



Communication Barriers and Digital Technology Readiness in Inclusive Elementary Schools: A Thematic Analysis of Stakeholder Perspectives on Teacher-Parent Interaction for Children with Special Needs

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the communication barriers and digital technology readiness of classroom teachers, special education companion teachers (GPKs), and parents of children with special needs (ABK) at SD Laboratorium UPI Cibiru, Bandung Regency. A qualitative approach was employed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 60 participants, comprising 18 classroom teachers, 19 special education companion teachers (GPKs), and 23 parents. The data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 15 software. The findings revealed six interconnected themes: (1) current communication practices dominated by WhatsApp; (2) multidimensional communication barriers encompassing structural, technical, and relational factors; (3) unmet needs for structured digital communication features; (4) stakeholders' perceptions of and readiness for website-based platforms; (5) concerns regarding the security and privacy of ABK students' data; and (6) the critical importance of long-term developmental documentation. The findings indicate that, although WhatsApp is universally used, it fails to support the structured, secure, and longitudinal communication required for effective inclusive education. Stakeholders across all participant groups demonstrated moderate-to-high levels of digital readiness, providing a strong foundation for the adoption of purpose-built digital communication platforms. These findings have important implications for the design of educational technologies and the development of inclusive education policies in Indonesia.

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Introduction

The global commitment to inclusive education, grounded in the Salamanca Statement (1994) and reinforced through Sustainable Development Goal 4, mandates the integration of children with diverse learning needs into mainstream educational environments. In Indonesia, this mandate is operationalized through Permendiknas No. 70/2009, which obligates each district to establish inclusive schools across educational levels. While legislative foundations are in place, the quality of inclusive education in practice is substantially mediated by the depth and consistency of communication between schools and families (Yunita & Subagya, 2025; Novrizal & Manaf, 2024).

Communication between teachers, special education companion teachers (GPK), and parents of children with special needs (ABK) is not merely an administrative function it is a pedagogical imperative. Hyassat et al. (2024) established that teachers' perceptions of parental involvement are directly shaped by the quality and accessibility of communication channels available to them. Gaspar and Sahay (2025) argue that the traditional



conceptualization of parental involvement must be expanded in special education contexts to account for the unique communication demands created by individualized education programs (IEP/PPI). Santiago et al. (2022) further demonstrated that congruence between school and family perspectives on a child's development achievable only through consistent, documented communication is a strong predictor of positive outcomes for autistic and special needs students.

Despite its critical importance, teacher-parent communication in Indonesian inclusive schools largely remains informal and technology-dependent in ways that introduce significant structural vulnerabilities. The emergence of WhatsApp as the *de facto* communication platform in Indonesian schools (Beilmann et al., 2023; Harwanto et al., 2025) reflects broader global trends toward the use of consumer instant messaging for educational communication. However, Al-Ahmed (2025) documents that special education teachers identify inadequate communication channels as one of the foremost barriers to effective inclusion, particularly when no structured system exists for conveying nuanced developmental information. Proff et al. (2025) similarly note that post-pandemic communication practices have permanently shifted toward digital platforms, but schools have largely failed to transition from informal apps to purpose-designed educational communication systems.

The limitations of WhatsApp-based communication in special education contexts are well-documented. Mashudi et al. (2025) identified instant messaging platforms as structurally incompatible with the longitudinal documentation requirements of ABK education. Macià Bordalba and Garreta Bochaca (2019) found that while teachers and parents in digital communication-reliant schools value speed and convenience, they consistently identify the absence of structured, retrievable records as a major communication quality deficit. Szabó et al. (2025) report that teacher-parent online communication, when conducted through unstructured channels, leads to information asymmetry, where parents receive inconsistent information about their child's progress depending on individual teacher practices.

A promising alternative is the transition toward purpose-built, website-based communication platforms that integrate structured reporting, multimedia documentation, privacy protection, and notification systems. Meyer et al. (2025) evaluated a web-based application facilitating family-school-healthcare collaboration for children with neurodevelopmental disorders and found it significantly improved communication quality and parental engagement. Abeer et al. (2024) demonstrated that purpose-built connectivity platforms for parents and teachers of autistic children substantially enhanced information exchange consistency. Yet adoption of such platforms is contingent not only on their technical capabilities but also on stakeholder readiness encompassing digital literacy, perceived usefulness, and trust in digital systems (Scherer & Teo, 2019; Granić, 2022).

