

# Managing Inclusive Education through the *Merdeka* Curriculum: Evidence from an Indonesian Special School

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## ABSTRACT

*Inclusive education has become an important agenda in global educational reform, and the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia represents a significant effort to strengthen equitable access for students with disabilities. However, limited research has examined how inclusive education is managed under this new curriculum in special schools. This study aimed to analyze the management of inclusive education through the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo, focusing on planning, implementation, and evaluation. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, involving the principal, vice principal for curriculum, and teachers as participants, selected purposively for their roles in curriculum management. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model with triangulation to ensure trustworthiness. The results revealed that planning was conducted through the development of Individual Learning Plans (RPI), teacher training, and collaboration with external stakeholders. Implementation emphasized differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and the integration of technology to meet diverse student needs, while evaluation employed authentic and flexible methods such as portfolios, performance tasks, and parental involvement. These findings suggest that inclusive education management in special schools requires multi-stakeholder collaboration, teacher autonomy in instructional strategies, and adaptive evaluation systems. The study provides practical recommendations for strengthening teacher competencies, enhancing collaboration with external partners, and developing authentic assessment approaches to ensure the effective realization of inclusive education goals under the Merdeka Curriculum.*

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a central discourse in global educational reform, aiming to provide equal access and opportunities for all learners, including those with special needs. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement ([UNESCO, 1994](#)) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([UNCRPD, 2018](#)) emphasize the urgency of building inclusive schools that embrace diversity, equity, and social justice. Inclusive practices are not only about

integrating students with disabilities into mainstream education but also about reshaping teaching and learning processes to accommodate diverse abilities and potentials ([DeMatthews et al., 2020](#); [Mahmood et al., 2024](#)).

In Indonesia, the implementation of inclusive education has been mandated by the national education system. However, several challenges hinder its optimal practice, such as limited teacher competence, lack of adequate facilities, and insufficient public awareness ([Isnawati et al., 2025](#); [Sari et al., 2022](#); [Somad et al., 2024](#)). Although Special Schools (Sekolah Luar Biasa/SLB) are designed to serve students with disabilities, the adaptation of national curriculum reforms remains a complex issue. The introduction of the *Merdeka Curriculum* (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) in 2022 represents a significant shift in the Indonesian educational landscape, emphasizing flexibility, differentiated learning, and project-based approaches to strengthen students' competencies and character ([Kemendikbudristek, 2024](#)). While this curriculum has been widely implemented in regular schools, its adoption in special schools poses unique challenges due to students' diverse needs and teachers' preparedness to adapt instructional strategies.

Existing studies on inclusive education management in Indonesia have predominantly examined different curriculum approaches and their relevance to the needs of students with disabilities. For instance, [Rasid et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasized the role of functional curriculum management in promoting independence among learners with special needs, while [Tamsilu et al. \(2025\)](#) investigated the integration of life-skills-based Islamic curriculum in special schools to foster holistic student development. Similarly, [Ayundari & Rustam \(2025\)](#) explored the transition process from the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) to the *Merdeka Curriculum*, highlighting the leadership role of school principals in ensuring smooth adaptation. These studies collectively provide valuable insights into how curriculum management supports students with special needs in various contexts.

Despite these contributions, the current body of literature reveals a significant gap in understanding how the newly introduced *Merdeka Curriculum* is being implemented specifically within the framework of inclusive education. While regular schools have received considerable attention regarding curriculum adaptation, limited scholarly inquiry has been directed toward special schools (Sekolah Luar Biasa/SLB). The uniqueness of SLB lies in its responsibility to accommodate students with diverse disabilities, which often requires more flexible, individualized, and resource-intensive approaches. Thus, the assumption that curriculum reforms applied in mainstream schools can be seamlessly adopted by SLB remains problematic and underexplored.

Addressing this gap is particularly important given the transformative potential of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in reshaping inclusive education practices in Indonesia. The curriculum's emphasis on project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and student-centered approaches offers both opportunities and challenges for special schools. A systematic investigation into how planning, implementation, and evaluation are managed in SLB under the *Merdeka Curriculum* framework will not only enrich the academic discourse but also provide practical implications for policymakers, educators, and school leaders.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the management of inclusive education through the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo. Specifically, it explores how planning, instructional practices, and evaluation are organized to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities. The findings are expected to contribute to the enrichment of inclusive education literature in the Indonesian context, providing empirical insights for policymakers, educators, and school leaders in optimizing curriculum implementation for students with special needs.

