Facing the Challenges of Inclusive Education in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a real evidence that there is no discrimination in education. The government through regulations has promoted and demonstrated to support the implementation of inclusive education for each level of education in Indonesia. That means that inclusive education should also be applied in Early Childhood Education (ECE). Therefore, all components involved in ECE should be prepared to admit and implement an inclusive education system. The qualitative approach used to examine selected sample in three provinces in implementing inclusive education, there are Central Java, East Java, and West Java. Fifteen early childhood education teachers involved in this research, five teachers of each province. The data were obtained by interviewing the teachers. This study identifies how teachers understand the implementation of inclusive education, the challenges, and obstacles faced, specifically in implementations and expectations for better inclusive education. The findings showed that the teachers understood the importance of inclusive education but none of them have admitted children with special needs. Then, the lack of teachers' competencies and skills, such as designing a proper curriculum in dealing with children with special needs, is a major challenge in implementing inclusive education. The government support is needed, such as to hold inclusive education training to improve teacher's competencies.

Keywords: Inclusive education, inclusive early childhood education

1. INTRODUCTION

Influenced by the global trend of Inclusive Education (IE), Indonesia has also begun to advocate it. IE promotes every child has an equal right to get an education and to attend school. Making schools accessible and available is an important first step in fulfilling this right (United Nations Emergency Children's Fund, 2007). Some of the efforts made in Indonesia to realize IE are through the Bandung National Convention in 2004 which produced the slogan "Indonesia Towards IE", then in 2009 the regulation on IE made namely Permendiknas No.70 of 2009 (Suparno, 2010). In 2019, Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia has also strongly advocated IE which the implementation should be supported by regional governments as well. The implementation of Permendiknas No.70 of 2009 concerning IE also is the real evidence of government to suppor IE in Indonesia (Menteri Pendidikan Nasional, 2009). Study revealed that one of the crucial issues related to equalization of education was the few accessibility services for people with disabilities (disabled people) (Sulistyadi, 2014). Education for all is implemented starting from early childhood education. IE brings benefits, if it is organized and executed well. Inclusive early childhood is early learning programs for disabled children, from birth to eight years (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2014). Early childhood inclusion is based on the assumption that: it creates equal learning opportunities for children with disabilities;

providing young children with opportunities to socialize with their peers in a range of natural environments; facilitates participation in community settings over time; and enriches children's development (Brown & Guralnick, 2012; Guralnick, 2008). However, the implementation IE of early childhood needs many requirements. A high-quality of early childhood inclusive program usually serves two major purposes (Allen & Cowdery, 2012). It provides chances and goals in improving the quality of teaching and learning experience for children. Moreover, it provides equitable access to all children irrespective of their circumstances to have early childhood education. A high-quality of early childhood inclusive program is not only concerned with access but also how to facilitate children's needs and how to optimize their potential (Underwood, Valeo, & Wood, 2012).

In reality, there are many obstacles, that came from schools and teachers, to implement IE in ECE programs in Indonesia. One of them is low readiness which is affected by financial and infrastructure factors. The teachers' readiness for planning learning program activities for IE is still inadequate. The lack of government supports, facilities and infrastructure are insufficient. Furthermore, other obstacles are parents do not realize that their children have deficiencies, a costly for IE and teachers' difficulties to plan learning programs for inclusive children (Ayu, Tirtayani, & Abadi, 2019; Mastuti, 2014; Subagya, 2012; Windarsih, Jumiatin, Efrizal, Sumini, & Utami, 2017). The study only showed several barriers that prevent early childhood in Indonesia in preparing high quality

inclusive early childhood. Therefore, this study aimed to find out more about the implementation of IE in early childhood in Indonesia. Thus, this study intended to answer the following three questions:

1) How do teachers' understandings of the implementation of IE?
2) What are the obstacles in implementing IE and how to deal with it?
3) What are teachers' expectations ahead of IE in ECE for the best?

2. METHOD

This research used a descriptive qualitative approach. This study described the findings of the research on the implementation of IE in ECE programs based on the results of interviews.

2.1. Participant

The study involved 15 teachers (W = 12; M = 3) from three provinces in Indonesia selected with cluster sampling method (East Java, Central Java, and West Java). The fifteen teachers were from different schools (come from both rural and urban schools). All respondents had bachelor degree.

2.2. Procedure

Before conducting the study, researchers asked the respondents' willingnessto conduct the interview. Then, the interviews were conducted through telephone at lines and WhatsApp in 15-20 minutes.

2.3. Instrument

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured schedule which consisted of questions obtaining information of: teachers' understanding about the implementation of IE, the challenges and obstacles faced in their implementation, and their expectations for better IE.

