



Unheard Voices in Adaptive Classrooms Exploring Emotional Narratives of Children with Special Needs

Maisura¹, Muakhir Syah Putra²

^{1,2} Universitas Muhammadiyah Mahakarya Aceh, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: ✉ : maisuraalfatih@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the past decade, the global attention to inclusive education has driven structural transformations in learning systems, including in adaptive classrooms. However, even though physical and curricular access is expanding, the emotional voice of children with special needs (CWSN) is still often ignored in the empirical discourse of education. This qualitative research aims to explore and elevate the emotional narrative of CWSN in the context of an adaptive inclusive class. Using a phenomenological approach, data were collected through non-invasive observational techniques combined with journals of teacher reflection and children's creative expression (such as free images and stories) from 12 children aged 7–11 years in three inclusive primary schools. The results show that although adaptive classes have provided structural accommodation, the response to the emotional needs of CWSN is still inadequate. Some of the key themes that emerge in children's narratives include feelings of silence, fragile attachment, and the occasional happiness—suggesting that true inclusion cannot be achieved through physical adjustment alone, but rather requires deeper affective and relational engagement. This research makes an important contribution to the inclusive education literature by emphasizing the importance of emotional literacy, recognition of children's voices, and affectively responsive pedagogy as an integral part of inclusive classroom design. The implications of this study confirm the need for teacher training that places the emotional aspect at the center of a participatory culture and inclusive learning for all learners.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, inclusive education has evolved into a key principle in the global education system, embodying the spirit of justice, equality, and recognition of student diversity (Slee, 2018). In Indonesia, inclusive education policies have begun to be institutionalized through regulations such as Permendiknas No. 70 of 2009 and strengthened by Law No. 8 of 2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities, which

encourages the implementation of education that is friendly to children with special needs (CWSN). However, although the implementation of inclusion at the elementary school level has expanded access, the practice is still heavily focused on meeting academic needs and structural modifications, while the affective aspects and emotional experiences of students are often overlooked (Number, 8 C.E.).

The main objective of this study is to explore the emotional narratives of children with special needs in the context of adaptive classrooms in inclusive primary schools, by raising their experiences, feelings, and perceptions of presence, social acceptance, and engagement in learning. This research aims not only to understand how CWSN interacts in a classroom that accommodates their special needs physically, but also to explore how they experience the class emotionally – whether they feel heard, valued, and part of the learning community (Mahato, 2025).

This research is important because of the consistent gap between the structural design of inclusive education and the affective reality experienced by students. Various studies show that the presence of CWSN in regular classrooms does not automatically guarantee true emotional engagement (Asthana, 2023; Tunney & Hanreddy, 2021). Many of them experience what's called emotional exclusion – feeling invisible or unheard even though they're physically in the same learning room. The absence of children's voices in the evaluation of the success of inclusive education is a serious problem because it can hinder the achievement of complete and sustainable inclusion (Ainscow, 2020; Sopwandin & Rostiana, 2024). Therefore, this research is here to highlight the importance of emotional inclusion as a fundamental aspect of effective and humane inclusive education practices.

Several previous studies have evaluated the success of inclusion programs based on academic indicators, curriculum adaptation, or teacher training (Arriani et al., 2021; Arriani et al., 2021). However, very few studies have specifically raised children's emotional voices – especially from vulnerable groups such as CWSN – as the primary basis for evaluating inclusion. Goodley emphasizes that CWSN is not only an object of intervention, but an active subject who has an expressive and reflective capacity that deserves to be recognized in the educational process (Goodley, 2017). This approach is also supported by Grajczonek and Downton who show that when students are given space to voice their feelings creatively and non-verbally, their engagement in learning increases significantly (Grajczonek, 2019).

Against this background, this research offers an original contribution (novelty) in the inclusive education literature by presenting unheard voices – namely the emotional experiences of CWSN that have not been raised much in academic discourse, especially in the context of elementary schools in Indonesia. This approach also challenges the general paradigm of inclusion that is too technocratic and invites the reader to see that

the success of inclusion cannot be measured only by participation rates or mastery of the material, but also by how much the child feels part of the learning space itself.