This study addresses a critical gap: while the inadequacy of WhatsApp-based teacher-parent communication in inclusive settings is increasingly recognized, systematic qualitative evidence mapping the specific barriers experienced across the teacher-GPK-parent triad and the conditions of digital readiness that would support platform adoption remains scarce in Indonesian contexts. Evaluating stakeholder readiness in the context of Indonesian inclusive schools is particularly important and warrants in-depth investigation at the present time for three converging reasons. First, the number of ABK students enrolled in regular schools continues to grow as inclusive education policy is strengthened, yet most schools still depend on informal communication practices that were never designed for the intensive, individualized information exchange these students require. Second, the post-pandemic normalization of digital communication has created a rare window of opportunity: teachers



and parents have accumulated unprecedented experience with digital tools (Proff et al., 2025), and infrastructure decisions made at this moment will shape school-family communication practices for years to come. Third, introducing a purpose-built platform without first understanding stakeholders' actual barriers, needs, and readiness carries a high risk of rejection and wasted investment, because technology adoption research consistently shows that user readiness, rather than technical capability alone, is the primary determinant of successful implementation (Scherer & Teo, 2019; Granić, 2022). An in-depth qualitative investigation of stakeholder readiness therefore constitutes an essential evidence base before any platform development or policy intervention is undertaken.

Accordingly, this study aims to describe the current conditions of communication between teachers, GPKs, and parents of ABK students; to identify the communication barriers experienced across the three stakeholder groups; to map the digital communication features that stakeholders consider necessary; and to examine stakeholder perceptions, readiness, privacy concerns, and documentation needs related to the adoption of a website-based communication platform. In doing so, the study offers three contributions to the existing literature and educational practice. Theoretically, it extends the technology acceptance discourse by providing triadic qualitative evidence, drawn simultaneously from teachers, GPKs, and parents, which remains rare in inclusive education research. Empirically, it presents one of the first systematic thematic mappings of teacher-GPK-parent communication barriers and digital readiness in an Indonesian inclusive elementary school. Practically, its findings provide an evidence base for educational technology developers designing purpose-built school-family communication platforms and for policymakers formulating standards on digital communication for students with special needs.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological orientation, appropriate for capturing the lived experiences and perceptions of multiple stakeholder groups regarding a shared social phenomenon teacher-parent communication in inclusive education (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research was conducted at SD Laboratorium UPI Cibiru, Bandung Regency, West Java, Indonesia, a designated inclusive elementary school serving students with various special needs categories. This school was purposively selected as the research site for four reasons. First, as the laboratory school of Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, it has been formally designated as an inclusive school and has long served students across diverse special needs categories, including autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, specific learning difficulties, and speech delays, making it an information-rich setting for the phenomenon under study. Second, unlike most inclusive schools in the region, it assigns a special education companion teacher (GPK) to accompany almost every ABK student, so the complete teacher-GPK-parent communication triad examined in this study operates on a daily basis and can be observed in a mature form. Third, its teachers, GPKs, and parents have already established intensive school-wide digital communication routines through WhatsApp, which makes the school a suitable site for examining both the limitations of instant-messaging-based communication and the readiness of stakeholders for a purpose-built platform. Finally, as a university laboratory school it carries a mandate to model innovative practices for other schools, so the insights generated at this site have strong developmental relevance for inclusive schools throughout the region.



Sixty participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in ABK student communication: 18 classroom teachers, 19 GPKs, and 23 parents of ABK students. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Group	N	Gender (F/M)	Teaching Exp.
Teachers	18	14/4	5–22 years
GPKs	19	17/2	3–18 years
Parents	23	19/4	Child 6–12 yrs

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews averaging 50 minutes per participant (range: 35–75 min), conducted between September and November 2024. An interview guide was developed from a literature review and validated by two experts in special education and qualitative research methodology. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and member-checked with eight representative participants.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, initial code generation, theme searching, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing. NVivo 15 software facilitated systematic coding across 60 transcripts totaling approximately 180,000 words. Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, triangulation across three stakeholder groups, peer debriefing with two co-researchers, and an audit trail maintained throughout the analysis process.

Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis yielded six major themes, each with constituent sub-themes, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Identified Themes and Sub-themes

No.	Theme	Key Sub-themes
1)	Current Communication Conditions	WhatsApp dominance; absence of structured systems; frequency & quality gaps
2)	Multi-dimensional Communication Barriers	Structural barriers; digital literacy gaps; time constraints; trust deficits
3)	Needs for Digital Communication Features	Structured reporting; PPI monitoring; multimedia documentation; notifications
4)	Perceptions & Readiness for Website Platforms	TAM dimensions; prior tech experience; training needs; adoption intent
5)	Data Security & Privacy Concerns	Student data protection; third-party access; institutional accountability
6)	Importance of Long-term Documentation	Developmental trajectories; PPI continuity; evidence-based advocacy

The six themes did not operate in isolation; the analysis indicated clear relationship paths among them, which are visualized in the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. The universal reliance on WhatsApp (Theme 1) creates multi-dimensional communication barriers (Theme 2), which in turn generate stakeholder needs for structured digital communication features (Theme 3). These needs shape stakeholder perceptions of and readiness toward website-based platforms (Theme 4). Two cross-cutting themes condition



this readiness: concerns about student data security and privacy (Theme 5) determine the trust dimension of platform acceptance, while the need for long-term developmental documentation (Theme 6) reinforces the perceived value of a structured platform. Together, these paths converge on stakeholder support for the adoption of a school-administered, website-based communication platform.

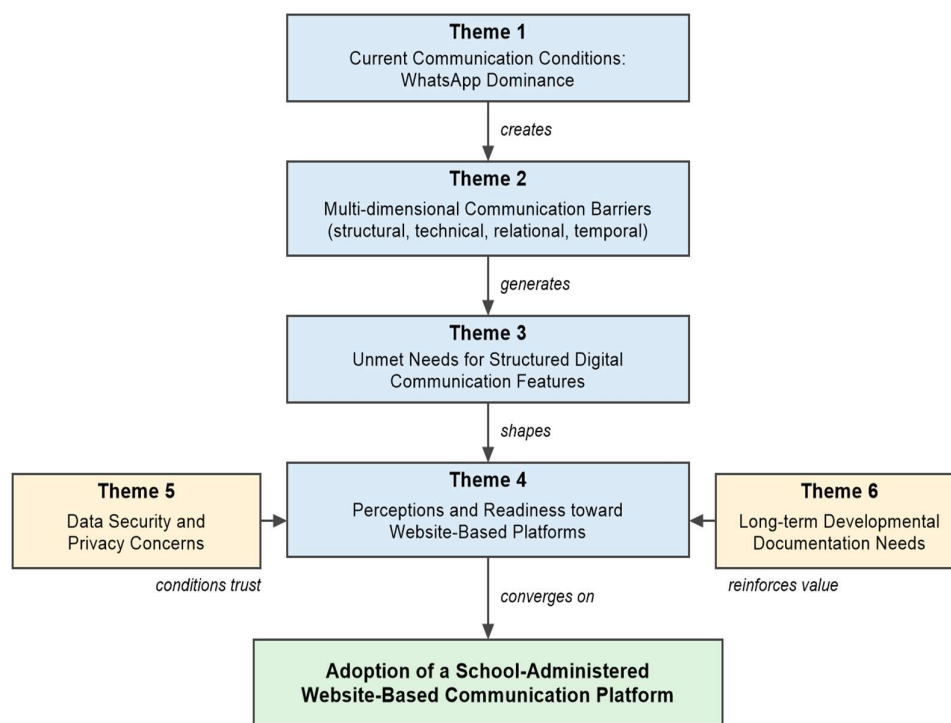


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the relationship paths among the six identified themes
Theme 1: Current Communication Conditions The WhatsApp Paradox

All 60 participants confirmed that WhatsApp is the singular, universal communication platform across all stakeholder groups. No participant reported using a dedicated educational platform, structured reporting system, or school-issued digital communication tool. This finding reflects what we term the "WhatsApp Paradox" in inclusive education: a platform universally adopted yet structurally inadequate for its educational purpose.

