

Inclusive Classroom Management to Accommodate Diverse Student Characteristics and Learning Preferences in Indonesian Primary Education: A Qualitative Case Study

Khairiyah¹, Manap Somantri¹, Muhammad Kristiawan¹

¹Universitas Bengkulu, Bengkulu, Indonesia

Corresponding author e-mail: khairiyah231021@gmail.com

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Abstract: This qualitative case study examined inclusive classroom management practices accommodating diverse student characteristics and learning preferences at SD Negeri 6 Muara Rupit, a public elementary school in Indonesia. Participants included two classroom teachers, twenty-eight students, and the school principal, selected purposively. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis (lesson plans and teaching modules). The interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing guided data analysis. Findings revealed four main themes. First, teachers implemented systematic planning by designing varied instructional activities and flexible seating arrangements before instruction. Second, classroom implementation involved interactive strategies, including group discussions, collaborative learning, questioning sessions, and positive behavior management rather than punitive approaches. Third, classroom organization featured flexible seating rearrangements and heterogeneous grouping to facilitate peer interaction. Fourth, teachers employed adaptive strategies such as simplifying explanations, providing individual guidance, and varying instructional methods to address challenges including student diversity, limited instructional time, and constrained resources. Supporting factors included teacher competence, positive teacher-student relationships, school leadership support, and available facilities. The study concludes that inclusive classroom management extends beyond behavioral control to function as a comprehensive pedagogical framework for creating participatory, student-centered learning environments. Practical implications recommend targeted professional development in differentiated instruction, flexible classroom design, and positive behavior support. Limitations include the single-site focus and a stronger emphasis on teacher perspectives than student voices. Future research should examine inclusive classroom management across diverse school contexts and include student perspectives more extensively.

Keywords: Classroom Management, Differentiated Instruction, Inclusive Education, Learning Preferences, Primary Education

A. Introduction

The growing diversity of student characteristics in primary classrooms is a major pedagogical challenge across education systems. Students enter school with different academic readiness, language experiences, confidence levels, patterns of participation, social-emotional needs, and ways of responding to instruction (Gotlieb et al., 2022). Diversity is therefore not an exceptional condition to be managed only when difficulties arise; it is an ordinary feature of contemporary classrooms. Research on superdiverse primary schools shows that students' backgrounds and identities shape how they engage with learning, while international studies of inclusive education emphasize that meaningful participation depends on teachers' capacity to respond to heterogeneous needs in everyday practice.

Within this context, classroom management should not be reduced to maintaining silence, enforcing compliance, or responding to misconduct. Contemporary classroom management encompasses the organization of time, space, relationships, instructional activities, transitions, participation, and behavior in ways that support academic and social-emotional development. A meta-analysis found that classroom management strategies can influence academic, behavioral, emotional, and motivational outcomes, indicating that management practices are inseparable from teaching quality (Korpershoek et al., 2025). In inclusive classrooms, effective management is also associated with students' social acceptance because teachers shape interaction patterns, rules, opportunities to collaborate, and the emotional climate of the classroom. Thus, inclusive classroom management is best understood as a planned pedagogical process that enables all students to participate meaningfully rather than as a narrow system of behavioral control.

Differentiated instruction provides one theoretical foundation for this broader understanding. Differentiation involves adjusting learning processes, task complexity, grouping, support, and classroom environments according to students' readiness and instructional needs, while maintaining shared learning goals. Recent reviews show that teachers foster inclusion through flexible grouping, varied activities, scaffolding, formative assessment, and responsive instructional decisions rather than through a single uniform method. Teachers' perceptions and confidence are important because differentiation requires continuous judgment about when to provide common instruction, additional explanation, peer support, or individual guidance. Classroom management is therefore the practical mechanism that makes differentiated instruction possible by organizing students, resources, interaction, and time (Taş & Minaz, 2024).

A second theoretical foundation is the social-emotional perspective on learning. Students are more likely to ask questions, express uncertainty, and participate in collaborative work when teacher-student interactions communicate respect, safety, and support. Supportive teacher behavior contributes to self-regulation and

engagement, whereas undermining interaction can weaken students' motivation and willingness to participate. Compassion-oriented classroom frameworks similarly emphasize sensitivity to students' difficulties combined with appropriate action to reduce barriers to participation (Sinclair et al., 2024). These perspectives imply that positive behavior management, encouragement, and non-punitive redirection are not secondary interpersonal skills; they are central components of inclusive classroom management, especially for students who are quiet, less confident, easily distracted, or slower to understand instructional content.

