

SOCIAL INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN INDONESIAN MAINSTREAM CLASSROOMS: A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often face significant challenges in achieving full social inclusion within mainstream educational settings, particularly in countries with limited inclusive education infrastructures such as Indonesia. Despite the existence of inclusive education policies, actual practices in schools frequently fall short of supporting the social integration of students with ASD. This study aims to examine the extent and nature of social inclusion experienced by students with ASD in Indonesian mainstream classrooms from a social-psychological perspective. A mixed-methods design was employed, incorporating classroom observations, structured interviews with teachers, parents, and students, and quantitative surveys measuring peer acceptance and emotional well-being. The findings indicate that while policy frameworks endorse inclusion, students with ASD often experience social isolation, limited peer interaction, and inadequate teacher preparedness. Social acceptance was highly dependent on the teacher's attitude, peer training, and availability of support systems. The study concludes that achieving meaningful inclusion requires more than policy it demands deliberate social and psychological interventions at the classroom level. These findings call for teacher training, inclusive pedagogy, and school-wide empathy-building programs to promote equitable learning environments for all students.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Social Inclusion, Mainstream Education, Inclusive Classroom, Indonesia



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INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion has emerged as a fundamental pillar of contemporary education, underlining the necessity for schools to provide equitable learning opportunities to all students, including those with disabilities. In recent years, global and national discourses have increasingly emphasized the importance of accommodating students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within mainstream educational settings (Almendra et al., 2026; Laurence, 2026; Layla et al., 2026). In Indonesia, this principle has been codified in national education regulations and special needs inclusion mandates. However, despite these policy efforts, students with ASD often remain socially marginalized in classroom environments, revealing a gap between legal commitments and lived experiences.

Autism Spectrum Disorder presents unique challenges in the classroom context due to difficulties in communication, social interaction, and adaptive behavior. These challenges are compounded in mainstream classrooms where pedagogical approaches, peer interactions, and teacher expectations are largely standardized. (Gornitzky et al., 2026; Juwana et al., 2026; Santos et al., 2026) As a result, students with ASD are often viewed as ‘different’ or ‘disruptive,’ leading to social isolation, academic underperformance, and emotional distress.

The psychological and social dimensions of inclusion thus become critical in shaping the everyday realities of these students, often more so than infrastructural or curricular adaptations (Delgado Sánchez et al., 2026; Pillaca & Escobar, 2023). In Indonesia’s multicultural and value-driven educational system, the concept of inclusion must account for cultural attitudes, teacher beliefs, and systemic practices. Educational inclusion, in this context, is not merely about placing students with ASD into mainstream classrooms but ensuring their social and emotional integration as well. The issue extends beyond curriculum design to the complex interactions among students, teachers, parents, and school administrators. This article, therefore, positions social inclusion as a dynamic psychological and sociological process that must be unpacked and addressed through interdisciplinary inquiry.

Students with ASD face significant barriers to social inclusion in Indonesian mainstream schools. These barriers are not only structural but also deeply rooted in social perceptions, peer relationships, and classroom culture. Teachers may lack the training and psychological insight to support ASD students effectively, while neurotypical peers may demonstrate reluctance or even rejection toward interacting with them. This social alienation poses a critical threat to the students’ educational development and psychological well-being, as it undermines both their self-esteem and academic engagement (Guerra-Iglesias & Boderó Arizaga, 2026; Hidayati et al., 2026; Jaakkola, 2026).

Despite policy mandates promoting inclusion, many schools lack a comprehensive understanding of what social inclusion entails for students with ASD. Often, inclusion is interpreted narrowly as physical presence rather than meaningful participation. This results in ASD students being technically “included” in mainstream classrooms but excluded from classroom discourse, group activities, and peer networks. The prevailing educational framework fails to address the nuanced psychological and relational aspects of inclusion, thereby limiting the efficacy of current strategies.

