



Assistance for Early Childhood Education Teachers in Early Identification of Children with Special Needs through Inclusive Teaching Training

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Abstract :

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of inclusive teaching training and mentoring in supporting early childhood education teachers in the early identification of children with special needs. A qualitative research design with a case study approach was employed to explore teachers' experiences and practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations during training and mentoring sessions, and pre- and post-training surveys. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing to ensure systematic interpretation. The findings indicate that the training and mentoring program significantly improved teachers' knowledge, awareness, and self-confidence in identifying children with special needs. Teachers demonstrated a shift from intuitive and unsystematic identification practices toward more structured observation, documentation, and collaboration. Additionally, the integration of mentoring facilitated the practical application of knowledge in real classroom contexts, leading to more inclusive and responsive teaching practices. However, challenges such as limited time, lack of resources, and communication barriers with parents were still identified. The study implies that combining training with continuous mentoring is an effective strategy to enhance teachers' capacity in inclusive early childhood education. It highlights the importance of sustained professional development and institutional support to ensure the successful implementation of early identification practices.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a central issue in contemporary society as it reflects the commitment to ensuring equal learning opportunities for all children, including those with special needs. The importance of early identification in early childhood education (ECE) lies in its potential to prevent long-term developmental delays and to provide timely intervention that supports children's holistic growth. From a societal perspective, inclusive practices contribute to reducing inequality and promoting social justice by ensuring that no child is left behind. Empirical evidence suggests that early intervention significantly improves developmental outcomes, particularly for children with autism and other developmental challenges (Vivanti et al., 2022; Rad et al., 2022). Furthermore, inclusive early education settings foster acceptance, diversity awareness, and social cohesion among children

from an early age. Therefore, strengthening teachers' capacity in early identification is not only an educational priority but also a societal necessity to achieve equitable and sustainable development.

Despite the growing emphasis on inclusive education, significant challenges persist in its implementation, particularly in early childhood contexts. One of the major problems lies in the limited preparedness of teachers to identify and support children with special needs. Many educators lack adequate training, practical skills, and confidence to conduct early identification effectively. Research indicates that insufficient teacher knowledge and low self-efficacy often hinder the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Taresh et al., 2023; Singh & Zhang, 2022). Additionally, systemic issues such as limited access to resources, lack of institutional support, and inadequate collaboration with specialists further complicate the situation. These challenges not only delay early intervention but also increase the risk of misidentification or neglect of children's developmental needs. As a result, the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities continues to widen, highlighting the urgency of addressing these issues through targeted interventions.

In practice, the phenomenon observed in many early childhood education settings shows that teachers often rely on subjective judgment rather than systematic approaches in identifying children with special needs. This situation is particularly evident in contexts where professional development opportunities are limited, and inclusive education is still in its developmental stage. Teachers tend to focus on managing classroom activities rather than conducting detailed developmental assessments, which leads to inconsistent identification practices. Studies have shown that teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and prior experiences significantly influence how they respond to children with diverse needs (Alisultanova & Qu, 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2024). Moreover, communication barriers between teachers and parents, as well as cultural stigma surrounding special needs, further hinder early identification efforts. This phenomenon underscores the need for structured training and mentoring programs that can support teachers in developing more systematic and evidence-based practices.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of inclusive education, including teacher preparedness, inclusive pedagogy, and intervention strategies for children with special needs. For instance, Cade (2023) emphasizes the importance of child-centered pedagogy in supporting children with special needs, while Davis et al. (2023) demonstrate the effectiveness of teacher training interventions in improving classroom interactions. Similarly, Hugh et al. (2024) highlight the need for teachers to adopt evidence-based practices, and Wong et al. (2024) argue for the importance of reflective and experiential learning in teacher preparation. Other studies, such as McKee et al. (2023), focus on the development of inclusive-mindedness among educators, suggesting that attitudes and beliefs play a crucial role in shaping inclusive practices. These studies collectively indicate that teacher competence is a key determinant of successful inclusive education.

However, despite the growing body of research, there remain significant gaps in understanding how training and mentoring programs specifically influence teachers' ability to conduct early identification in real classroom contexts. Many studies tend to focus on theoretical frameworks or short-term interventions without examining the sustained impact of practical mentoring. Additionally, limited attention has been given to the integration of early identification practices into daily teaching routines. Research by Maten and Rommes (2024) and Olsson and Slewa (2024) suggests that effective identification requires not only individual

competence but also collaborative and contextualized practices. Furthermore, challenges related to systemic barriers and teacher support mechanisms, as highlighted by Saari et al. (2022) and Masuku and Marumolo (2024), indicate that existing approaches are often insufficient. These gaps highlight the need for more comprehensive and context-sensitive studies that combine training with ongoing mentoring support.