The term learning styles requires particular caution. Visual, auditory, and kinesthetic categories remain common in educational discourse, but the assumption that instruction should be matched to a fixed individual style lacks consistent empirical support. Evidence does not support routinely matching instruction to fixed learning styles, and recent research continues to question the validity of the learning-styles meshing hypothesis. This critique does not mean that teachers should use a single teaching method. Rather, it supports the use of varied and multimodal learning opportunities for all students without labeling learners permanently. In this study, learning preferences refer to observable differences in students' responses to explanation, discussion, collaboration, practice, repetition, and individual support, not to fixed psychological types (Gomes et al., 2023).

Implementing these principles remains difficult in resource-constrained public primary schools. Teachers must manage heterogeneous participation, differences in learning pace, limited instructional time, available facilities, curriculum demands, and classroom behavior simultaneously. Studies of inclusive practice indicate that teacher competence, school support, professional learning, and the quality of teacher-student interaction influence whether inclusive aspirations become workable classroom routines. Indonesian evidence likewise suggests that teachers value inclusive education but encounter practical tensions related to resources, preparation, and differences between school contexts. These conditions make it important to examine inclusion as it is enacted through routine classroom decisions rather than only as a policy or lesson-planning principle (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Penthin Grumloese, 2020).

Preliminary observation at SD Negeri 6 Muara Rupit on January 16, 2026, indicated substantial variation within one primary classroom. Some students responded quickly, participated confidently, and remained engaged with minimal prompting, whereas others required repetition, simplified explanations, encouragement, or closer guidance. Conventional whole-class arrangements were still visible, but teachers also attempted discussion, grouping, seating adjustments, and personal approaches. Previous research has often examined classroom discipline, differentiated instruction, teacher competence, or inclusive education as separate topics. Less attention has been given to how teachers integrate these elements during everyday classroom management in an Indonesian public primary school, particularly when time and

resources are constrained. This study addresses that gap by analyzing planning, implementation, classroom organization, supporting conditions, obstacles, and adaptive responses as an interconnected process (Dursun & Aykan, 2025).

Accordingly, this qualitative case study asks three questions: (1) How do teachers plan and implement classroom management to accommodate diverse student characteristics and learning preferences? (2) What supporting factors and challenges influence inclusive classroom management in primary education? and (3) What adaptive strategies do teachers employ to overcome classroom management challenges? By answering these questions, the study seeks to contribute theoretically by positioning classroom management as an inclusive pedagogical framework that integrates differentiated instruction and social-emotional support. Practically, it offers context-specific evidence for teachers, school leaders, and professional development providers seeking to create participatory and responsive primary classrooms.

B. Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative case-study design to explore inclusive classroom management in its natural school context (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022). The design was selected because the research questions concerned how teachers interpreted student diversity, made instructional and managerial decisions, and adapted classroom practices during daily learning. Rather than measuring the prevalence of particular strategies, the study examined the relationships among planning, classroom interaction, spatial organization, behavior management, and adaptive support.

The study was conducted at SD Negeri 6 Muara Rupit, an Indonesian public primary school. Participants were selected purposively because of their direct involvement in the classroom management process. They comprised two classroom teachers (coded ES and ZW), twenty-eight students in the observed class, and the school principal (coded SY). The teachers were the primary informants regarding planning, implementation, challenges, and instructional adaptation. The principal provided information on supervision and institutional support, while student participation and responses were examined primarily through classroom observation and supporting conversations (Könings et al., 2021).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. Teacher and principal interviews explored classroom planning, student participation, behavior management, supporting conditions, constraints, and strategies used when students required additional assistance. Observations focused on teacher-student and student-student interaction, questioning, discussion, grouping, seating arrangements, behavioral redirection, engagement, and individualized support. Documents included lesson plans, teaching modules, learning schedules, and other instructional records relevant to classroom

organization. Combining these sources enabled the researchers to compare reported practices with observed interaction and written planning (Nicol, 2021).

The instruments consisted of semi-structured interview guides, an observation sheet, and a document-analysis guide (Busetto et al., 2020). They were developed from the study's conceptual framework, which combined inclusive classroom management, differentiated instruction, and social-emotional support. The instrument matrix in Table 1 links each research focus to observable indicators, data-collection techniques, and data sources. During fieldwork, the guides remained sufficiently flexible to capture unexpected classroom events and participants' explanations of their decisions (Dahlin, 2021).