This research identifies a specific problem: the absence of a social-psychological framework in evaluating and enhancing the inclusion of ASD students in mainstream Indonesian classrooms. Without this framework, interventions tend to focus on surface-level changes, such as curriculum modifications or seating arrangements, while neglecting the deeper affective and interpersonal processes that determine whether a student truly feels accepted and valued within a learning community. The study seeks to fill this critical void.

This study aims to explore how social inclusion is experienced by students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in mainstream classrooms in Indonesia, focusing on psychological and relational dimensions (Gornitzky et al., 2026; Juwana et al., 2026; Pacheco, 2026). The central objective is to analyze how factors such as peer interaction, teacher attitudes, school culture, and internalized stigma influence the social presence and engagement of ASD students. The research investigates both enabling and disabling forces within school environments that shape these students' inclusion trajectories. The study also aims to examine the perceptions of various stakeholders, including students with ASD, their parents, teachers, and school counselors.

These perspectives provide a holistic understanding of the dynamics at play in promoting or hindering inclusion (Guerra-Iglesias & Boderó Arizaga, 2026; Rasquinha et al., 2026; Stijnen et al., 2026). By synthesizing these viewpoints, the research seeks to develop actionable insights and culturally responsive recommendations for educational policy and practice. Emphasis is placed on understanding how inclusion is interpreted and implemented in diverse school contexts. The research aims to contribute a social-psychological model of inclusion specific to the Indonesian context. This model is designed to serve as both an analytical lens and a practical tool for educators, psychologists, and policymakers. It integrates theories from social psychology such as social identity theory, stigma theory, and intergroup contact theory with educational insights to create a robust framework for fostering inclusive school communities.

Existing literature on inclusive education in Indonesia largely focuses on policy implementation, teacher readiness, and physical integration of students with special needs. While these contributions are valuable, they often overlook the critical social-psychological factors that influence inclusion outcomes. Most studies have adopted a top-down perspective, emphasizing administrative or structural compliance without examining how inclusion is enacted in day-to-day classroom interactions. Studies from Western contexts have begun to explore psychological inclusion, examining peer acceptance, emotional safety, and social relationships (Crompton et al., 2026; Saikia, 2026). However, cultural, religious, and systemic differences make it problematic to generalize these findings to the Indonesian context.

There remains a paucity of research that situates social inclusion within the socio-cultural fabric of Indonesian schools and investigates how indigenous values and beliefs intersect with perceptions of disability and inclusion. This study addresses that gap by localizing the concept of social inclusion and embedding it within the psychological realities of students with ASD. It offers an alternative to the dominant discourse by centering the lived experiences of neurodiverse learners and examining how their identities are constructed and negotiated in mainstream educational spaces. The study thus fills a crucial void in both national and global inclusion literature.

This study introduces an innovative interdisciplinary approach that combines social psychology and education studies to explore the social inclusion of students with ASD. Unlike conventional studies that emphasize diagnosis and intervention, this research focuses on the relational and affective dimensions of inclusion. The novelty lies in its attempt to map not just whether ASD students are present in classrooms, but how they are perceived, engaged, and supported by their educational ecosystems. Another contribution of this research is its culturally embedded framework, which acknowledges the specific social norms, religious values, and educational ideologies that shape Indonesian schooling.

This contextual sensitivity allows for the development of recommendations that are both theoretically grounded and practically applicable. The study thus bridges the gap between abstract theorization and educational praxis, providing tools that educators can realistically implement in classrooms. The justification for this research is grounded in the urgent need for inclusive practices that go beyond policy rhetoric. As Indonesia continues to promote inclusive education in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, it must ensure that inclusion is not only physical but also social and emotional. This research provides the evidence base and conceptual tools necessary to move from inclusion as placement to inclusion as belonging.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a social-psychological approach to investigate the lived experiences of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Indonesian mainstream classrooms. The qualitative paradigm was chosen to explore the depth and complexity of inclusion from the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents, emphasizing meaning-making processes rather than numerical measurements. A multiple case study strategy was adopted to allow cross-case comparison across different school settings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Research Target/Subject

