collaboration between schools, families, and external agencies, all of which depend on strategic government investment and policy coordination to be effectively established and maintained (Latif & Paramita, 2023).

The Indonesian government has demonstrated its commitment to inclusive education through legal frameworks, funding for infrastructure, and curriculum reform. This commitment is evident in the extensive legislative and policy frameworks such as the 1945 Constitution (Article 31), Law No. 20/2003 on National Education, Law No. 8/2016 on Persons with Disabilities, and Permendiknas No. 70/2009, all of which guarantee the right of students with disabilities to access quality education and mandate inclusive classroom practices, training, and accessible learning environments (Damri et al., 2023; Rasmitadila et al., 2023). Moreover, financial support has been provided in the form of grants worth 50 million rupiah for training, infrastructure development, administrative resources, and the dissemination of inclusive education guidelines (Mulawarman et al., 2022; Yusuf & Yeager, 2011). These efforts are complemented by the appointment of Special Guidance Teachers and the provision of teaching aids and training for general education teachers in pilot schools (Kurniawati, 2021). In terms of curriculum, the government introduced differentiated learning through *Kurikulum Merdeka* in 2020 to better accommodate diverse student needs, including students with Autism (Utami, 2025). Additionally, training through the Centre for Development and Empowerment of Teachers and Education Personnel (PPPPTK TK & PLB) further supports inclusive pedagogy (Ediyanto et al., 2017). Overall, these coordinated legal, financial, and pedagogical strategies reflect a growing national commitment to building a more inclusive education system, although challenges in consistent implementation and teacher training remain.

Despite government efforts to support inclusive education, the reality of implementation across Indonesian schools remains fragmented, under-resourced, and often ineffective for students with Autism. While national policies and funding frameworks have been introduced,

research shows that 75% of schools still consider themselves far from inclusive, and only half have attempted to adjust their curriculum to meet student needs (Yusuf & Yeager, 2011). This gap is largely due to institutional barriers, including unclear policies, delayed fund disbursement, and limited technical guidance from the government, which leave schools and teachers to shoulder the responsibility independently (Latif & Paramita, 2023). Inclusive education is often treated as a school-led initiative rather than a systemic mandate (Damri et al., 2023), with insufficient operational support to meet the cognitive, behavioural, and sensory needs of autistic students. Environmental barriers also persist with many schools lacking resource rooms, adapted media, and quiet sensory-friendly spaces that are essential for autistic learners (Ummah et al., 2024; Yusuf & Yeager, 2011). These barriers reflect a broader failure to design schools inclusively, positioning exclusion as a result of inaccessible systems rather than student deficits.

Based on the Social Model of Disability, these challenges reveal how the schooling system disables students through structural exclusion. Institutional barriers include inadequate teacher training, the absence of dedicated institutions for continuous professional development, and a rigid reliance on standardised curricula that are merely simplified rather than meaningfully differentiated (Ummah et al., 2024). These practices marginalise autistic students by failing to accommodate diverse learning profiles. *Environmental barriers*, such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of assistive technology, and the physical inaccessibility of school facilities, further hinder participation (Latif & Paramita, 2023; Rasmitadila et al., 2022). Geographical and socioeconomic disparities compound the issue, with urban schools tend to have more resources and trained staff than rural ones, and regional gaps in infrastructure and funding create unequal conditions for inclusive education (Rasmitadila et al., 2023; Utami, 2025). Ultimately, these combined barriers undermine the implementation of inclusive policies and reinforce the marginalisation of autistic students (Damri et al., 2023).

Societal Attitude and Stigma

Societal attitude towards students with Autism in Indonesia functions as *an attitudinal barrier*, a core concept within the Social Model of Disability, which locates the problem of disability not in the individual, but in the prejudiced attitudes, norms, and social expectations that exclude and marginalise those with impairments (Graham, 2024; Oliver, 1983). These attitudinal barriers are especially evident in how autism is misunderstood and stigmatised across many Indonesian communities. Little et al. (2022) highlight a case study in an Indonesian primary school where children with disabilities, though enrolled in an inclusive setting, were labelled as “inclusion children,” excluded from group work, and experienced emotional distress and public shame. This exclusion reflects broader societal attitudes rooted in misinformation and a poor understanding of autism. The widespread use of derogatory terms like “madman” or “mental handicap” reflects the persistence of these beliefs in the education system (Tri Handoyo et al., 2021).

Cultural beliefs in Indonesia play a significant role in shaping societal attitudes toward autism, which negatively influences how children with autism and their families are treated. Riany et al. (2016) argue that cultural understandings of autism influence parenting through the level of community support or censure that parents receive, which in turn affects the strategies they adopt to meet their child’s needs. In many Indonesian communities, particularly in rural areas, autism is not well understood and is often associated with spiritual causes such as karma, curses, or parental wrongdoing (Riany et al., 2016; Sheehy et al.,

2020). These misconceptions are deeply embedded in cultural traditions that link disability to past misdeeds, including broken taboos during pregnancy or immoral behaviour such as extramarital affairs (Riany et al., 2016). As a result, families may be blamed and socially excluded, leading to isolation, internalised guilt, and limited support for both the child and caregivers (Daulay et al., 2025; Sheehy et al., 2020). This cultural context helps explain why families may still follow traditional behavioural guidelines during pregnancy and believe that a child with autism is a form of divine punishment or a test from God (Daulay et al., 2025).

Although inclusive education policies have been introduced, societal acceptance remains low, especially toward developmental disabilities. Sipahutar (2019) found that only 20.9% of Indonesians support the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities like autism, compared to those with physical disabilities. This indicates that autism is still widely misunderstood, making students with ASD more vulnerable to bullying and peer rejection in schools (Purbani, 2013). Educators may view the inclusion of autistic students as inefficient due to the challenges of addressing their diverse learning needs (Sipahutar, 2019).