This study offers a novel contribution by integrating inclusive teaching training with continuous mentoring to enhance teachers' capacity for early identification of children with special needs. Unlike previous approaches that focus primarily on knowledge transfer, this study emphasizes the transformation of teachers' practices through experiential learning and real-time classroom application. The training is designed not only to improve teachers' understanding but also to foster reflective and adaptive practices that can be sustained over time. By focusing on early childhood education settings, this study addresses a critical stage in children's development where timely intervention can have the greatest impact. The emphasis on practical implementation and contextual relevance represents a state-of-the-art approach to strengthening inclusive education at the foundational level.

Based on these considerations, the research problem of this study centers on how training and mentoring can effectively support early childhood education teachers in identifying children with special needs within inclusive classroom settings. This study argues that a combination of structured training and continuous mentoring can significantly enhance teachers' knowledge, awareness, and self-confidence, leading to more systematic and proactive identification practices. Furthermore, it is proposed that such an approach not only improves individual teacher competence but also contributes to the development of more inclusive and responsive educational environments. The findings of this study are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions, particularly in informing policy and practice related to teacher professional development and inclusive early childhood education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the process and impact of training and mentoring provided to early childhood education (ECE) teachers in identifying children with special needs. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices within a real-life context. The case study design was considered appropriate as it focuses on a specific bounded system, namely the implementation of inclusive teaching training in selected early childhood education settings. Through this approach, the study aimed to capture the complexity of teachers' learning processes and their transformation in conducting early identification practices.

The research was conducted in several early childhood education (PAUD) institutions in Probolinggo Regency, Indonesia. This location was purposively selected due to its relevance to the study objectives, particularly the growing need for strengthening inclusive education practices and the limited prior training opportunities for teachers in identifying children with special needs. Data were collected through multiple techniques to ensure richness and depth of information, including semi-structured interviews with ECE teachers, direct observations during training and mentoring sessions, and pre- and post-training surveys to capture

changes in teachers' knowledge and awareness. The use of these multiple data sources enabled triangulation and enhanced the comprehensiveness of the findings.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following several systematic steps. First, data condensation was carried out by selecting, simplifying, and organizing relevant information obtained from interviews and observations. Second, data were presented in the form of descriptive narratives and thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation. Third, conclusions were drawn and verified through an iterative process to ensure consistency and credibility of the findings. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, several validation techniques were applied, including data triangulation, member checking with participants, and prolonged engagement during the training process. These strategies were employed to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Initial Conditions of Teachers' Understanding of Children with Special Needs

The findings indicate that prior to the implementation of the training program, most early childhood education (ECE) teachers had a limited and fragmented understanding of children with special needs. Their knowledge was primarily associated with visible physical disabilities, while less apparent conditions such as autism spectrum disorders, speech delays, and socio-emotional difficulties were rarely identified. Teachers often relied on general impressions rather than systematic observation, which led to inconsistencies in recognizing developmental differences among children in the classroom.

In addition, teachers demonstrated a tendency to interpret children's behaviors within the framework of normal variation, even when certain patterns suggested potential developmental concerns. This lack of differentiation between typical and atypical development resulted in delayed responses and missed opportunities for early intervention. Interviews revealed that teachers did not possess structured tools or clear guidelines to support identification, which further contributed to uncertainty in decision-making processes.

Moreover, participants expressed low confidence in addressing children who exhibited characteristics of special needs. Many teachers reported feeling unprepared and hesitant to take action due to limited training and fear of making incorrect judgments. This condition reflects a significant gap between the expectations of inclusive education and the actual readiness of teachers, emphasizing the importance of targeted training programs to strengthen their foundational competencies.

Implementation of Inclusive Teaching Training and Mentoring Program

The inclusive teaching training program was implemented through a structured design that integrated both theoretical and practical components. The training sessions introduced key concepts of inclusive education, characteristics of children with special needs, and strategies for early identification. Interactive approaches such as group discussions, case analyses, and guided reflections were employed to encourage active participation and contextual understanding. These methods enabled teachers to relate new knowledge to their existing classroom experiences.

The mentoring phase complemented the training by providing direct support in real classroom settings. Teachers were guided to apply identification strategies

through observation and documentation, followed by feedback sessions with mentors. This hands-on approach facilitated the translation of theoretical knowledge into practical skills. Observational data indicated that teachers became more engaged and responsive during the mentoring process, showing gradual improvement in their ability to recognize and respond to developmental differences.

Changes in Teachers' Knowledge, Awareness, and Self-Confidence

The results show a notable improvement in teachers' knowledge following the training program. Teachers demonstrated a broader understanding of the characteristics of children with special needs, including behavioral, cognitive, and emotional indicators. Survey findings revealed an increase in teachers' ability to recognize early signs of developmental differences, suggesting that the training effectively enhanced their conceptual understanding of inclusive education.

