



Understanding Inclusive School Culture Through the Index for Inclusion: Empirical Findings from Primary Schools in Asahan Regency, Indonesia

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the culture dimension of the Index for Inclusion in public primary schools implementing inclusive education in Asahan Regency, Indonesia. Employing a quantitative descriptive survey approach, the investigation involved 35 teachers selected through purposive sampling from seven designated inclusive public primary schools (UPTD SDN) based on their direct instructional experience in inclusive classrooms. Data were collected using an adapted questionnaire measuring Dimension A (Creating Inclusive Cultures) of the Index for Inclusion and analyzed through descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that the participating schools demonstrated a relatively strong inclusive culture, with descriptive statistical analyses revealed that the participating schools demonstrated a high level of inclusive culture, with an overall composite mean score of 1.91 (SD = 0.28) on a three-point scale (ranging from 0.00 to 2.00). Across subdimensions, Building Community achieved a higher mean score (M = 1.93, SD = 0.24), led by peer assistance (M = 1.97, SD = 0.17), whereas Establishing Inclusive Values scored slightly lower (M = 1.88, SD = 0.33), with institutional anti-discrimination practices recording the lowest mean (M = 1.85, SD = 0.36). These empirical findings indicate that principles of participation, equity, and respect for diversity are well-integrated into the school culture, while underscoring the necessity of reinforcing family engagement and explicit anti-discrimination initiatives within primary schools.

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Introduction

Inclusive education has evolved into a global agenda that emphasizes the right of every learner to receive equal access to education regardless of physical, intellectual, social, cultural, or economic conditions (Rahmadani et al., 2025). This concept is not only concerned with providing educational access for students with special educational needs but also with creating learning environments that accommodate diversity and promote the optimal participation of all learners. In line with this international commitment, the Indonesian government has implemented regulatory policies to guarantee inclusive education, notably the Regulation of the Minister of National Education No. 70 of 2009 concerning Inclusive Education for Learners with Disabilities and Learners with Exceptional Intelligence and/or Talents (Ministry of National Education, 2009). This policy affirms that regular schools are responsible for providing accessible, responsive, and non-discriminatory educational services for all students (Tsaputra & Amani, 2025).

Nevertheless, the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia continues to face numerous challenges. Previous studies have indicated that limited teacher competence,



insufficient resource support, weak school policies, and persistent stigma toward students with special educational needs are among the factors hindering the effective realization of inclusive education (Efendi et al., 2022). These conditions suggest that the success of inclusive education is determined not merely by the presence of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools, but also by the ability of schools to cultivate a culture that supports acceptance, participation, and respect for diversity. From the perspective of the *Index for Inclusion* developed by Booth and Ainscow (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), inclusive culture constitutes the fundamental basis for the development of inclusive policies and practices. Inclusive culture is manifested through the establishment of supportive school communities (*building community*) and the promotion of inclusive values (*establishing inclusive values*) that underpin all school activities. Schools characterized by a strong inclusive culture are believed to enhance students' sense of belonging, strengthen participation, and foster a safe learning environment that values diversity (Sukma et al., 2025).

However, several studies have shown that the development of inclusive culture in primary schools still encounters significant barriers. Social exclusion practices, low levels of parental involvement, limited social interaction among students, and the predominance of academic achievement-oriented school priorities often impede the strengthening of inclusive values (Ainscow et al., 2006). Similar conditions are prominently observed in public primary schools implementing inclusive education in Asahan Regency, North Sumatera—a semi-rural and peri-urban district in the Global South characterized by an agrarian and plantation-driven economy, geographic dispersion of schools, and marked socio-economic stratification. Although primary schools across this decentralized region have officially admitted learners with diverse characteristics, the internalisation of inclusive values within the institutional ethos faces unique localized hurdles, including scarce specialized support personnel, limited pedagogical adaptations, and episodic parental engagement constrained by agrarian livelihoods. Consequently, the extent to which inclusive principles have been genuinely embedded within the everyday school culture in this regional context remains underexplored empirically. Existing research on inclusive education in Indonesia has primarily focused on policy implementation, teacher readiness, and instructional strategies in metropolitan centers, while studies specifically evaluating school culture using the *Index for Inclusion* framework remain relatively limited, particularly within the context of primary schools in regional areas. This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive culture as a critical determinant of successful inclusive education implementation (UNESCO, 2020).

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the inclusive school culture of primary schools in Asahan Regency using the cultural dimension of the *Index for Inclusion*. Specifically, the study examines two key aspects: *building community* and *establishing inclusive values*. The findings are expected to provide empirical contributions to the development of inclusive education in Indonesia and serve as a foundation for schools and policymakers in strengthening inclusive culture within primary education institutions (Yang & Zhou, 2025).