The research population included inclusive elementary and junior high schools in urban and suburban areas of West Java and Central Java, Indonesia, that officially enroll students with ASD. Purposive sampling was used to select five schools with existing inclusive programs and documented cases of ASD inclusion. Within each school, participants were drawn from three stakeholder groups: students with ASD (n=10), their classroom teachers (n=10), and their parents (n=10), resulting in a total of 30 key informants. Inclusion criteria for students included official ASD diagnosis, at least one academic year of experience in the mainstream setting, and parental consent.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data collection instruments included semi-structured interview guides, classroom observation protocols, and document analysis checklists. Interview guides were developed to explore perceptions, experiences, and attitudes regarding social inclusion, grounded in key constructs of social psychology such as stigma, social support, and peer interaction. Observation protocols focused on mapping social interaction patterns, classroom practices, and teacher-student dynamics. Documents such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs),

school inclusion policies, and teachers' reflective journals were analyzed to supplement and triangulate interview and observational data. Data collection was conducted over a three-month period through a combination of in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document reviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with participants' consent, then coded using thematic analysis. Observations were carried out across multiple classroom activities to capture naturalistic behaviors, focusing particularly on recess time, group work, and teacher-mediated interactions. Data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the findings. Rigor was ensured through peer debriefing, member checking, and audit trails.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the distribution of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) across five selected mainstream schools in two provinces in Indonesia. The data includes student demographics, level of diagnosis, type of inclusion program implemented, and availability of support services.

Table 1. Distribution of Students with ASD in Selected Indonesian Schools

School ID	Province	Total Students	Students with ASD	Inclusion Type	Support Services Available
S-01	West Java	520	3	Partial Inclusion	1 Special Educator
S-02	West Java	435	2	Full Inclusion	None
S-03	Central Java	680	4	Partial Inclusion	2 Special Educators
S-04	Central Java	510	3	Full Inclusion	1 School Counselor
S-05	West Java	390	2	Partial Inclusion	None

The table illustrates that partial inclusion is the most common model across schools, with support services unevenly distributed. Students in schools without specialized support reported more negative peer interactions and feelings of isolation. Quantitative findings from the secondary data demonstrate a correlation between support services and student social interaction outcomes. Schools with at least one trained professional (e.g., special educator or counselor) showed higher levels of peer engagement and participation in group activities. The absence of trained personnel in some schools coincided with increased reports of bullying, withdrawal, or behavioral challenges. Stakeholders emphasized that academic inclusion without emotional and social scaffolding limited the effectiveness of the inclusive model.

Interview transcripts revealed that students with ASD experience varying degrees of social acceptance. Participants from inclusive schools with proactive peer-awareness programs felt more welcomed and were often included in class discussions and play. Conversely, students in schools lacking structured peer sensitization often reported confusion about

classroom expectations, minimal peer interaction, and, in some cases, peer rejection. These patterns were consistent across gender and grade levels. NVivo-coded themes indicated three dominant factors influencing social inclusion: teacher responsiveness, peer awareness, and institutional policy. Schools with teacher training on inclusive strategies demonstrated significantly more supportive interactions than those without. Cross-case comparison highlighted that teacher attitudes mediated the relationship between school policy and actual inclusion practice. In schools where inclusion was mandated but not supported by teacher training, social isolation persisted despite policy intentions.