Consequently, students with autism are often bullied, excluded, and denied adequate support, while teachers struggle to meet their needs due to a lack of understanding and empathy (Mulia et al., 2022). Because of the persistent stigma, families often choose to hide their children rather than send them to school out of fear of stigma and mistreatment (Riany et al., 2016). This environment of exclusion intensifies the emotional burden on caregivers, the behavioural challenges and social rejection faced by children with ASD significantly raise maternal stress, leading to depression, anxiety, and exhaustion (Daulay et al., 2025). These barriers to inclusion are not only systemic but also deeply intertwined with cultural beliefs in Indonesia, which continue to shape negative perceptions and societal responses toward autism. The persistence of stigma and cultural misconceptions about autism, therefore, creates a hostile environment where both children and their families face ongoing marginalisation, highlighting the urgent need for culturally sensitive education and community-wide attitudinal change.

Discussion

Based on the investigation and guided by the Social Model of Disability, two crucial recommendations emerge for Indonesian schools to address the barriers faced by students with autism. These barriers include: (1) insufficient support for educators, (2) inadequate government funding and operational guidance, and (3) widespread societal stigma. In response, two key recommendations emerged by focusing on the implementation of comprehensive professional learning for teachers and nation-wide support to enable inclusive practices for students with autism.

Firstly, there is a critical need to strengthen training and professional development within school communities to improve understanding and support for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In Indonesia, many educators lack adequate knowledge about autism, which negatively influences teaching practices and interactions with autistic students (Kurniawati, 2021). A national survey revealed that 42% of teachers explicitly requested training to improve their skills in behaviour management and the creation of autism-friendly environments (Sheehy et al., 2020). This demand stems from the fact that many Indonesian teachers lack familiarity with fundamental interventions such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) or the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) (Sheehy et al., 2020). Moreover, Damri et al. (2023) emphasised the need to address the absence of dedicated

institutions that provide specialised training for teachers in inclusive education. To tackle these challenges, comprehensive and sustained training programs must be implemented, focusing specifically on autism-related competencies. These should include modules on identifying and understanding ASD characteristics, implementing evidence-based interventions such as ABA and PECS, adapting classroom environments to sensory and communication needs, and managing challenging behaviours in a respectful and inclusive manner (Damri et al., 2023). Additionally, training should be delivered through practical workshops, school-based coaching, and collaboration with autism specialists to ensure that educators can apply inclusive strategies confidently in real classroom settings. When school communities have appropriate knowledge and tools, they are better positioned to foster inclusive environments and reduce stigma through informed and compassionate practice.

Secondly, policymakers and the Ministry of Education must increase funding and provide consistent, accessible support for inclusive education initiatives. While inclusive education policies exist at the legislative level, many schools face challenges in translating these policies into practice due to a lack of clear operational guidance (Damri et al., 2023). This gap between policy and implementation highlights the need for targeted investment in infrastructure and the systems that enable inclusive practice. This includes allocating financial resources for specialised teacher training, hiring additional support staff, and equipping schools with tools such as fidget toys, visual supports, and therapy rooms. However, as Latif and Paramita (2023) note, delays in the disbursement of government funds often hinder implementation efforts, creating inequities in access to inclusive education. In addition to funding, current policies and assessment standards must be revised to reflect the diverse needs of autistic students, thereby reducing the burden on both educators and learners. Ainscow et al. (2000) emphasise the importance of sustained governmental commitment to funding and policy implementation, which can help overcome barriers to facilities, resources, and teacher capacity. When schools are motivated to enrol more children with autism, communities are increasingly exposed to neurodiverse learners, an essential factor in reducing stigma and fostering empathy. As Sipahutar (2019) suggests, familiarity with inclusive education, whether through policy, media, or training, is linked to more positive societal attitudes. Thus, government-led initiatives play a dual role in strengthening school readiness and reshaping public perceptions of autism and inclusion in the long term.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the barriers to inclusive education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Indonesia using the Social Model of Disability, which locates disability not within the individual but within the systemic, institutional, and attitudinal structures that exclude (Graham, 2024; Oliver, 1983). Despite progressive legal frameworks, the implementation of inclusive education remains fragmented, with many schools lacking operational guidance, timely funding, and adequate resources (Damri et al., 2023; Latif & Paramita, 2023). Teachers face large class sizes, minimal collaboration with special educators, and insufficient training in autism-specific strategies, leaving them ill-prepared to support neurodiverse learners (Kurniawati, 2021; Sheehy et al., 2020). Cultural stigma further compounds these issues, as autism is often misunderstood or attributed to supernatural causes, leading to social exclusion and emotional distress for both students and families (Daulay et al., 2025; Riany et al., 2016; Sipahutar, 2019). To address these challenges, two key strategies are recommended: first, the development of sustained, autism-focused professional development for educators—including training on Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), PECS, and sensory-responsive teaching methods (Handayani & Paramita, 2020); and

second, increased government investment in infrastructure and inclusive curriculum reform, coupled with public awareness campaigns to shift societal attitudes (Ainscow et al., 2000). As familiarity with inclusive education correlates with more positive views (Sipahutar, 2019), these combined efforts can transform current exclusionary practices into environments that uphold equity, dignity, and full participation for autistic learners in Indonesian schools.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I used ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>) to assist with paraphrasing, improving academic tone, and restructuring specific sections of this paper, such as the theoretical framework and literature synthesis. AI support was incorporated across approximately 3–5 iterative drafts during the writing process. I modified the outputs by integrating academic references, refining arguments, and rewording content to ensure clarity, originality, and alignment with academic writing conventions. All critical thinking, source evaluation, and final decisions were made independently by me.

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