## **METHODS**

### ***Research Design***

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design ([Elliott & Timulak, 2021](#)). The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of inclusive education management within its natural context, focusing on curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation under the *Merdeka Curriculum*.

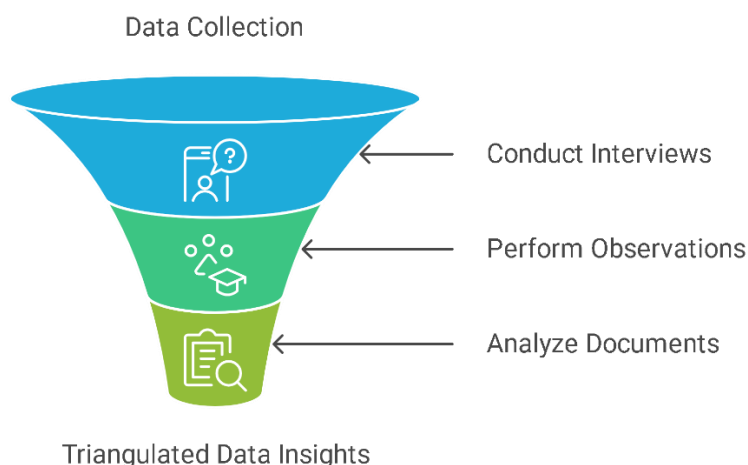
### **Research Site and Participants**

This research was conducted at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, which is the only state-owned special school in the city that has formally adopted the *Merdeka* Curriculum. The school serves students with diverse disabilities, making it a relevant context for examining the management of inclusive education. Participants in this study consisted of the principal, vice principal for curriculum, classroom teachers, and special education teachers. They were directly involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating the inclusive education practices under the *Merdeka* Curriculum.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants (Douglas, 2022), ensuring that only individuals with substantial experience and responsibility in curriculum management were included. This approach allowed the researcher to capture rich and relevant information from stakeholders who played key roles in decision-making and instructional practices at the school.

### **Data Collection**

Data were obtained through three main techniques:



**Figure 1. Data Collection**

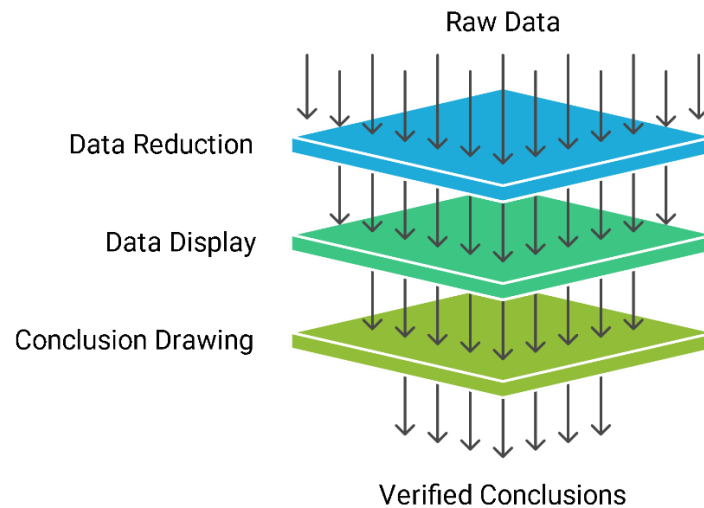
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, vice principal for curriculum, and teachers to explore their experiences, perceptions, and strategies in managing inclusive education through the *Merdeka* Curriculum. This method allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their perspectives while ensuring that key research questions were addressed.

In addition, classroom observations were carried out to capture the real practices of teaching and learning, particularly the application of differentiated instruction and project-based learning for students with special needs. These observations provided valuable insights into how the curriculum was enacted in daily instructional activities and how students actively engaged in inclusive learning processes.

Furthermore, document analysis was employed to complement and triangulate the interview and observation data. Documents such as curriculum plans, instructional modules, school reports, and policy guidelines were examined to provide supporting evidence of how the *Merdeka* Curriculum was designed and implemented at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo. The integration of these three data collection methods enabled the researcher to obtain a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education management in the context of special schools.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which involves:



**Figure 2. Data Analysis**

In the data reduction stage, raw data were carefully selected, coded, and organized to focus on the most relevant information (Miles et al., 2014) related to curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation in inclusive education. This process helped simplify and highlight key insights from the large volume of qualitative data collected.