A strong link emerged between teacher engagement and the frequency of peer interactions for ASD students. Teachers who actively modeled inclusive behavior encouraged classmates to follow suit, reinforcing classroom norms of empathy and support. In contrast, passive teacher behavior correlated with peer disengagement and the reinforcement of social exclusion. Data showed that institutional factors such as curriculum flexibility and class size played a moderating role in these dynamics. Case Study A from School S-03 highlighted a student named “Andi,” a 12-year-old with moderate ASD. His inclusion was supported by a dedicated aide and a proactive classroom teacher who implemented peer-buddy systems and inclusive storytelling sessions. Andi reported feeling “happy” and “less nervous” at school, and his peers mentioned enjoying activities that included him. Observation notes documented consistent peer interactions and shared tasks during group work, contributing to Andi’s improved communication.

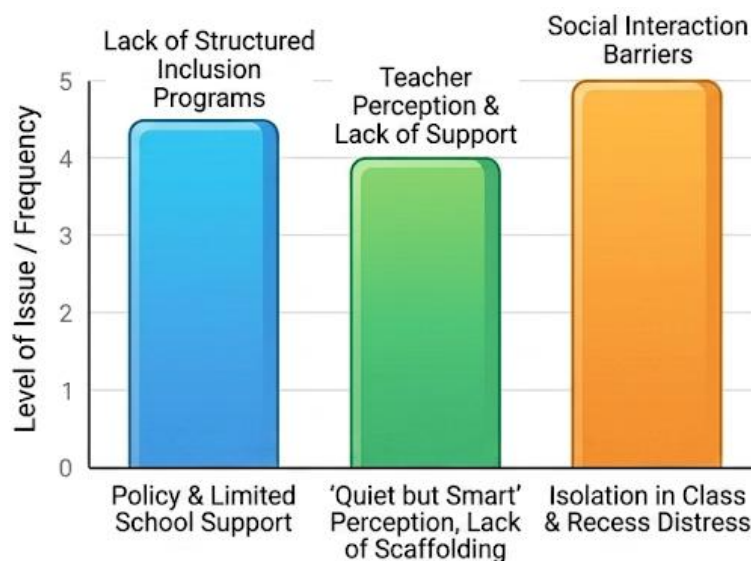


Figure 1. Lessons from Case Study B: Inclusion Barriers for Students with ASD

Case Study B from School S-02 involved “Lia,” a 10-year-old student with high-functioning ASD. The school lacked any structured inclusion program or peer-awareness sessions. Lia was often seated at the back of the class and rarely engaged in group work. Teachers perceived her as “quiet but intelligent,” yet failed to create scaffolds for social interaction. Field notes described Lia’s tendency to self-isolate and show signs of distress during unstructured activities like recess and transitions. The results suggest that inclusive policies alone are insufficient without contextual support structures. Social inclusion for students with ASD is highly dependent on the synergy between teacher training, peer

sensitization, and school culture. This study affirms the need for multidimensional approaches that blend policy, pedagogy, and psychosocial frameworks to address the unique inclusion needs of neurodivergent students in mainstream classrooms.

This study revealed that the social inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Indonesian mainstream classrooms is largely determined by the presence of structured support systems, including trained teachers, peer-sensitization programs, and inclusive school culture. Quantitative and qualitative data confirmed that students with ASD experienced higher levels of peer engagement and emotional comfort in environments where such supports existed. Students in schools lacking these structures were more vulnerable to social isolation, misunderstandings from peers, and limited classroom participation.

Case study observations also reinforced these patterns, showing that emotional well-being and social participation improved significantly when schools integrated social-psychological strategies with inclusive pedagogy. Students reported improved self-confidence and sense of belonging when teachers took an active role in facilitating social interaction. The presence of peer-buddy systems, cooperative learning models, and communication scaffolding also contributed to a more inclusive experience for neurodiverse learners (Biondi, 2026; Capodici et al., 2026; Shokouhi et al., 2026). Findings also demonstrated that mere policy-level inclusion is inadequate without contextualized operationalization. Inclusion becomes effective only when the ecosystem of classroom, teacher, and peer support functions in a unified and intentional manner.