Teachers described a communication landscape characterized by reactive rather than proactive information exchange. Communication typically occurred only when problems arose a behavioral incident, a missed medication, or an upcoming assessment rather than through consistent developmental reporting. GPKs identified themselves as informal communication brokers, frequently absorbing messages from parents and forwarding relevant information to classroom teachers, creating an ad hoc relay system rather than a structured information flow. Parents described receiving information in fragmented, context-dependent bursts that made it difficult to form a coherent understanding of their child's developmental trajectory. From the parents' perspective, the predominantly reactive nature of WhatsApp communication was experienced not merely as an inconvenience but as a source of recurring anxiety. Because messages from school arrived mainly when a problem had already occurred, many parents reported feeling apprehensive whenever a teacher's name appeared on their screen, anticipating bad news about their child. Parents also explained that, in the absence of



routine positive reporting, silence was ambiguous: they could not tell whether no news meant stable progress or simply unreported difficulties. This uncertainty left them dependent on their own initiative to ask for updates, an initiative many hesitated to take for fear of disturbing teachers, as elaborated under the relational barriers in Theme 2. Parents thus shared, and in some respects felt more acutely, the concerns that teachers and GPKs expressed about the reactive communication pattern.

These findings align with Trisnawaty et al. (2025), who document the challenges parents and teachers face in navigating digital communication in inclusive settings, and with Harwanto et al. (2025), who identify WhatsApp dependency as creating structurally unequal information access among parents. Nuryanti and Pamungkas (2025) similarly found that teacher-parent collaboration for children with speech delays is significantly hampered by the absence of structured digital communication tools.

Theme 2: Multi-dimensional Communication Barriers

Analysis revealed communication barriers operating across four interconnected dimensions: structural, technical, relational, and temporal. Structural barriers included the absence of standardized reporting formats, unclear role boundaries between teachers and GPKs regarding communication responsibilities, and no institutional policy mandating regular developmental updates for ABK students. Technical barriers encompassed varying smartphone literacy levels among parents particularly older parents with lower digital literacy and inconsistent internet connectivity.

Relational barriers were particularly salient among parent participants, who reported hesitancy to initiate communication for fear of burdening busy teachers. This finding resonates with Batz and Yadav's (2024) metasynthesis, which identified trust and perceived welcome as critical mediators of parental engagement in special education contexts. Temporal barriers included teachers' difficulty in maintaining communication outside school hours through a personal messaging app, consistent with Kuusimäki et al. (2019), who found that digital school-home communication through unstructured channels creates boundary-dissolution stress for teachers.

The structural and relational barrier intersection was most evident in the communication triangle between classroom teachers, GPKs, and parents. GPKs reported operating without clear institutional guidelines for information sharing, resulting in inconsistent practices across different classroom-GPK pairs. Al-Ahmed (2025) and Hyassat et al. (2024) corroborate this finding, noting that role ambiguity in GPK-teacher-parent communication is a widespread challenge in inclusive education systems globally.

Theme 3: Unmet Needs for Structured Digital Communication Features

When asked about desired digital communication features, stakeholders across all groups demonstrated remarkable convergence. Six feature clusters emerged from the analysis: (1) structured daily developmental reporting templates that go beyond narrative messages; (2) PPI progress monitoring visible to all three parties simultaneously; (3) multimedia documentation capabilities for uploading photos and short videos of student activities and achievements; (4) automatic notifications ensuring time-sensitive information reaches parents reliably; (5) a searchable historical record enabling longitudinal review of communications; and (6) a protected information channel distinct from personal WhatsApp conversations.

The convergence of needs across teacher, GPK, and parent groups is significant, as prior research suggests that stakeholder consensus on feature requirements substantially increases adoption likelihood (Granić, 2022; Scherer & Teo, 2019). The emphasis on PPI



monitoring features is particularly noteworthy: Gaspar and Sahay (2025) argue that parent access to real-time PPI implementation data represents the highest-value communication feature in special education, yet it is consistently absent from existing digital communication tools. Nawawi and Muhammad (2024) and Kuswanto and Arianti (2022), who developed web-based communication book applications in Indonesian school contexts, similarly identified structured reporting and documentation as the most-requested features by both teachers and parents.