Based on the gaps that have been identified, this study asks a key question, namely how to form the emotional narrative experienced by children with special needs in adaptive classrooms in inclusive elementary schools. The basic hypothesis of this study is that the emotional experiences of children in adaptive classes are not always in line with the ideal goals of inclusive education, and often display forms of emotional alienation hidden behind apparent structural acceptance. To answer this question, this study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach with data collection methods that include non-invasive observation, analysis of students' expressive works such as pictures and stories, and review of reflective notes from teachers. This approach is designed to capture the child's subjective experiences in depth and allow for the emergence of authentic emotional themes.

In the context of this research, several key terms need to be understood correctly so that there is no conceptual ambiguity. Children with Special Needs (CWSN) refers to children who have obstacles in cognitive, emotional, or physical aspects that demand a tailored educational approach (Charate, 2020). Adaptive classrooms refer to regular classrooms that have undergone adjustments in terms of curriculum, learning environment, and teaching strategies to accommodate the diverse needs of students. Emotional narratives are forms of expression, reflection, and stories about emotional experiences expressed by children, both verbally and non-verbally. Meanwhile, emotional inclusion refers to a condition in which students are not only physically accepted in the classroom, but also feel emotionally connected, valued for their presence, and have a space to be listened to (Ratnam, 2019).

By raising the affective dimension in inclusive education practices, this research is expected not only to enrich the treasure of academic studies on the education of children with special needs, but also to make a practical contribution for teachers, policymakers, and school administrators in creating a truly inclusive learning space – a space that not only welcomes children's physical presence, but also opens up an authentic space to welcome their voices and feelings.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a phenomenological qualitative approach that aims to explore and understand the emotional experiences of children with special needs (CWSN) in the context of adaptive classrooms in inclusive elementary schools. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to access the subjective meaning of the child's experiences directly, particularly in affective aspects that are often not covered in conventional educational evaluations. By focusing on children's emotional

narratives, this approach seeks to capture the "unheard voices" that reflect the deepest dimensions of their existence in an inclusive learning environment.

Research Design

This research is designed in an exploratory and descriptive manner, with the aim of understanding the phenomenon in depth through the exploration of personal experiences that are rich in meaning. The exploration process is carried out openly and reflective of the responses that arise naturally from the research subjects during the data collection process (Stevens & Wrenn, 2013).

Research Participants

Participants consisted of 12 students with special needs ranging in age from 7 to 11 years, who were involved in the learning process in an inclusive classroom at the elementary school level. Participant selection is carried out through purposive sampling techniques by considering criteria: students have participated in an inclusive learning process for at least one school year, have basic verbal or visual communication skills, and have permission from parents or guardians. In addition to the students, three inclusive classroom teachers were also involved as supporting informants to provide a reflective perspective on students' expressions and emotional dynamics during learning.

Data Collection Techniques

Data is obtained through three main techniques. First, non-invasive observation is performed in a naturalistic manner in the classroom to record facial expressions, gestures, social interactions, and reactions to specific learning stimuli. Second, the analysis of students' expressive works such as free images and simple narratives is used as a medium to understand emotional experiences that may be difficult to express verbally. Third, teachers' reflective records are collected periodically to gain additional meaning to the behaviors and affective changes that occur in students during learning interactions.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out using a phenomenological thematic analysis approach based on the Colaizzi procedure, which includes the process of identifying meaningful statements, formulating implicit meanings, grouping themes, and drafting comprehensive descriptions that represent the essential structure of the student experience. This process is carried out iteratively and reflexively to ensure the validity of the interpretation obtained (Morrow et al., 2015).

Validity and Validity

To ensure validity, a triangulation technique strategy (observation, student work, teacher reflection) and member checking of several participants and adult informants were used. Descriptive validity is maintained with systematic field documentation and the use of audit records as part of methodological transparency. In addition, the

analysis was carried out collaboratively by involving accompanying researchers to minimize interpretive bias.

Research Ethics

This research was carried out by paying attention to the ethical principles of children's research, including informed consent from parents or guardians, maintaining the confidentiality of participants' identities, and ensuring psychological comfort and safety during the data collection process. All data is encrypted anonymously and is only used for scientific purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal three main themes that reflect the spectrum of emotional experiences of children with special needs (CWSN) in the context of adaptive classes. The three themes are: (1) ambivalent feelings about one's presence in the classroom, (2) emotional dynamics in social interaction with peers and teachers, and (3) the meaning of emotional involvement through symbolic expression. These findings were extracted from a triangulation between non-invasive observations, analysis of students' expressive work, and teachers' reflective notes.