Research Method

This study employs a quantitative descriptive survey approach to examine inclusive school culture through an empirical lens (Judijanto et al., 2025). Within this method framework, the investigation involved 35 primary school teachers from seven public primary schools in Asahan Regency, North Sumatera (UPTD SDN 010093 Selawan, UPTD SDN 010088 Selawan, UPTD SDN 013854 Selawan, UPTD SDN 017106 Kisaran Naga, UPTD

SDN 017107 Kisaran Naga, UPTD SDN 010097 Selawan, and UPTD SDN 010098 Selawan). Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on predefined inclusion criteria: (1) active status as a permanent or full-time contract teacher in a designated inclusive primary school, and (2) possessing at least one full academic year of direct instructional experience managing diverse learners in inclusive classrooms. From each participating school, five teachers representing classroom teachers and subject teachers were recruited, with teaching experience ranging from 1 to 25 years.

Data collection was conducted during the 2025 academic year. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from school principals and relevant educational authorities. Questionnaires were distributed directly to participating teachers in each school. Respondents completed the instrument independently based on their experiences and observations regarding the implementation of inclusive education within their schools. To ensure data accuracy, completed questionnaires were reviewed for completeness before being entered into a spreadsheet for analysis (Susanto et al., 2024). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Responses from all participants were tabulated and calculated to determine the frequency, percentage, mean score, and overall tendency of responses for each indicator within the inclusive culture dimension (Maulidazani et al., 2026). The interpretation of the findings was conducted objectively by categorizing the mean scores across three equal interval tiers derived from the three-point response scale (ranging from 0.00 to 2.00).

Table 1. Categorization Criteria and Mean Score Intervals for Inclusive School Culture

Mean Score Interval	Category Level	Descriptive Interpretation
0.00 - 0.66	Low/Weak	Inclusive culture is largely unestablished; exclusionary attitudes or practices predominate within the school environment.
0.67 - 1.33	Moderate	Inclusive culture is partially established; inclusive values and community-building efforts are implemented inconsistently.
1.34 - 2.00	High/Strong	Inclusive culture is firmly established; principles of collaboration, equity, mutual respect, and active participation are consistently practiced.

Indicators and subdimensions scoring within the higher range (1.34–2.00) were interpreted as demonstrating a robust institutionalization of inclusive cultural practices. The findings were subsequently analyzed across the two subdimensions of the Index for Inclusion framework: Building Community and Establishing Inclusive Values (Jailani, 2023).

Results and Discussion

Inclusive School Culture Based on The Index for Inclusion

This study examined the culture dimension of the *Index for Inclusion* framework, consisting of two subdimensions: *Building Community* and *Establishing Inclusive Values*. Responses from 35 teachers were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the extent to which inclusive culture has been implemented in public primary schools in Asahan Regency. Overall, the findings indicate that the participating schools demonstrated a relatively strong inclusive culture. The overall mean score for Dimension A (*Creating Inclusive Cultures*) was 1.91 (SD = 0.28) on a three-point scale ranging from 0 (*Disagree*) to 2 (*Agree*). This result suggests that most respondents perceived the implementation of inclusive cultural practices positively.

Building Community

The first subdimension, *Building Community*, examined the extent to which schools foster welcoming relationships, collaboration, mutual support, and partnerships among members of the school community. Table 1 presents the descriptive results for each indicator.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Building Community Subdimension

Indicator	Mean	SD
A1.1 All people are welcomed	1.87	0.34
A1.2 Staff work together	1.95	0.21
A1.3 Children help one another	1.97	0.17
A1.4 Staff and children respect one another	1.95	0.21
A1.5 Staff and parents collaborate	1.91	0.28

The highest mean score was obtained for A1.3 Children help one another ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 0.17$), indicating that respondents perceived strong peer support and positive social interactions among students. Similarly, high scores were observed for A1.2 Staff work together ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 0.21$) and A1.4 Staff and children respect one another ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 0.21$), suggesting that collaborative and respectful relationships have been established within the school environment.

The indicator A1.5 Staff and parents collaborate obtained a slightly lower mean score ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.28$), although the result remained within the positive category. This finding indicates that collaboration between schools and families has generally been established but may vary across schools. Meanwhile, A1.1 All people are welcomed also received a high level of agreement ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 0.34$), reflecting the presence of a welcoming school environment for members of the school community. Overall, the findings suggest that schools have developed supportive interpersonal relationships characterized by cooperation, mutual respect, and active participation among stakeholders.