In terms of awareness, teachers developed a more reflective approach toward observing children's behavior. They became more attentive to subtle developmental cues and more systematic in documenting their observations. This shift from intuitive judgment to evidence-based observation indicates a meaningful change in professional practice. Teachers also reported a greater appreciation of the importance of early identification as a foundation for providing appropriate support to children.

Furthermore, the training significantly improved teachers' self-confidence in handling inclusive classroom situations. Participants expressed greater readiness to engage with children who have diverse needs and showed increased willingness to take proactive steps in identification and support. This enhanced confidence was evident in their classroom interactions, where teachers demonstrated more initiative and adaptability. The transformation in both knowledge and attitude highlights the effectiveness of the training and mentoring program.

Teachers' Practices in Early Identification of Children with Special Needs

Following the training, teachers began to implement early identification practices in a more structured and consistent manner. They utilized observation techniques more systematically, focusing on specific developmental domains such as communication, behavior, and social interaction. Teachers reported that having clear indicators helped them to better understand children's needs and reduced uncertainty in the identification process.

In addition, teachers started to document their observations using simple tools such as checklists and anecdotal records. These documentation practices enabled them to track children's developmental progress over time and identify patterns that might indicate special needs. The use of such tools marked a shift from informal observation to more organized and purposeful identification practices within the classroom.

Collaboration also emerged as an important aspect of teachers' practices. Teachers engaged in discussions with colleagues to validate their observations and share insights about children's development. In some cases, they initiated communication with parents to discuss concerns and gather additional information about the child's behavior outside the classroom. This collaborative approach contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of each child's needs.

Moreover, classroom observations revealed that teachers became more

responsive and adaptive in their teaching strategies. They began to modify learning activities to accommodate individual differences and create a more inclusive learning environment. Early identification was no longer treated as a separate task but was integrated into daily teaching practices, reflecting a shift toward more inclusive and child-centered pedagogy.

Challenges and Barriers in Implementing Early Identification

Despite the positive outcomes, teachers encountered several challenges in implementing early identification practices. One of the main barriers was limited time, as teachers had to manage multiple responsibilities, including teaching, administrative tasks, and classroom management. This constraint reduced their ability to conduct thorough observations and maintain consistent documentation of children's development.

Another challenge involved communication with parents regarding potential developmental concerns. Teachers often found it difficult to convey sensitive information, particularly when parents were not fully aware of or receptive to the possibility of special needs. Cultural perceptions and stigma further complicated these interactions, highlighting the need for greater awareness and support systems to facilitate effective collaboration between teachers and families.

Supporting Factors in Strengthening Inclusive Practices

The findings identified continuous mentoring as a key supporting factor in strengthening teachers' inclusive practices. Ongoing guidance and feedback helped teachers to reinforce their skills and maintain confidence in applying early identification strategies. Mentoring also provided opportunities for reflection, allowing teachers to evaluate and improve their practices over time.

Peer collaboration was another important factor that contributed to successful implementation. Teachers benefited from sharing experiences, discussing challenges, and exchanging practical solutions with colleagues. This collaborative environment fostered a sense of professional support and encouraged collective problem-solving, which enhanced the overall effectiveness of inclusive practices.

In addition, institutional support played a crucial role in sustaining the outcomes of the training program. Support from school leadership, including encouragement for professional development and the provision of resources, created a conducive environment for implementing inclusive education. The availability of practical training materials and contextual examples further enabled teachers to apply their knowledge effectively, ensuring the continuity of early identification practices.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that early childhood education (ECE) teachers initially possessed limited and fragmented understanding of children with special needs, particularly in identifying non-visible developmental conditions. This aligns with previous research highlighting that teachers often lack adequate conceptual clarity and practical competence in inclusive education contexts (Alisultanova & Qu, 2025; Singh & Zhang, 2022). The tendency to associate special needs with visible disabilities reflects a persistent gap in teacher preparation, especially in recognizing autism spectrum conditions and socio-emotional

difficulties. Similarly, Taresh et al. (2023) emphasize that insufficient knowledge and low self-efficacy among preschool teachers significantly hinder early identification efforts. These findings suggest that without targeted intervention, teachers may overlook critical early signs, delaying appropriate support for children.

The implementation of inclusive teaching training and mentoring in this study demonstrated a meaningful transformation in teachers' knowledge, awareness, and classroom practices. This supports evidence from Davis et al. (2023), who found that structured teacher training interventions can significantly improve teacher-child interactions and inclusive practices in early childhood settings. The combination of theoretical input and practical mentoring proved particularly effective, as it enabled teachers to bridge the gap between knowledge and application. Wong et al. (2024) further argue that teacher preparation for inclusive classrooms must go beyond theoretical instruction and incorporate reflective and experiential learning approaches. The improvement in teachers' awareness and systematic observation practices observed in this study also resonates with McKee et al. (2023), who highlight the importance of developing inclusive-mindedness as a dynamic process shaped by training and experience.