Emotional Ambivalence to Classroom Attendance

Most of the students in this study exhibited an ambivalent emotional state, which is a conflicting feeling between the desire to be present and part of the classroom community, and the sense of alienation they constantly experience. Although they are physically present and participate in learning activities that are designed in an adaptive manner, their affective expressions hint at invisible discomfort. In direct observation, students are seen following the teacher's instructions, participating in class assignments, and being in a relatively supportive social environment. However, if you look closely, a number of non-verbal indicators show an emotional distance between students and their learning environment. Their faces appear stiff, lack of spontaneous smiles, and tend to avoid eye contact, especially when asked to speak or work in a group. Some children exhibit solitary behavior even though they are in a circle of activities, such as choosing to sit on the edge of the room, not talking much, or showing defensive gestures such as hugging their knees and bowing their heads when interacting.

This ambivalence condition is increasingly strongly illustrated through the expressive works they produce. In the free image, many students symbolically describe the classroom as a physically dense yet emotionally empty place. They refer to classrooms as "*crowded but quiet*" or "*full of noise but I am silent*"—expressions that implicitly describe the contrast between the outside atmosphere and the inner state. This visualization is reflected in the use of strong graphic elements, such as thick lines that delimit one object to another, the choice of dark colors such as black, dark blue, or gray that dominate the paper area, as well as the depiction of oneself as a small figure

placed far in the corner of the image plane. In some works, students consistently place themselves outside the circle of friends or do not include the figure of the teacher at all in the classroom illustrations. This signifies the existence of an existential experience as an "outsider" in a space that is supposed to be inclusive.

Reflective notes from teachers confirm these findings. One teacher noted that although the student *"never sat down and seemed calm,"* he rarely showed enthusiasm, never voluntarily raised his hand to answer questions, and seemed agitated when working in a new group. Other teachers noted a pattern of passive interaction, such as just following instructions without taking the initiative to ask, or waiting for other friends to complete an assignment first before trying on their own. These patterns indicate that the presence of a child in the classroom does not necessarily mean full involvement in the learning process, especially when it comes to affective engagement.

Thus, these findings show that the presence of students in the adaptive classroom system does not necessarily erase the sense of alienation they experience. Inclusion structurally does not guarantee emotional inclusion. The ambivalence between *"present but invisible"* shows that there is a gap between the good intentions of the system and the real perception of the educational subject itself – children. This narrative emphasizes the importance of expanding the meaning of inclusion to include affective and emotional dimensions, and not just stopping at technical aspects such as curriculum modifications or physical accommodations. True inclusive learning demands space to hear and respond to the emotional experiences that live behind students' silence.

Emotions in Social Interactions

Social interaction with peers is the most volatile source of emotions. Some students show joy when they get the opportunity to play in pairs or supported by peers. However, in many cases, there is a feeling of not being considered or not invited in the play group. In the teacher's notes, it was recorded that some children experienced "subtle rejection", such as not being selected in group work, or only being a follower in a joint activity without really being actively involved. One of the students even wrote a short narrative that stated: *"I'm here, but no one is looking for me."* This suggests the existence of hidden social exclusion that can affect a child's self-esteem and learning motivation. Even though the learning system has been designed to be adaptive, there is still a big gap in terms of social acceptance that students feel affectively.

Emotional Expression through Symbolic Media

When given space to express their experiences through images and free stories, students show an improved quality of emotional narrative. This medium allows the emergence of expressions that cannot be expressed in verbal communication. Some children describe themselves as small figures in the corner of the room, or draw themselves with blank expressions in the crowd. However, as time went on and with a more emotionally responsive teacher's approach, some works began to show symbols of

change—such as smiles, interconnected hands, or brightly colored classrooms. This transformation shows that emotional engagement is not a static state, but can be developed through authentic experiences, social support, and emotional connection to the learning environment.

Overall, the results of this study show that although structurally students have been in adaptive classes, not all children have experienced emotional inclusion. There is a mismatch between physical presence and feelings of inner involvement. Emotional narratives that emerge through symbolic media show the importance of hearing children's voices as an indicator of the success of true inclusive education. These findings provide a starting basis for designing pedagogical strategies that are more sensitive to students' affective needs, as well as redefining inclusion as a relational experience, rather than just administrative integration.