Table 1. Research Instrument Matrix

Research Focus	Indicators	Data Collection Techniques	Data Sources
Student diversity	Differences in participation, confidence, learning pace, behavior, and response to activities	Observation, interview	Students, teachers
Planning	Varied activities, grouping, seating, anticipated support, learning objectives	Interview, document analysis	Teachers, lesson plans/modules
Implementation	Interaction, questioning, collaboration, behavior management, student participation	Observation, interview	Teachers, students
Classroom organization	Seating, heterogeneous grouping, movement, access to learning resources	Observation, document analysis	Teachers, classroom documents
Supporting factors and challenges	Teacher competence, relationships, leadership, time, facilities, student needs	Interview, observation	Teachers, principal, students
Adaptive strategies	Simplified explanations, repetition, individual guidance, varied methods, reflection	Observation, interview	Teachers, students

Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Fetters & Tajima, 2022). Interview notes, observation records, and documents were first read repeatedly and coded according to the research questions. Related codes were grouped into categories, compared across sources, and refined into four themes: (1) recognition of diverse participation and learning responses; (2) systematic planning and flexible classroom organization; (3) interactive implementation and positive behavior support; and (4) adaptive strategies, supports, and constraints. The researchers then examined convergence and divergence among interview, observation, and document evidence before drawing conclusions. Figure 1 summarizes the iterative analysis process.

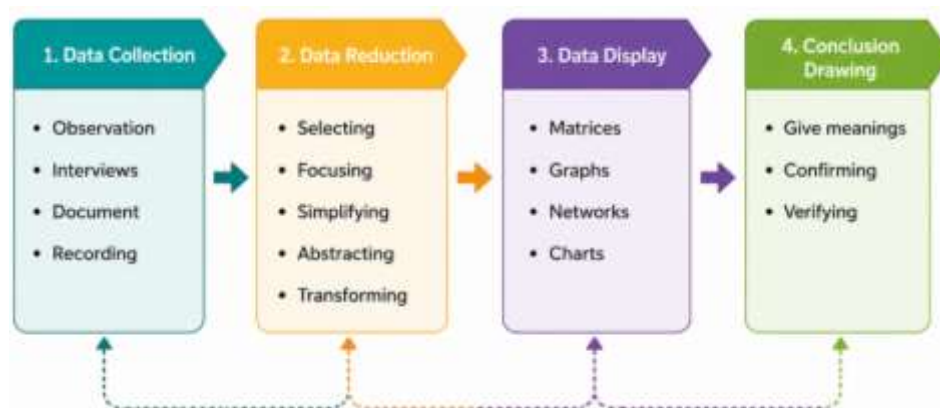


Figure 1. Stages in Qualitative Data Analysis

Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, technique triangulation, repeated observation, member checking, and an audit trail. Source triangulation compared information from the two teachers, students' observed responses, and the principal (Al Maktoum & Al Kaabi, 2024). Technique triangulation compared interviews, observations, and documents. Preliminary interpretations were discussed with the classroom teachers to check whether the themes represented their practices and classroom conditions accurately. Coding decisions, theme development, and supporting evidence were documented so that the path from raw data to interpretation remained traceable (Michelen et al., 2024).

C. Results and Discussion

1. Result

The analysis produced four interconnected themes. Across the interviews, observations, and documents, inclusive classroom management appeared as a responsive process rather than a fixed set of rules (Lindner & Schwab, 2025). Teachers adjusted activities, interaction, grouping, and support in response to differences in participation, confidence, learning pace, concentration, and understanding. Table 2 summarizes the themes and evidence sources. Because the source manuscript did not include interview transcripts, the third column presents paraphrased participant evidence derived from the reported interview accounts rather than verbatim quotations.

Theme 1: Recognizing diverse participation and learning responses

Student diversity was visible in how learners entered classroom interaction. Some students answered rapidly, volunteered opinions, and participated confidently, while others remained quiet until prompted. Differences were also observed in learning pace: several students understood an explanation after the first presentation, whereas

others needed repetition, simpler language, contextual examples, or additional time. These patterns were confirmed in the accounts of teachers ES and ZW and in classroom observations. The evidence indicates that diversity involved not only academic attainment but also confidence, concentration, communication, and willingness to participate (Poort et al., 2022).

