

BEHIND INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: HOW SPECIAL EDUCATION SUPPORT TEACHERS (GURU PENDAMPING KHUSUS) ENABLE LEARNING IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL SETTING

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Abstract. *This study explores the strategic role of Special Education Support Teachers (Guru Pendamping Khusus or GPK) in implementing inclusive education in international school settings. The focus is placed on the daily responsibilities, challenges, and institutional support experienced by a GPK at an international school in Jakarta. The research responds to the increasing demand for inclusive practices in diverse educational environments, where the GPK acts as a key figure in bridging individualized student needs with mainstream teaching structures. A qualitative case study approach was applied, involving in-depth interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis. Findings indicate that GPKs contribute significantly to curriculum access by adapting learning materials, simplifying instruction, and guiding students with learning or language challenges through personalized support. They maintain flexible, informal collaboration with classroom teachers and often take initiative in communicating with parents. However, the absence of structured inclusion policies, limited involvement in formal IEPs, and lack of institutional coordination pose persistent challenges. Despite these constraints, GPKs exhibit strong professional commitment, responsiveness, and creativity in supporting inclusive practices. The study concludes that optimizing the role of GPKs requires clearer institutional support, role clarity, and structured collaboration with teaching staff. This research offers practical insights for school leaders, educators, and policymakers to enhance the effectiveness of inclusive education, particularly in international school contexts where cultural and pedagogical diversity present unique complexities.*

Keywords: GPK, Inclusive Education, International School, Special Education, Support Teacher

1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing adoption of inclusive education worldwide has brought renewed attention to the strategic role of Special Education Support Teachers, known in Indonesia as Guru Pendamping Khusus (GPK). As classrooms become more diverse and inclusive, GPKs are positioned as key personnel who ensure that students with special educational needs (SEN) receive the individualized attention and support required for meaningful participation in regular learning environments (Hanson et al., 2024; Toma, 2024). Far from being passive aides, GPKs act as facilitators, collaborators, and advocates who help translate inclusive policies into effective classroom practice (Hosshan, 2022; Mcghie-richmond, 2020).

In Indonesia, inclusive education has been promoted through various national regulations, including Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System and Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020, both of which mandate that public and private schools provide equitable access for students with disabilities. However, the practical implementation of these ideals continues to face significant challenges. Research shows that many inclusive schools in Indonesia still lack sufficient numbers of trained GPKs, and existing teachers often feel unprepared to handle the diverse needs of students (Mujiati & Yoenanto, 2023; Wulandari & Hendriani, 2021). Additionally, studies reveal weak collaboration between GPKs, general education teachers, and other support professionals, which impedes the effective application of differentiated instruction and adaptive assessment strategies (Iqbal et al., 2024).

These challenges are further magnified in international school settings, where inclusive education intersects with diverse curricula, multilingual environments, and varying cultural expectations. Unlike in national school systems with standardized structures, international schools operate within global pedagogical frameworks that often require educators to adapt not only to the individual needs of learners, but also to institutional values shaped by multicultural communities. Within this complex educational landscape, Guru Pendamping Khusus (GPKs) are expected to perform multifaceted roles: providing tailored academic support, facilitating social inclusion, coordinating with foreign-trained staff, and aligning individualized learning plans with international curriculum standards (Da Cruz et al., 2024; Misquitta & Joshi, 2024).

The demands placed on GPKs in such contexts go beyond instructional adaptation; they must also demonstrate cultural sensitivity, bilingual communication, and the ability to mediate between diverse stakeholders—including parents from different cultural backgrounds, international faculty, and local educational authorities. Yet, despite the critical importance of their contributions, there remains a noticeable gap in empirical research that specifically examines how GPKs function within international inclusive school systems, particularly in Indonesia. Most existing studies tend to generalize inclusive practices without acknowledging the distinct operational, linguistic, and socio-cultural complexities that GPKs encounter in global school environments. This gap limits our understanding of effective strategies for supporting GPKs and enhancing their role as key agents in building inclusive, culturally responsive learning communities.