Discussion

The findings in this study reveal that the existence of children with special needs (CWSN) in adaptive classrooms has not fully provided an emotionally inclusive learning experience. Although structurally classrooms have been designed to accommodate diversity, many students exhibit ambivalent emotional narratives, such as feeling present but unseen, or feeling physically engaged but socially and emotionally disconnected. These findings reinforce the criticism in the contemporary inclusive education literature that physical integration is not synonymous with authentic engagement (Estefan et al., 2023; Fatchurahman & Solikin, 2020).

The narrative of "*crowded but quiet*" and visual expressions that depict emotional alienation suggest that students experience a form of exclusion that is affective. This is consistent with the idea of emotional exclusion (Zou et al., 2022), where children are technically present in the classroom, but do not feel social significance or affection in the experience. In the context of Realistic Mathematics Education (RME) and contextual learning that have been widely applied in Indonesia (Zulkardi & Putri, 2010), the affective dimension is often still positioned as an additional effect, not as the core of the learning process. Instead, this research highlights that students' emotional experiences should be the foundation for adaptive classroom design, as affection is directly related to motivation, engagement, and the ability to build meaning.

Additionally, students' social relationships with peers and teachers play an important role in forming a sense of security and acceptance. When students feel uninvited in a play group or just become passive followers in group work, psychosocial experiences are formed that weaken their confidence and empowerment. This is in accordance with the concept of relational inclusion put forward by Goodley (2017), that inclusion is not only a matter of administrative policy or physical placement, but a matter of interaction that forms a sense of attachment and meaning. Teachers who are insensitive to students' emotional signals, or a learning system that focuses too much on

academic achievement, can reinforce emotional inequality despite applying structurally inclusive principles.

The existence of a shift of expression in students' symbolic works from isolation to connectedness suggests the potential for emotional recovery if a safe and authentic space of expression is available. When students are given the opportunity to express their feelings through the medium they are good at – such as drawing, storytelling, or free writing – they not only process emotions, but also rebuild their relationship with the learning environment. This is in line with the child-centered education and voice pedagogy approach that places children's subjective expression as a valid source of data in evaluating educational success (Stevenson & Alzyood, 2025; Garraway, 2019).

Theoretically, this study expands the inclusive education framework by integrating the concept of emotional inclusion as an important dimension that has not been widely explored in the context of adaptive classrooms at the elementary school level. While most previous studies have focused on access, curriculum modifications, or cognitive achievement of students with special needs (Thompson et al., 2018), this study highlights the importance of affective engagement as an indicator of true inclusion success. This is where the novelty of this research's contribution lies: that in order to build meaningful inclusion, schools are not enough to just open physical doors, but also need to open an emotional space for students to feel fully present, heard, and valued.

As such, these findings provide important implications for teachers and policymakers. Teachers need to be trained to have emotional sensitivity, the ability to read students' non-verbal signals, and the skills to build an affectively participatory learning environment. Meanwhile, education policy needs to integrate the affective dimension in the success indicators of inclusive learning, including through narrative assessments and affective observations, not just cognitive achievement

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the existence of children with special needs (CWSN) in adaptive classes in elementary schools does not fully guarantee the creation of an emotionally inclusive learning experience. Although they have been structurally accommodated through various curricular and physical adjustments, many of them still experience emotional alienation that is revealed through non-verbal expressions, symbolic work, and reflective notes of teachers. The absence of students' emotional voices in the educational process is an important indicator that true inclusion has not been fully achieved.

Key findings suggest the existence of three dominant spectrums of emotional narratives: ambivalence to classroom attendance, fragile social relationships, and symbolic expression as a hidden form of emotional articulation. These narratives reveal the importance of emotional engagement as a foundation for the success of inclusive

education, which has tended to be marginalized by a focus on administrative and cognitive aspects. Inclusion cannot be interpreted as limited to physical presence in the classroom, but must include recognition of the affective existence of each child.

Thus, this research makes an important conceptual contribution in expanding the inclusive education paradigm through strengthening the concept of emotional inclusion. In addition, this study offers empirical evidence that a safe and sensitive space of expression to students' affective needs has the potential to rebuild the emotional relationship between children and their learning environment. The practical implications of this study are the importance of teacher training in social-emotional competencies and the need for education policies that include affective indicators in inclusion assessments.

This research also opens up opportunities for further studies that examine how interventions based on symbolic and participatory expression can be systematically integrated in inclusive classroom curricula. In the long run, acknowledging the unheard voices of children with special needs is an important step towards achieving education that is truly inclusive, equitable, and meaningful for all.

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