Furthermore, the study found that teachers' self-confidence increased significantly following the training program, which in turn influenced their willingness to engage in early identification practices. This finding is consistent with Hugh et al. (2024), who note that exposure to evidence-based practices enhances teachers' confidence and reduces reliance on ineffective or low-value strategies. Increased confidence also plays a critical role in shaping teachers' proactive behaviors in inclusive classrooms. Cade (2023) emphasizes that child-centered pedagogical approaches require teachers to be both knowledgeable and confident in responding to diverse developmental needs. In this context, the observed shift from passive recognition to active identification reflects a deeper transformation in teachers' professional identity as inclusive educators.

The results also indicate that teachers began to implement early identification practices more systematically, including the use of observation tools, documentation, and collaboration with colleagues and parents. This finding is in line with Maten and Rommes (2024), who highlight the importance of structured practices and professional judgment in early identification processes. Additionally, Olsson and Slewa (2024) stress that interprofessional collaboration is a key component in effectively supporting children with special needs, particularly in inclusive early childhood settings. The emergence of collaborative practices in this study suggests that training not only enhanced individual competence but also fostered a more collective approach to addressing children's needs. Moreover, the integration of early identification into daily teaching practices reflects a shift toward more inclusive and responsive pedagogy, as also noted by Ratnawulan et al. (2025) in the context of inclusive learning strategies.

Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain, particularly related to time constraints, limited resources, and difficulties in engaging parents. These barriers are widely documented in the literature, with Saari et al. (2022) identifying systemic limitations and lack of institutional support as major obstacles to inclusive education in early childhood contexts. Similarly, Pratiwi et al. (2024) highlight that teachers often face sociocultural challenges when communicating with parents about sensitive issues such as special needs. The presence of stigma

and limited parental awareness can hinder early intervention efforts, as also discussed by Masuku and Marumolo (2024), who question the extent to which inclusive education can effectively accommodate all learners without broader societal support. These findings indicate that improving teacher competence alone is insufficient without addressing structural and cultural barriers.

In addition, the study underscores the importance of continuous mentoring and institutional support in sustaining inclusive practices. This is consistent with Liu and Potměšil (2025), who emphasize that the development of inclusive education requires ongoing professional development and systemic reinforcement. Woolfson (2024) further argues that achieving inclusive education is not an “impossible dream,” but it requires sustained commitment from multiple stakeholders, including educators, institutions, and policymakers. The role of school leadership in providing resources and fostering a supportive environment is particularly crucial in ensuring the long-term impact of training programs. Tasu’ah et al. (2023) also highlight the importance of teacher literacy and access to relevant information in supporting inclusive practices, especially in resource-constrained contexts.

Finally, the findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive early childhood education as a pathway toward achieving equitable and quality education for all children. Rad et al. (2022) emphasize that early identification and intervention are critical components in achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education. Furthermore, Vivanti et al. (2022) demonstrate that children with special needs, particularly those on the autism spectrum, benefit significantly from early intervention in inclusive settings when appropriate support is provided. Therefore, this study reinforces the argument that strengthening teachers’ capacity through training and mentoring is a strategic approach to enhancing inclusive education practices. However, future efforts must adopt a more holistic perspective that integrates teacher development, institutional support, and community engagement to ensure sustainable and effective implementation.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that the most important finding lies in the transformative impact of inclusive teaching training combined with continuous mentoring on teachers’ capacity to conduct early identification of children with special needs. The key lesson derived from this research is that improving teachers’ knowledge alone is insufficient; sustained guidance and practical application are essential to foster meaningful changes in awareness, confidence, and classroom practices. Teachers who participated in the program demonstrated a shift from intuitive and fragmented identification toward more systematic, reflective, and collaborative approaches. The strength of this study lies in its contribution to the field of inclusive early childhood education by offering an integrated model that bridges the gap between theory and practice through training and mentoring. It provides empirical evidence that professional development programs can be more effective when they are contextualized, continuous, and practice-oriented.

However, this study also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The use of a qualitative case study design limits the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts. Additionally, the relatively short duration of the intervention may not fully capture the long-term sustainability of teachers’ practices

after the mentoring phase. Future research is recommended to employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine the long-term impact of such programs across diverse educational settings. Further studies could also explore the role of policy support, parental involvement, and interdisciplinary collaboration in strengthening early identification practices. Addressing these areas would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how inclusive education can be effectively implemented and sustained in early childhood contexts.

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