Theme 4: Perceptions and Readiness Toward Website-Based Platforms

Analysis through a Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) lens revealed that stakeholder perceptions of website-based communication platforms were predominantly positive, though conditioned by prior experience and training availability. Three TAM dimensions emerged prominently: perceived usefulness was high across all groups, with participants readily articulating how a structured platform would improve their current communication experience; perceived ease of use was moderate, contingent on platform design simplicity and the availability of orientation sessions; and trust, a TAM extension dimension identified by Scherer and Teo (2019) as particularly relevant in educational technology adoption, was high when platforms were school-administered rather than third-party applications.

GPKs demonstrated the highest adoption readiness, consistent with their role as technology mediators in the classroom. Teachers showed moderate readiness, with concerns centered primarily on time investment for data entry rather than technical capability. Parents showed the greatest variance in readiness: younger parents with smartphone experience expressed immediate willingness, while parents with limited digital literacy expressed anxiety about managing a new platform. This variance aligns with Acosta-Vargas et al. (2024), who identify digital literacy as a key barrier to technology adoption in inclusive education, and underscores the importance of Universal Design for Learning principles (Al-Azawei et al., 2016) in platform design to accommodate diverse user literacy levels.

Theme 5: Student Data Security and Privacy Concerns

Data security emerged as a cross-cutting concern, particularly among parents and GPKs. Participants identified three primary privacy risks in the current WhatsApp-based system: unintended data dissemination through group chats or forwarded messages, the permanent storage of sensitive student information on personal devices without institutional control, and the absence of any formal data governance framework guiding what information should and should not be shared digitally.

These concerns have direct implications for platform design. Participants across groups expressed strong preference for school-administered closed platforms over third-party applications, where institutional accountability for data governance is clearer. This preference aligns with Chadwick and Wesson's (2016) framework of digital inclusion, which emphasizes institutional responsibility for creating safe digital environments, and with emerging Indonesian data protection requirements that impose obligations on educational institutions handling student personal data.

Theme 6: The Critical Importance of Long-term Developmental Documentation

The sixth theme revealed a deeply felt need articulated most forcefully by GPKs and parents for systematic longitudinal documentation of ABK student development. GPKs described the inability to retrieve historical communication records as a major impediment to PPI review meetings, where evidence of developmental progress is essential. Parents



expressed the desire to maintain a personal developmental archive accessible across school years and potentially shareable with healthcare providers.

This theme connects to a broader literature on evidence-based advocacy in special education. Dalmasso et al. (2023) document that technology-enabled documentation substantially strengthens parents' capacity to advocate for appropriate services for their children with special needs. Santiago et al. (2022) found that family-school partnership quality including documentation quality is among the strongest predictors of long-term outcomes for children with autism spectrum disorder. The need for cross-year continuity of developmental records underscores that effective digital communication tools must be conceived not as messaging apps but as longitudinal developmental management systems.

Conclusion

This study provides systematic evidence that teacher-parent communication for children with special needs in Indonesian inclusive elementary schools is characterized by structural inadequacy, despite universal digital technology adoption. The six identified themes WhatsApp dominance, multi-dimensional barriers, unmet feature needs, moderate-to-high digital readiness, privacy concerns, and documentation imperatives collectively constitute a compelling needs landscape for purposefully designed, school-administered digital communication platforms. The finding that all three stakeholder groups (teachers, GPKs, and parents) converge in their communication needs and demonstrate readiness for structured digital platforms represents a significant positive signal for educational technology developers and inclusive education policymakers. Future research should examine how purpose-built digital communication platforms affect the identified barriers longitudinally, and investigate whether improved communication quality translates into measurable gains in ABK student developmental outcomes.

Recommendation

Based on the six themes identified, educational technology developers are recommended to prioritize: structured PPI monitoring dashboards, privacy-controlled multimedia documentation, automated notification systems, and cross-year record portability. School administrators should establish clear institutional policies governing digital communication roles for teachers, GPKs, and parents. The Educational policy makers at the national level are recommended to develop national standards for digital teacher-parent communication in inclusive schools, including data governance frameworks. Future quantitative studies should validate the TAM readiness findings identified here using standardized instruments, and controlled implementation studies should measure the impact of structured digital communication platforms on parental involvement depth and ABK developmental outcomes.

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