Establishing Inclusive Values

The second subdimension, *Establishing Inclusive Values*, assessed the extent to which schools promote equity, participation, respect for diversity, and anti-discrimination principles. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Establishing Inclusive Values Subdimension

Indicator	Mean	SD
A2.1 School develops inclusive values together	1.89	0.32
A2.4 Inclusion is viewed as increasing participation for all	1.90	0.31
A2.6 Children are valued equally	1.88	0.32
A2.7 School opposes all forms of discrimination	1.85	0.36

Among the indicators within this subdimension, the highest mean score was recorded for A2.4 Inclusion is viewed as increasing participation for all ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 0.31$). This finding indicates that respondents generally perceive inclusion as a strategy to enhance participation opportunities for all students rather than a practice limited to students with disabilities. Similarly, A2.1 School develops inclusive values together obtained a high mean score ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.32$), suggesting that inclusive values are promoted collectively within the school community. The indicator A2.6 Children are valued equally also demonstrated a positive result ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.32$), indicating that schools strive to provide equitable treatment and opportunities for all learners. The lowest mean score within this subdimension was observed for A2.7 School opposes all forms of discrimination ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.36$). Although this score remains relatively high, the larger

standard deviation indicates greater variation in respondents' perceptions compared with other indicators (Valle-Florez et al., 2022).

Summary of Findings

Across all evaluated indicators, mean scores ranged from 1.85 to 1.97, indicating a consistently strong baseline of inclusive culture across public primary schools in Asahan Regency. However, a critical comparative analysis reveals a distinct dichotomy between internal school-based dynamics and external community-facing engagements:

- 1) The Prominence of Internal School Cohesion (A1.3 & A1.2): The exceptional ratings for peer support (A1.3: Children help one another, $M = 1.97$) and teacher teamwork (A1.2: Staff work together, $M = 1.95$) are deeply rooted in the local socio-cultural fabric of North Sumatra. In primary schools across Asahan Regency, traditional values of gotong royong (communal solidarity) and tepa selira (mutual empathy) serve as intrinsic cultural foundations that naturally encourage pupils to assist peers facing learning or physical difficulties in the classroom. At the staff level, institutional mechanisms such as regular Teacher Working Groups (*Kelompok Kerja Guru/KKG*) and school-level consultative meetings provide structured platforms where educators routinely exchange instructional strategies, solve pedagogical dilemmas collaboratively, and cultivate a cohesive collegial culture.
- 2) The Dilemma of External & Community Linkages (A1.5 & A1.1): In contrast, indicators linked to external partnerships, namely school-family collaboration (A1.5, $M = 1.91$) and creating an open, welcoming environment for all wider community members (A1.1, $M = 1.87$) received comparatively lower scores and exhibited wider response variance ($SD = 0.28$ and 0.34 , respectively). Within the socio-demographic realities of Asahan Regency, where a significant portion of families engage in agricultural, plantation, or informal trade sectors, structural challenges such as demanding working hours, logistical constraints, and economic burdens limit parents' active day-to-day involvement in school governance. Furthermore, communication between schools and families often remains formal and episodic (e.g., restricted to administrative report-card distribution days) rather than collaborative. Additionally, lingering cultural hesitance, lack of awareness regarding special educational needs, and subtle societal stigmas surrounding disability continue to hinder parents from fully engaging as equal co-educators, thereby constraining the school's capacity to establish a comprehensively welcoming atmosphere for every member of the broader community.

Discussion

The findings indicate that primary schools implementing inclusive education in Asahan Regency have developed a relatively strong inclusive culture, as reflected in the high scores across the *Building Community* and *Establishing Inclusive Values* dimensions of the *Index for Inclusion*. The strongest results were found in indicators related to peer support, staff collaboration, and mutual respect between teachers and students, suggesting that the schools have established a supportive and participatory learning environment. This is also closely tied to the principal's role in implementing inclusive values within the school environment (Damri et al., 2023; Panjaitan et al., 2026). These findings support Booth and Ainscow's perspective that inclusive culture serves as the foundation for successful inclusive education (Opoku-Nkoom & Ackah-Jnr, 2023). Positive peer relationships and collaborative practices among school stakeholders contribute to increased participation, social inclusion, and a stronger sense of belonging among students (Indra et al., 2019). Furthermore,



the perception of inclusion as a process that benefits all learners, rather than only students with disabilities, reflects a broader and more contemporary understanding of inclusive education consistent with international frameworks such as UNESCO and the *Index for Inclusion* (Srinivasavarathan & Rajendran, 2025).