This study investigates the strategic role of a GPK at New Zealand School Jakarta (NZSJ), an international institution that integrates inclusive principles through the New Zealand Curriculum. With a small class size and a multicultural community, NZSJ offers a unique case to explore how a GPK carries out their responsibilities, faces professional challenges, and contributes to inclusive education in a global learning environment. By examining the lived experience of a GPK in this context, the study aims to offer practical insights into inclusive school management and the professional empowerment of GPKs as essential agents of inclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Role of Special Education Support Teachers (GPK)

The Special Education Support Teacher (Guru Pendamping Khusus, or GPK) plays a central role in ensuring that students with special educational needs (SEN) receive equitable support in inclusive learning environments. Unlike general educators, GPKs are professionally trained to identify learning barriers, adapt instructional strategies, and facilitate student participation in both academic and social aspects of school life (Arriani et al., 2021; Toma, 2024). Their responsibilities include assisting in individualized education planning, modifying curricula, providing behavioral support, and working closely with mainstream teachers to co-design learning processes.

In practice, GPKs function as facilitators, collaborators, and advocates—helping schools actualize inclusive values not only through instructional delivery but also through cultural transformation and mindset shift among staff and students (Aldabas, 2020). Their strategic presence strengthens inclusive education by fostering differentiated learning, emotional support, and continuity of service across classroom contexts.

2.2 GPK in Multicultural and International Schools Context

In international schools, where diversity is more complex due to multicultural student populations, multilingual communication, and non-national curricula, the role of GPKs becomes even more multifaceted. GPKs must be adept not only in inclusive pedagogy but also in cross-cultural communication, curriculum translation, and collaboration with teachers trained under different educational systems (Artiles et al., 2016; Da Cruz et al., 2024).

International inclusive schools often operate under global standards such as IB or Cambridge, where inclusion is embedded but interpreted variably depending on institutional resources and teacher preparedness. GPKs in such settings must adapt IEPs to internationally framed learning objectives, navigate high parental expectations, and act as liaisons between families, teachers, and specialists—sometimes across languages and cultures. These challenges demand high adaptability, intercultural sensitivity, and a strong institutional support system (Arifa, 2024; Misquitta & Joshi, 2024).

2.3 Institutional Support and Teacher Collaboration

Research consistently highlights that the success of inclusive education is not solely determined by the competence of GPKs, but also by how well schools structure collaborative frameworks and professional support (Kristina et al., 2025; Mcghie-richmond, 2020). In international schools, GPKs often work as part of multidisciplinary teams alongside counselors, therapists, and psychologists. Effective collaboration requires shared planning time, clear role division, and joint accountability for student progress.

Institutional management also plays a crucial role in empowering GPKs. This includes equitable teacher deployment, recognition of GPKs as professional equals, access to relevant professional development, and integration into decision-making structures. Without such support, the strategic contributions of GPKs can be underutilized or limited to technical assistance only, rather than meaningful inclusion leadership (Bahri, 2021; Elfrida et al., 2020).

2.4 Challenges of GPK Implementation in International Inclusive Settings

Despite the presence of inclusion policies, many GPKs in international schools encounter systemic constraints. These include limited numbers of trained professionals, unclear job descriptions, insufficient coordination with general educators, and a lack of formal assessment tools aligned with international curricula (Iqbal et al., 2024; Kemdikbud, 2017). Additionally, stigmatization of students with disabilities by peers or parents can indirectly affect how GPKs function in promoting full participation (Tarnoto, 2016).

Moreover, the variation between national inclusion mandates and global curriculum expectations creates tension in implementation. GPKs must often bridge these gaps through informal negotiation, culturally responsive practice, and advocacy. These realities highlight the need for case-based exploration of how GPKs navigate their work in specific schools—such as in New Zealand School Jakarta, where inclusive values intersect with international academic standards and multicultural dynamics.

2.5 Professional Standards and Training for GPKs

One of the key determinants of the effectiveness of Special Education Support Teachers (GPKs) in inclusive schools is the level of their professional training and certification. Unlike general classroom teachers, GPKs require specialized knowledge in disability education, individualized instruction, behavior intervention, and collaboration within multidisciplinary teams (Direktorat Pembinaan Sekolah Luar Biasa, 2011). In Indonesia, however, there is still no standardized national framework for certifying GPKs, leading to wide variations in their preparedness, qualifications, and role clarity.