The second stage, data display, involved organizing the reduced data into thematic categories and visual displays that allowed the researcher to examine patterns, relationships, and emerging themes (Miles et al., 2014). The use of qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti supported this process by providing systematic coding and categorization, making it easier to identify recurring concepts and connect them across different sources of data.

Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher interpreted the findings by linking them to the research objectives and theoretical framework (Miles et al., 2014). Conclusions were continuously verified throughout the analysis process by comparing different data sources and checking consistency with the evidence. This iterative process ensured that the final interpretations were grounded in the data and reflected the actual practices of inclusive education management at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo.

### ***Trustworthiness of Data***

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, several strategies were employed in this study. Triangulation was applied across data sources and methods by comparing information obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, thereby increasing the validity of the interpretations. Member checking was conducted by returning preliminary findings to participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and reduce potential researcher bias. In addition, the researcher engaged in prolonged fieldwork, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the school context and enhanced the authenticity of the data collected.

Furthermore, an audit trail was maintained by systematically documenting the research process, including data collection procedures, coding processes, and analytical decisions. This transparency ensured that the findings could be traced and evaluated by other scholars. The use of qualitative analysis software (Atlas.ti) also supported consistency in coding and categorization. Through these combined strategies, the study sought to establish trustworthiness, ensuring that the findings reflect the actual practices of inclusive education management under the *Merdeka Curriculum* at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The study adhered to ethical research standards. Participants were provided with informed consent, assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and participation was voluntary. All data were used solely for academic purposes.

## RESULTS

### ***Planning of Inclusive Education through the Merdeka Curriculum***

The results indicate that the planning of inclusive education in SLB Negeri 1 Palopo was carried out systematically and collaboratively. The school designed individual learning plans (Rencana Pembelajaran Individual/RPI) to ensure that instruction was tailored to the specific needs and abilities of each student. As the school principal explained:

*“In our school we have implemented the Individual Learning Plan (RPI) program to train students to develop their potential, and thanks to the collaborations that we often establish with institutions that want to support learning, we are very open and supportive of them.”* (Principal, Interview, January 6, 2025)

Teachers were also provided with professional development to strengthen their capacity in implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum*. One teacher emphasized the importance of such preparation:

*“The readiness of resources in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo is shown through the training provided to teachers by the school... Teachers are given the freedom to design learning that is more flexible.”* (Teacher, Interview, 2025)

In addition, the school actively collaborated with external stakeholders such as the local education office and partner institutions to improve resources and support inclusive practices. As the principal further stated:

*“Inclusive education planning is carried out by mapping students’ needs, adapting the appropriate curriculum, and providing training for educators through special workshops. The principal also plays a role in building cooperation with the education office and external parties to improve the quality of inclusive education in this institution.”* (Principal, Interview, January 7, 2025)

These excerpts demonstrate that the planning process at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo was not only internally structured but also externally supported, ensuring that the *Merdeka Curriculum* could be effectively adapted for students with special needs.

### ***Implementation of Inclusive Education***

The implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo emphasized flexibility, differentiated instruction, and the use of adaptive strategies to accommodate students with diverse disabilities. The principal explained:

*“The implementation of inclusive education in SLB through the Merdeka Curriculum is carried out by adjusting learning strategies to the needs of students. Teachers are given the freedom to adapt the curriculum, taking into account factors such as parental collaboration, students’ learning difficulties, available learning aids, and the individual learning styles of students. This flexibility makes inclusive education more effective.”* (Principal, Interview, 2025)

Teachers confirmed that the *Merdeka Curriculum* allowed them to integrate innovative approaches, particularly in supporting visually impaired students. One teacher emphasized:

*“With the Merdeka Curriculum, there are greater opportunities for visually impaired students to express their confidence and access their skills with the freedom to learn. The freedom given makes it easier for students with special needs to adapt to their abilities. One of the supports in the school is the use of technology in inclusive learning, which has become an innovation in supporting students with special needs.”* (Visually Impaired Teacher, Interview, 2025)

Another teacher, who worked with students with intellectual disabilities, described both the opportunities and the challenges in practice:

*“In implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, I use media such as pictures, charts, and simple teaching aids to help students with intellectual disabilities understand the material. The main difficulty is that not all students have the same level of ability, so I have to prepare different strategies for each child. The effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum is seen when students can actively participate according to their abilities, even though the facilities we have are still limited.”* (Teacher of Students with Intellectual Disabilities, Interview, 2025)