3. RESULT

Respondents were given a code R. The results of interviews can be seen as follows.

3.1. Teachers' Understanding about The Implementation of Inclusive Education

RQ1.1: Explain the meaning of Inclusive Education?
Most of teachers could correctly answer and explain the concept and implementation of IE in ECE generally

whereas R12 gave a proper explanation of how the implementation of IE, the learning process in which engages Special Education Needs (SEN)children with normal children. R6 also said:

> "I know IE is educational services for SEN children but not placed in a special place, they put together to learn together with other normal children."

A total of two participants could not explain the meaning of IE.
R9 said:

> "Sorry, What is IE like? I have never known and only just found out about IE."

RQ1.2: Explain the meaning of IE in the early childhood program?
Departing from several research questions, the teacher who could explain the meaning of IE in general, they also could explain the IE of early childhood program. R 13 said:

> "IE of early childhood programs that includes SEN children into regular classes without discrimination, and get the same service to develop all aspects of development".

RQ 1.3: Does your school implement IE?
A total of 9 schools have implemented IE and admitted SEN children. R1 said that the school where he taught this year admitted a child who uses a wheelchair, R6 stated that the school admitted a child with impaired speech and slow learning (R6). R14 commented:

> "Yes, our school admits all children with various conditions. This year in our school, some children have a visual impairment."

Then, 6 schools have never admitted children with a special need. The six schools have never admitted SEN children.
RQ 1.4: Does your school carry out a specific process when implementing new admissions of children with special needs?
Interview results showed that 3 schools have applied special identification procedures while admitting new students. They should collect health report or a document of special recommendations from doctors in order to get information about the child's condition, and to prepare if the children need special services. R1 also said

> "In the acceptance of new students, we usually ask parents if the child has been consulted with a psychologist, to find out what disorders the child has."

R6 commented:

> "Yes, when we admit new students, if there are SEN children we ask for a certificate of health from the doctor. So that later during learning we can adjust the services that will be provided to the child."

Most of the respondents did same admissions procedures for children. R2 explained that no specific procedure to admit the child. R11 said:

> "There is no specific procedure in accepting new students. We did the same way."

RQ1.5: Does your schoolwork with psychologists or other experts in the field of children with special needs?

Based on the results, only 2 of schools collaborated with psychologists or experts in SEN background. R6 whose school admitted SEN children explaining:

> *"Yes, our school is indeed collaborating with experts, to facilitate if there are children who need their services."*

Then 13 schools did not collaborate with psychologists or other experts in the field of special education. That is because one of them has not special needs children at school. R4 explained that during the time, school did not have cooperation with a psychologist.

RQ 1.6: How is the curriculum in your school? Is there a difference between children with special needs and normal children?

None of the school used a special curriculum for SEN children. That is due to the lack of teachers' competencies to design special learning programs for inclusive children. So, schools which admitted inclusive children did not use a specific curriculum. The teacher should design a separate curriculum to facilitate inclusive children's needs. R11 explained that the school did not admit SEN children, yet a specific curriculum was needed to provide chances for them to learn, R14 commented:

> *"Yes in our school there is a child with special needs is a vision disorder, but in the learning process we still apply the same curriculum."*

RQ1.7: Do you have a special teacher in your school?

None of them had a special assistant teacher or shadow teacher. R5 said that all this time the class teacher had to be prepared if there were children with special needs. R8 said

> *"There is no special teacher in my school, who teaches only class teachers."*

RQ1.8: Do the facilities and infrastructure in your school support the implementation of IE?

Fifteen schools did not have special facilities for SEN children. also It happened due to financing obstacles. However, schools should be well prepared to welcome the children with special needs by providing facilities. R1 said that special facilities were needed to serve SEN children in our school, unfortunately, it was unavailable . R14 said:

> *"Indeed, there should be a plaything or special media for SEN children, so that they can keep abreast of the learning well".*

3.2. The Challenges and Obstacles They Face in the Implementation of Inclusive Education

RQ2.1: What obstacles are experienced if / when schools implement Inclusive Education?