Professional standards for GPKs must include competencies in inclusive curriculum adaptation, assessment for learning, communication with non-verbal or behaviorally complex students, and the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). International frameworks, such as those implemented in countries like New Zealand, Australia, and the UK, emphasize structured teacher education pathways, ongoing professional learning, and institutional recognition of special educators as specialists within the broader school (Hanlon, 2016; Kovač & Vaala, 2021).

In the context of international schools in Indonesia, the lack of formal national certification or accreditation for GPKs creates a unique challenge. These schools often recruit support teachers based on institutional discretion, which may prioritize English proficiency or international experience over specific special education qualifications. As a result, many GPKs must rely on informal learning or mentorship rather than structured training programs (Chotimah & Nisa, 2019; Elfrida et al., 2020).

This gap highlights the need for developing a hybrid framework—one that meets both global inclusion standards and local regulatory requirements. Such a framework would guide international schools in recruiting, developing, and evaluating GPKs with a clear understanding of their strategic role. It would also empower GPKs to advocate more effectively for inclusive practices and contribute meaningfully to school-wide development plans.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This research applied a qualitative case study method (Yin, 2018) to investigate the strategic role of a Special Education Support Teacher (GPK) in an international inclusive school context. The study was conducted at New Zealand School Jakarta, a multicultural school that implements inclusive education through the New Zealand Curriculum. The participant was selected through purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2014), focusing on two GPKs actively involved in assisting students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. Data were collected in June-July 2025 using three techniques: semi-structured interviews to explore the GPK's daily roles and challenges, classroom observation to capture actual teaching interactions, and document analysis for triangulating institutional support mechanisms. Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (2014) qualitative analysis procedure, which includes data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed triangulation and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of a qualitative case study that explored the role of The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) in supporting inclusive education in an international school setting. Thematic analysis was conducted based on interview responses, classroom observation, and document analysis. The results are discussed in six interconnected themes.

4.1 GPKs as Instructional Enablers in Inclusive Classrooms

The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) were found to be central figures in enabling students with special needs to access mainstream academic content. Their instructional role involved simplifying complex material, segmenting instructions into manageable parts, and guiding students through classroom activities using personalized strategies. Instructional adjustments were made responsively, depending on the students' strengths and challenges. These practices reflect differentiated instruction approaches, aligning with inclusive education models that emphasize equity and accessibility for diverse learners.

Observation of a mathematics class supported these findings. The Special Education Support Teacher (GPK) used visual aids, simplified questions, and non-verbal cues to reinforce student understanding of multi-step problems. The support provided was subtle yet strategic, encouraging student independence while maintaining engagement. This balance between assistance and autonomy exemplifies student-centered support within an inclusive learning environment.

4.2 Collaboration with Teachers and Role Clarity

The collaboration between The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) and classroom or subject teachers occurred informally. Teaching staff typically communicated their instructional goals or lesson plans, which the GPK then adapted

independently to suit the learning needs of students with disabilities. There were no scheduled meetings or co-teaching arrangements, and communication generally occurred on a day-to-day basis through direct conversation or follow-up after lessons.

While this informal collaboration allowed for flexible responses to students' needs, it also reflected a lack of institutionalized co-planning processes. The absence of clearly defined roles contributed to overlapping or unclear responsibilities, particularly regarding behavioral support, content modification, or communication with parents. These role ambiguities could potentially hinder effective coordination and may lead to inconsistencies in instructional delivery across subjects.

4.3 Involvement in IEPs and Family Communication

The study found that The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) participated in individualized planning and instructional adjustments; however, their involvement in formal Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) was minimal. They often initiated recommendations regarding instructional strategies or classroom modifications, but this input was rarely formalized through structured IEP processes. Instead, adaptation decisions were made in real time based on classroom experience and ongoing observation.

Parental communication was maintained independently by the GPK, primarily through digital communication platforms. They provided regular progress updates and shared insights into student behavior and performance. While these efforts were valuable in maintaining home-school partnerships, they were not governed by institutional policies or standardized procedures. The absence of structured communication protocols may place additional workload and responsibility on GPKs and limit consistency in parent engagement.