In addition, teachers of students with physical disabilities stressed the importance of activity-based and contextual learning:

*“The role of the teacher in inclusive education is to apply learning methods that are flexible, activity-based, and adapted to the individual abilities of students. The Merdeka Curriculum allows us to motivate students to learn actively and develop skills according to their potential.”* (Physical Disability Teacher, Interview, 2025)

These testimonies illustrate that the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in SLB Negeri 1 Palopo relied on adaptive strategies, the integration of technology, and teacher creativity to ensure that students with disabilities could fully participate in learning activities.

### **Evaluation of Inclusive Education**

The evaluation of inclusive education at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo under the *Merdeka Curriculum* was carried out through both formative and summative assessments, adjusted to the individual needs and abilities of students with disabilities. Teachers emphasized that evaluation was not limited to test scores but also included observation, portfolios, and performance-based assessments. As one teacher explained:

*“In evaluating learning, we do not only rely on written tests, because many students cannot complete them. Instead, we also use observations, student performance during practice, and portfolios. This way, the evaluation can reflect the progress of each student according to their abilities.”* (Teacher, Interview, 2025)

The principal confirmed that evaluation results were discussed collectively with teachers and parents to ensure follow-up actions were taken to support students' development:

*“Evaluation is carried out not only by teachers but also through meetings involving parents. The school holds periodic meetings to present students' progress, then discusses what improvements need to be made. This collaborative evaluation helps us adjust teaching strategies according to students' needs.”* (Principal, Interview, 2025)

Teachers of students with intellectual disabilities also highlighted the challenges of assessment, noting that flexibility was essential:

*“The evaluation process for students with intellectual disabilities must be very flexible. We cannot use the same standards as in regular schools. For example, if a child shows progress in daily activities such as being able to button their clothes or write their name, that is already considered a learning achievement.”* (Teacher of Students with Intellectual Disabilities, Interview, 2025)

In addition, teachers of students with hearing impairments stressed the use of practical tasks and visual-based evaluations:

*“For deaf students, evaluation is carried out more with practice and visual assignments, because they find it difficult to follow instructions in writing. We see how well they can demonstrate skills, not just answer questions.”* (Hearing Impaired Teacher, Interview, 2025)

These findings indicate that evaluation in SLB Negeri 1 Palopo was adaptive, collaborative, and oriented toward individual progress rather than standardized benchmarks. This approach ensured that the *Merdeka* Curriculum could be effectively implemented in an inclusive context.

## DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that planning in SLB Negeri 1 Palopo was conducted through Individual Learning Plans (RPI), teacher professional development, and external collaborations. This finding is consistent with the theory of curriculum management which emphasizes that effective planning must be responsive to learners' needs and supported by adequate resources ([Pinar, 2019](#)). Furthermore, the concept of inclusive education management highlights the necessity of identifying barriers to learning and participation at the planning stage ([Kurth et al., 2020](#); [Lüddeckens et al., 2021](#)). In this study, the use of RPI reflects the theoretical principle of differentiated learning, which ensures that students with disabilities receive tailored instruction in line with their potential.

Previous studies have similarly stressed the importance of curriculum planning in inclusive education. Relevant research found that functional curriculum planning improved the independence of students with special needs, while another research noted that life-skills-based planning helped foster holistic development in special schools ([Alhalalmeh, 2024](#); [Darlington-Bernard et al., 2023](#); [Tamsilu et al., 2025](#)). Another research also emphasized the critical role of school leaders in planning during the curriculum transition from K-13 to *Merdeka* Curriculum ([Aulia et al., 2025](#); [Pratiwi et al., 2024](#); [Priawasana & Subiyantoro, 2024](#)). However, the present study extends these findings by showing that in SLB Negeri 1 Palopo, planning was not only an internal process but also a collaborative one involving external stakeholders. It highlights the novelty of cross-institutional partnerships as a crucial component of inclusive education planning in special schools.