Theme 2: Systematic planning and flexible classroom organization

Teachers attempted to anticipate these differences through lesson preparation and classroom organization (Cevikbas et al., 2024). Lesson plans and teaching modules included combinations of explanation, questioning, discussion, group tasks, and individual work. Seating and grouping were adjusted according to the activity rather than retained as permanent arrangements. Heterogeneous groups enabled students with different levels of confidence and understanding to work together, while changes in seating reduced monotony and widened peer interaction. Planning therefore functioned as an initial inclusion strategy by creating multiple routes for participation within common lesson objectives (Kelly et al., 2022).

Theme 3: Interactive implementation and positive behavior support

During instruction, teachers combined short whole-class explanations with questioning, discussion, collaborative assignments, and individual tasks. Quieter students were invited to respond, and students were encouraged to ask questions without ridicule. When attention declined or behavior disrupted learning, teachers generally used verbal reminders, proximity, redirection, and personal approaches rather than punitive responses. Observations showed stronger participation during group discussion and collaborative work than during extended teacher explanation (Gore & Rosser, 2022). Positive teacher-student interaction helped maintain classroom order while preserving students' willingness to participate.

Theme 4: Adaptive strategies, supports, and constraints

Table 2. Thematic Summary of Findings and Evidence Sources

Theme	Synthesized finding and evidence sources	Illustrative interview evidence (paraphrased from field notes)
Diverse participation and responses	Active and quiet participation, different learning pace, varying confidence and concentration. Sources: teacher interviews and classroom observations.	Teacher ES reported that some students answered questions quickly and expressed opinions confidently, whereas others remained quiet and needed additional encouragement before participating (ES, teacher interview).
Planning and organization	Varied activities in plans/modules; flexible seating and heterogeneous	Teacher ZW reported that lessons were planned using several methods because students differed

	grouping. Sources: interviews, observations, and documents.	in learning pace and participation; seating was also rearranged so that students could interact with different classmates (ZW, teacher interview).
Interactive implementation	Questioning, discussion, collaborative work, individual tasks, and non-punitive redirection. Sources: observations and teacher interviews.	Teacher ES reported that discussion and interactive activities helped students become more confident in expressing opinions, while distracted students were redirected through verbal reminders and personal approaches rather than punitive responses (ES, teacher interview and classroom observation).
Adaptation, supports, and constraints	Simplified explanation, repetition, individual guidance; supported by competence, relationships, leadership, and facilities; constrained by time and resources.	Teacher ES reported that instructional time was often insufficient when students required repeated explanation and individual support; Teacher ZW therefore re-explained difficult material using simpler language and additional examples (ES and ZW, teacher interviews).

The thematic findings were integrated into a conceptual model of inclusive classroom management (Bodfield et al., 2025). The model links student diversity, planning, implementation, classroom interaction, supporting and inhibiting conditions, adaptive teacher responses, and expected inclusive outcomes.



Figure 2. Comprehensive Model of Inclusive Classroom Management in Accommodating Diverse Student Characteristics and Learning Styles

Figure 2 shows that inclusive classroom management begins with recognizing differences in participation, confidence, learning pace, and response to activities. These differences inform planning, flexible grouping, seating, interaction, and instructional variation. Supporting factors strengthen implementation, while constraints require teachers to adjust explanations, provide individual guidance, vary activities, and reflect on practice (Pantić et al., 2022). The intended outcome is not instruction matched to fixed learning-style labels, but a classroom in which all students have meaningful opportunities to participate, understand, and develop academically and socially.

2. Discussion

The findings indicate that inclusive classroom management is an integrated pedagogical process in which instructional planning, classroom organization, interaction, behavior support, and adaptation operate together. The central contribution is that management decisions were not made only to preserve order. They were also used to widen participation, respond to differences in learning pace and confidence, and maintain a supportive learning climate. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that teachers' classroom-management decisions are context-dependent and shaped by perceived student needs, institutional expectations, and judgments about effectiveness (Hagenaars et al., 2025).

Comparison with International Research Findings

The observed use of questioning, collaborative tasks, flexible grouping, and positive redirection is consistent with international evidence that classroom management can influence academic, behavioral, emotional, and motivational outcomes. It also highlights the role of effective classroom management in promoting students' social acceptance and inclusion within diverse classrooms. In the present case, teachers' efforts to invite quieter students, organize peer interaction, and avoid humiliating punishment suggest that management affected not only task completion but also students' social access to classroom participation. Cooperative activities also promote more equitable participation among students in linguistically diverse classrooms.