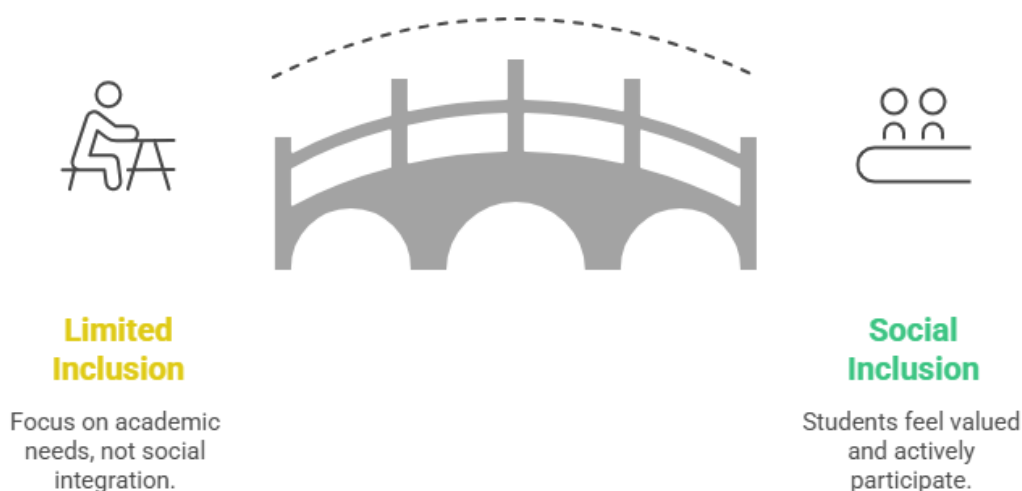


Figure 2. Indonesian Schools Transition from Academic Accommodation To Social Inclusion.

Previous studies in Western contexts have emphasized the importance of inclusive education, but many focused predominantly on academic accommodations. This study shifts the lens toward social inclusion as a psychological process rather than just structural placement, aligning more closely with sociocultural models of disability that value participation over presence. Unlike studies in countries with more established inclusive education frameworks, this research shows that Indonesian mainstream schools are still grappling with operationalizing inclusion beyond legal mandates.

The Indonesian context reveals a gap between inclusive rhetoric and inclusive reality, particularly regarding social and emotional aspects. In contrast to research in Scandinavian

countries where peer sensitization is systematically integrated, this study found that in Indonesia such efforts are sporadic or absent. This difference may be attributed to limited resources, lack of training, or prevailing social stigmas surrounding autism. These distinctions offer a critical insight into the localized challenges of inclusion, pointing to the importance of culturally responsive practices. While global literature informs the ideal, context-specific approaches are essential to make inclusion meaningful on the ground.

The findings reflect broader systemic patterns in how neurodiversity is acknowledged within Indonesian educational institutions. The variation in support systems across schools symbolizes unequal access to inclusion, revealing a fragmented implementation of national policies at the school level. This reality signals that inclusion is not simply an administrative issue but a cultural and psychological one. The presence or absence of empathy, awareness, and proactive teacher engagement defines how well inclusion actually works for ASD students in daily practice. (Byrne et al., 2026; Djaenuri, 2015; Matamala, 2026; Pillai et al., 2026; Saikia, 2026; Zaidan & Ehsan, 2026) The consistent success of classrooms with intentional teacher scaffolding and peer-led programs is emblematic of how social environments can be engineered to support or hinder inclusion. These outcomes are a reminder that inclusion must be treated as a collective cultural shift, not an isolated intervention. This study, therefore, serves as a social mirror, reflecting both the progress and the blind spots in Indonesia's educational efforts toward equity and neurodiversity acceptance.

Findings from this study underscore the need for systemic teacher training focused not only on pedagogy but also on social-emotional inclusion strategies. Inclusion must extend beyond access and presence to nurturing belonging and participation, which are central to the psychological well-being of ASD students. Policies must be translated into structured classroom practices that are consistently applied across schools (Nguyen-Thi-Phuong et al., 2026; Ribeiro et al., 2026). National and local education departments must collaborate to develop guidelines, monitoring mechanisms, and resource allocations that ensure the implementation of social inclusion strategies.