The positive results related to equity and respect for diversity also indicate that inclusive values have become embedded within school culture. Such values are essential for reducing barriers to participation and creating equitable learning opportunities for all students (Amani et al., 2024). However, the relatively lower scores on school–family collaboration and anti-discrimination practices suggest that these areas require further strengthening. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, stronger partnerships between schools and families are needed to create a more comprehensive support system for students and to ensure that inclusive values are reinforced across different social environments. Overall, this study highlights the importance of school culture as a key factor in the successful implementation of inclusive education (Dharma, 2022). The findings provide robust empirical evidence that supportive interpersonal relationships, shared values, and collaborative practices serve as the foundational drivers of inclusive school environments. When contextualized within the broader literature utilizing the Index for Inclusion framework, the cultural profile observed in Asahan Regency aligns with patterns documented in both national and international investigations while revealing distinct localized nuances.

Nationally, the high scores in staff collegiality and pro-social peer interactions mirror findings from primary schools in major Indonesian urban centers such as Jabodetabek and East Java, which consistently demonstrate that communal cohesion (mutual cooperation) facilitates early-stage inclusive adaptation (Efendi et al., 2022; Rahmadani et al., 2025). However, while urban schools frequently report stronger parental advocacy networks, regional primary schools in Asahan face distinct mesosystemic constraints, where home-school collaboration remains predominantly administrative rather than pedagogical (Tsaputra & Amani, 2025). Internationally, these empirical results corroborate findings from developing and emerging educational systems, such as studies in Ghana (Opoku-Nkoom & Ackah-Jnr, 2023) and India (Srinivasavarathan & Rajendran, 2025), which established that positive school climate and community building often precede formal policy alignment and resource allocation. Conversely, comparisons with European studies such as those conducted in Spain by Valle-Florez et al. (2022) reveal a key divergence: while Western inclusive schools typically exhibit institutionalized, structured anti-discrimination frameworks and legal complaint mechanisms, schools in Asahan Regency rely primarily on informal, normative interpersonal respect. This explains why anti-discrimination practices (A2.7) scored lowest with the highest variance in this study, highlighting that moral commitments to non-discrimination must be buttressed by formal institutional protocols.

These comparative insights yield critical practical implications for regional educational authorities (Asahan Regency Department of Education) and national policymakers: Institutionalizing Standard Operating Procedures for Anti-Discrimination: Policymakers must move beyond broad philosophical mandates by issuing enforceable regional guidelines and school-level Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that explicitly define, report, and remediate subtle discrimination, microaggressions, and bullying against vulnerable learners. Systematizing Family–School Mesosystemic Platforms: Educational authorities should design policy frameworks that mandate and fund structured Parent and Teacher Collaborative Working Groups, ensuring that parents of learners with special educational needs are treated as co-designers of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) (Abnar et al., 2026; Rahmahtrisilvia et al., 2024) rather than passive recipients of academic



reports (Dharma, 2022; Tong & An, 2024). Targeted Professional Development in Dimension-Driven Inclusion: Teacher continuous professional development (CPD) programs sponsored by regional budgets must integrate the three-dimensional philosophy of the Index for Inclusion, training educators not only in isolated pedagogical accommodations but also in community building strategies and diversity management (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Wang et al., 2024). Targeted Resource Allocation for Regional Clusters: Funding mechanisms should incentivize collaborative school clusters (e.g., Kelompok Kerja Guru/KKG) to share itinerant special education specialists (Guru Pembimbing Khusus/GPK) across neighboring rural and regional schools, bridging the technical capacity gap identified in decentralized districts.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the cultural dimension of the Index for Inclusion across seven public primary schools implementing inclusive education in Asahan Regency, Indonesia. The empirical findings reveal that the participating schools have established a strong inclusive culture, characterized by robust peer support, effective staff collegiality, reciprocal respect between teachers and students, and an understanding of inclusion as a mechanism to enhance learning participation for all students. These results demonstrate that principles of equity, mutual respect, and pro-social cooperation have become substantially embedded within the daily institutional and interpersonal climate of the schools.

The primary contribution of this research lies in providing localized empirical evidence regarding the foundational role of school culture in sustaining inclusive education within non-metropolitan primary schools. The findings highlight that the long-term success of inclusive education depends not merely on statutory compliance or structural facilities, but fundamentally on the degree to which inclusive values are integrated into the daily interactions of the school community. Practically, the study highlights an urgent need to institutionalize formalized anti-discrimination mechanisms and establish structured collaborative platforms between schools and families to create a more comprehensive and sustainable support system for all learners.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, schools should strengthen collaborative partnerships with parents and local communities to support the development of more sustainable inclusive educational environments. School leaders are encouraged to implement continuous professional development programs that reinforce inclusive values, diversity awareness, and anti-discrimination practices among teachers and staff. Policymakers should provide systematic support through training, monitoring, and resource allocation to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education at the primary school level. Furthermore, future studies should examine other dimensions of the Index for Inclusion, particularly inclusive policies and practices, and involve larger and more diverse samples across different regions. The use of mixed-methods approaches is also recommended to obtain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the development of inclusive school culture.

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