The findings also support research on differentiated instruction. Flexible grouping, varied activities, repeated explanation, and individualized support correspond with practices identified in reviews of differentiation and inclusive education. However, the present study adds an important contextual constraint: teachers attempted these adjustments within fixed instructional periods and limited resources. This tension resembles qualitative findings from other low-resource settings, where teachers support inclusion while simultaneously confronting limited preparation, facilities, and time. It is also consistent with Indonesian teachers' accounts of the gap between inclusive aspirations and the practical conditions of primary schools. The teachers varied instruction without permanently labeling students as visual, auditory, or

kinesthetic learners. This finding is consistent with critiques of the learning-styles meshing hypothesis and with evidence indicating that matching instructional presentation to presumed fixed learning styles does not reliably improve learning outcomes (Hattie & O'Leary, 2025). The pedagogically defensible implication is not to eliminate variety, but to provide varied opportunities to all learners and use evidence of understanding and participation to guide support. Positive interaction was equally important. The role of encouragement, safety, and respectful teacher-student relationships aligns with social-emotional and compassion-based classroom perspectives.

Theoretical Implications

The study extends classroom-management theory by integrating three domains that are often treated separately: the organization of classroom behavior and routines, differentiated instructional decision-making, and inclusive social-emotional support. The model in Figure 2 positions diversity as an input to pedagogical decision-making rather than as a disruption to a standard classroom. Planning and implementation are linked recursively: teachers plan varied routes to participation, observe students' responses, and adapt subsequent interaction and support. This dynamic interpretation is consistent with evidence that inclusive competence involves actionable knowledge and practices, not only favorable attitudes. It also explains why teacher competence and confidence are central supporting conditions (Valtonen et al., 2020).

Practical Implications

The findings suggest several specific actions. Teacher professional development should include flexible grouping, concise transitions, multimodal explanation, formative checks for understanding, and positive behavior support. School leaders should establish structured peer discussion or lesson-review sessions in which teachers examine participation patterns and plan responses for students who remain quiet, distracted, or slower to understand. Lesson planning should identify where individual guidance can be provided without stopping the entire class, and schools should prioritize low-cost reusable media that support discussion and practice. These recommendations are consistent with research emphasizing intentional lesson design, varied instructional methods, and the importance of equitable learning environments (Kong & Chen, 2022).

Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited by its focus on one public primary school and therefore does not support statistical generalization. Teacher and principal perspectives were more prominent than students' own accounts, and the analysis did not include standardized measures of engagement or learning outcomes. The findings should

consequently be interpreted as a contextual explanation of practice rather than evidence that the identified strategies caused improved achievement (Coles et al., 2020). Future research should compare urban, rural, private, public, and madrasah contexts; incorporate student interviews and participatory methods more systematically; use mixed methods with classroom-observation and engagement measures; and examine whether inclusive classroom-management practices produce sustained academic and social outcomes over time.

D. Conclusions

This study examined inclusive classroom management practices that accommodate diverse student characteristics and learning preferences at SD Negeri 6 Muara Rupit, an Indonesian public elementary school. The findings show that inclusive classroom management extends beyond behavioral control and functions as a comprehensive pedagogical framework involving systematic planning, interactive implementation, flexible classroom organization, and adaptive teaching strategies. Teachers responded to differences in participation, learning pace, confidence, and social-emotional conditions through varied instructional activities, collaborative learning, positive behavior support, and individualized assistance. Theoretically, this study contributes to classroom management literature by integrating principles of differentiated instruction with inclusive education perspectives. It challenges the narrow view of classroom management as merely discipline and behavior control, and instead positions it as a student-centered pedagogical process that supports equitable participation. The findings also reinforce contemporary critiques of rigid learning-style classifications by demonstrating that effective teachers provide varied learning opportunities without categorizing students into fixed learning-style groups. Practically, the study recommends that teacher professional development should emphasize flexible classroom management, differentiated instruction, and positive behavior support rather than punitive discipline. School leaders should create structured opportunities for teacher collaboration, peer reflection, and discussion of classroom management challenges. Policymakers should also consider class size, instructional time, and resource limitations when expecting teachers to provide individualized support. This study is limited by its focus on one school, its reliance on teacher and principal accounts, and the limited inclusion of student perspectives. Future research should examine inclusive classroom management across diverse Indonesian contexts, including urban, rural, public, private, and madrasah settings. It should also incorporate student voices more systematically, apply mixed-method designs using classroom observation and student-engagement measures, and investigate the long-term effects of inclusive classroom management on students' academic achievement, participation, social development, and emotional well-being over time and across grade levels.

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