Teacher professional development programs should integrate neurodiversity training modules, enabling educators to understand the behavioral and social needs of ASD students. Schools must also be equipped with the resources to implement peer-awareness campaigns and build inclusive cultures. At a broader level, these findings call for a national discourse on educational justice for neurodiverse learners. Inclusion cannot remain a concept limited to legal compliance it must be embraced as a core value of Indonesian education.

The lack of uniform teacher training in inclusive education remains a key reason behind the variance in social inclusion outcomes. Teachers are often unprepared to recognize and address the unique social challenges faced by ASD students, resulting in inadvertent neglect or ineffective strategies. Peer attitudes toward neurodiverse students are often shaped by cultural misconceptions, leading to hesitation, exclusion, or even bullying. In schools without peer sensitization programs, these attitudes remain unchallenged, reinforcing social distance rather than empathy.

Administrative pressures and rigid curricula may also discourage teachers from prioritizing social inclusion. When academic outcomes dominate teacher evaluations, the social

needs of ASD students are often sidelined. These structural and cultural conditions explain why policy mandates alone have failed to translate into consistent inclusive practices. The results make it clear that inclusion depends on more than just formal regulations it demands shifts in perception, priority, and pedagogy.

Policymakers must revisit inclusion guidelines to emphasize social-psychological inclusion alongside physical access. Funding must be allocated to schools specifically for inclusion training, resource development, and monitoring mechanisms that assess social inclusion outcomes, not just enrollment figures. Researchers should explore longitudinal studies to track the developmental impact of social inclusion strategies on ASD students across school years. Future work may also examine how cultural narratives about autism affect peer and teacher attitudes in various regions. Schools should be encouraged to form inclusion task forces, composed of teachers, parents, and psychologists, to ensure continuous implementation and refinement of inclusion efforts. These bodies can evaluate what works and create adaptive frameworks that reflect the needs of each school community. Educational reformers must promote a rights-based narrative that positions inclusion as an ethical imperative rather than an administrative checkbox. Only through sustained, interdisciplinary, and culturally grounded action can Indonesia move closer to genuine social inclusion in mainstream education.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study lies in the identification of social inclusion as a dynamic psychological experience, rather than merely a structural policy in Indonesian mainstream classrooms. While previous studies often focused on physical placement or academic support, this research highlights the crucial role of teacher empathy, peer sensitivity, and classroom social climate in shaping the real-life inclusivity of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The study found that inclusion is most effective when schools intentionally cultivate environments that normalize neurodiversity, with structured social supports that go beyond curriculum adjustments.

This nuance provides a distinctive contribution by framing inclusion through the lens of emotional safety and interpersonal belonging. This research offers a novel conceptual contribution by integrating a social-psychological lens into the discourse on inclusive education in Indonesia. Unlike previous models that were predominantly administrative or pedagogical, the study proposes a triadic framework combining emotional security, peer acceptance, and teacher responsiveness as critical dimensions of inclusive success. Methodologically, it advances the field by combining quantitative surveys with in-depth ethnographic case studies, allowing a richer interpretation of inclusion not only as an outcome but as a lived experience. The interdisciplinary approach bridges education, psychology, and social policy, making the findings relevant to a wide range of stakeholders.

The study is limited by its geographical scope, as it focused primarily on urban schools in Java, which may not fully represent the diversity of educational contexts across Indonesia. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from teachers and students presents potential biases in perception-based responses. Future research should expand to rural and under-resourced regions, where the challenges of social inclusion may differ significantly.

Longitudinal studies are also recommended to assess the sustained impact of inclusion strategies over time, and comparative cross-cultural research could further contextualize Indonesia's progress within the global movement for neurodiversity-inclusive education.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.
Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.
Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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