The implementation findings show that teachers applied differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and adaptive strategies to meet the needs of students with diverse disabilities. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with sociocultural theory, which underlines the role of social interaction and scaffolding in learning ([Tzuriel, 2021](#)). Differentiated instruction reflects the principle of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where teachers provide structured support to help students progress according to their abilities ([Irshad et al., 2021](#); [Margolis, 2020](#)). Additionally, the *Merdeka* Curriculum's emphasis on flexibility resonates with theory of differentiated learning, which argues that instructional practices must be adapted to student readiness, interests, and learning profiles to achieve meaningful inclusion ([Gheysens et al., 2022](#); [Rasid et al., 2024](#); [Tomlinson, 2021](#)).

Empirical studies also support these findings. Several research reported that teachers in inclusive classrooms who used adaptive strategies and multimedia tools achieved better student engagement ([Al-Qora'n et al., 2025](#); [Karagianni & Drigas, 2023](#)). Relevant research found that the *Merdeka* Curriculum provided space for teacher creativity and autonomy, enabling more innovative practices in inclusive classrooms ([Ayundari & Rustam, 2025](#); [Herawan & Herlambang, 2025](#); [Kumayas et al., 2025](#)). The present study confirms these results but adds new evidence from the special school context, showing that project-based learning and technology integration were effectively used to empower students with visual and intellectual disabilities. Unlike previous research that focused on general inclusive classrooms, this study provides unique insights into how the *Merdeka* Curriculum is operationalized specifically for students with disabilities in SLB.

The evaluation practices in SLB Negeri 1 Palopo were adapted to the abilities of each student, utilizing observations, portfolios, and performance-based assessments. This approach reflects the theoretical framework of authentic assessment, which emphasizes the need for real-life, contextualized evaluation of students' skills ([Fatinah et al., 2025](#); [Miller & Konstantinou, 2021](#); [Wiggins, 1990](#)). Moreover, inclusive evaluation theory underscores that assessment in inclusive schools should focus on progress and participation rather than standardized comparisons ([Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024](#); [Tai et al., 2023](#)). The use of flexible and individualized assessments in this study illustrates these theoretical principles in practice, as students' achievements were measured according to their developmental milestones rather than rigid benchmarks.

Research on inclusive assessment has also highlighted similar challenges and strategies. Relevant research found that conventional evaluation methods were often ineffective for students with disabilities and recommended the use of performance-based assessments ([Bakken & Dalmasso, 2021](#);

Yaghoubi et al., 2025). Likewise, another research reported that portfolio-based evaluations helped teachers monitor gradual progress in inclusive classrooms (Mamvuto & Kangai, 2023; Marinho et al., 2021). However, the current study contributes a new dimension by documenting collaborative evaluation involving both teachers and parents, which ensured a more holistic understanding of student development. It indicates that evaluation in SLB Negeri 1 Palopo under the *Merdeka* Curriculum goes beyond the classroom, involving family engagement as an integral part of inclusive education.

Taken together, the results highlight that the management of inclusive education through the *Merdeka* Curriculum at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo provides three main contributions. First, it demonstrates that inclusive planning in special schools requires cross-institutional collaboration, not just internal preparation. Second, it confirms that implementation under the *Merdeka* Curriculum enables greater teacher autonomy and creativity, especially in integrating technology and project-based learning for students with disabilities. Third, it provides empirical evidence that evaluation in inclusive settings must move beyond standardized tests and adopt adaptive, collaborative, and student-centered assessments. The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive analysis of planning, implementation, and evaluation under the *Merdeka* Curriculum in a special school context, which has been rarely explored in Indonesian scholarship.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the management of inclusive education through the implementation of the *Merdeka* Curriculum at SLB Negeri 1 Palopo. The results showed that planning was conducted through the development of Individual Learning Plans (RPI), teacher professional training, and collaboration with external stakeholders to ensure that curriculum objectives were aligned with students' needs. The implementation highlighted the use of differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and technology integration, which provided opportunities for students with disabilities to learn actively and independently. Evaluation was carried out using flexible and authentic methods such as portfolios, performance-based tasks, and observations, with the active involvement of parents to ensure that student progress was assessed holistically.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made. Schools are encouraged to continue strengthening teacher competencies through targeted training programs that focus on adaptive learning strategies. Greater collaboration between schools, local education authorities, and external partners is necessary to provide adequate resources and support for inclusive practices. In addition, evaluation systems should be further developed to emphasize authentic assessments that capture individual progress and real-life skills rather than relying solely on standardized measures. These efforts will help maximize the potential of the *Merdeka* Curriculum in supporting inclusive education, particularly in special schools.

## Funding and Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no funding and conflicts of interest for this research.

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