A total 13 teachers said that their competencies dealing with how to comprehend the situation and condition of children with disabilities. R14 explained that he had an obstacle of classroom management. He did not know how to create a conducive classroom for normal and disabled children. R10 also said that the teachers should have specialization of taking care of SEN children in order to stimulate them properly. R7 said:

> *"The most basic obstacle is the lack of ability of teachers to handle SEN children."*

Another obstacle was the lack of acceptance of SEN children, especially in terms of other parents . R1 said that parents of normal children did not want their children get along with SEN children. R6 also explained that parents of normal children did not want them at the same class with SEN children. R13 explained the fear of parents appeared if their children were at the same class with SEN children. R12 commented:

> *"Parents cannot accept if normal children are together with children with special needs. They were afraid that SEN children will do dangerous behaviors, such as spontaneous violence)"*

The quotation explained about SEN children with impaired speechless due to lack of stimulation given by parents. Then, R1 said that facilities and infrastructures were insufficient which become the obstacles. Nevertheless, two teachers have never been with children with a special need, so they did not mention the difficulties experienced when implementing IE.

RQ2.2: Given the challenges to be faced, how the school or teacher to handle it?

Some teachers provided their strategies to overcome the obstacles by observing the children's characters, learning the aspects of IE implementation through book references, and asking people who know better (R6, R 14 and R15). R14 said:

> *"To deal with SEN children, we must know and understand the character of children. then with that, we will know what children want and need".*

R6 commented:

> *"When there are SEN children in the class, first I have difficulty how to deal with it, I will ask people who are more skilled or find information through books".*

3.3. Their Expectations for Better Inclusive Education

The expectation expressed by teachers to improve the quality of IE was special training for teachers who are going to deal with SEN children. It aimed to provide suitable stimulation for children. It can be seen from interviews with R7 who said that teachers need training on IE, R8 said every teacher must be equipped with knowledge of IE, not only the curriculum. R12 said:

> *"The most important thing is the teacher's competency must be improved so that they can provide services that are suitable for special need children (R12)"*

Three teachers gave their ideas. For instance, R1 said about special assistant teachers who had SEN background, which should be provided by schools. Then, R2 also

explained that there should be shadow teachers at school that implementing IE. R13 said:

> *"Schools provide teacher assistants so that children can fulfill their needs very well"*

Another expectation was the salary given by to the teacher who did it successful. R7 said:

> *"Incompatible salary is also a barrier. Hopefully, if schools have to implement IE means teachers' salaries should also be adjusted to the efforts of teachers."*

R3 said:

> *"The teacher also hopes that in the future the structure and education system will be better".*

4. DISCUSSION

This study discussed the teachers' understanding of IE in early childhood. The success of every educational program depends on the quality, attitude and understanding of teachers about IE (Masanja, 2016). Teachers have a crucial role because they are promoting, participating and reducing underachievement children who might be have difficulties in learning (Tyagi, 2016). The results of the study explained that few schools that collaborated with experts to implement IE. It should provide support continuously, need expert assistance, create a suitable environment to improve children's development, and give accessible service, appreciate participation and self-reliance. Early childhood development is key to have productive life for every child (United Nations Emergency Children's Fund, 2019). The existence of teacher assistants could not be found from the results while the roles of them are to ensure the presence, participation, and progress of all students in the classroom (Perez, Lianos, & Guasp, 2017). Likewise, the specific curriculum could not be fulfilled the objectives of SEN children. Thus, it might affect their development.

One of the standards for IE regulations is a flexible curriculum (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994). This implies that teachers should create a conducive environment for school to accommodate diverse learners to ensure they are admitted in order to attend and complete education. However, there is no guarantee at the school that applies a flexible curriculum and worthy infrastructures. Meanwhile, schools should provide, adequate and accessible facilities to foster interests, needs, and to raise motivation for learning process (Yasin, Toran, Tahar, & Bari, 2019).

The study found that teachers required to collaborate and to invite parents for providing education. Teachers as leaders shared knowledge about problem-solving skills and decision-making process with parents. It means that parents became well-educated and their children could attend the school well. Additionally, the planning of students' enrollment and attendance guidelines might result in excellent education achievement for students with special needs (World Health Organization, 2011). In fact, several teachers feel unsupported by the government since they get a low-salary (Gray, 2013). Thus, they need to be motivated by developing their working environment.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explores most teachers have a good understanding of IE, and some schools have openness to accept children with special needs. However, it is still lacking of admission procedures, curriculum, special teacher assistants, experts cooperation and feasible infrastructures. Obstacles faced by both teachers and schools as follows: 1) Teachers' competences in regard to design a suitable curriculum for SEN children should be developed; 2) Parents' perception to SEN children should be remedied as well as parents of SEN children are supposed to stimulate them at home; 3) Infrastructures at school should be enhanced.

Expectations of IE were expressed by teachers to make ECE better. The government supports could be done through teachers' training related IE in ECE. Hence, schools and teachers are well-prepared to admit the special children by providing a specific curriculum and appropriate programs. Hopefully, the government appreciate the teachers' efforts by giving a better welfare.

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