4.4 Observational Insights on Classroom Dynamics

Classroom observation revealed how The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) function as integral facilitators of inclusive learning. In practice, they acted as real-time mediators between teacher instruction and student comprehension. During observed lessons, the GPK rephrased instructions, used visual aids, and adapted tasks on the spot to support a student with special learning needs. They monitored student engagement carefully and adjusted their level of assistance based on the student's response.

The collaboration with classroom teachers during observation was evident but not pre-planned. Verbal and non-verbal communication was used to coordinate transitions or instructional moments. This situational responsiveness demonstrated strong professional adaptability but also reinforced the earlier findings that GPK integration in instructional planning was largely informal and reactive rather than systemically embedded.

4.5 Document Analysis: Gaps Between Policy and Practice

To examine institutional support, school documents such as lesson plans, student support notes, and academic policy guidelines were reviewed. While general policies strongly emphasize inclusion and diversity, the level of operational implementation varies. Several lesson plans included annotations or adjustments indicating specific strategies for students with special needs, and in some cases, there were even specially designed sessions—such as separate mathematics instruction—for students requiring additional support.

Student support notes maintained by The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) were individualized and provided valuable insight into each learner's progress, although the documentation format remained informal and not standardized across the system. There was limited evidence of administrative review or integration of these notes into broader instructional planning processes.

These findings suggest that while inclusive values are present in both policy and

practice, the execution tends to rely on individual initiative rather than systematic enforcement. As Kovač & Vaala (2021) argue, sustainable inclusion requires not only strong philosophical alignment but also institutional structures and clear accountability. The absence of a designated inclusion coordinator or department continues to pose a challenge in unifying and scaling these efforts.

4.6 Challenges and Commitment in Practice

Several persistent challenges were identified that affected the effectiveness and sustainability of GPK roles. These included unclear role definitions, absence of a professional development framework specific to inclusive education, and lack of access to specialized consultants or inclusion teams. GPKs were often left to navigate support responsibilities independently, without a clear referral pathway or structured institutional guidance.

Students with speech or language delays posed particular challenges in instruction and assessment. The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) responded to these needs by adjusting their communication methods, employing visual tools, and exercising greater patience and repetition. These adjustments required emotional resilience, creativity, and ongoing reflection.

Despite institutional limitations, the GPKs demonstrated high levels of professional commitment. They developed their own tools, sought independent learning opportunities, and advocated for their students' participation and learning. Their work demonstrated a consistent focus on meeting individual student needs, aligned with inclusive educational practices, despite limited institutional support.

4.7 Synthesis and Implications

The findings of this study highlight the indispensable role of The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) in implementing inclusive education. Their contributions span instructional, emotional, and communicative domains, making them critical actors in ensuring that students with diverse needs are not left behind. However, their roles remain under-structured, under-recognized, and often disconnected from formal school systems.

To move toward sustainable inclusion, schools must shift from informal reliance on individual expertise to formal structures that define, support, and evaluate the role of The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK). This includes institutionalizing their role in lesson planning, providing ongoing professional development, involving them meaningfully in IEP design, and creating mechanisms for collaborative decision-making.

The results suggest that inclusive education, particularly in international and multicultural school environments, requires more than philosophical commitment—it demands strategic investment in support personnel, systems, and culture. The experiences of The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) serve as a reminder that the success of inclusion depends not only on policy but also on the everyday practices of those who work closest to the students.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) play a key role in advancing inclusive education in international school settings. Through personalized instructional support, flexible communication, and informal collaboration, they help bridge diverse student needs with mainstream learning structures. While inclusive values are reflected in school policies, effective implementation often depends on the initiative, creativity, and judgment of the GPK.

Despite limited institutional clarity, absence of structured collaboration, and minimal formal involvement in IEPs, The Special Education Support Teachers (GPK) consistently show strong professional commitment to student success. Their role extends beyond academics to include emotional support, parent communication, and behavioral guidance.

To improve the sustainability of inclusive practices, schools should establish clearer role definitions, offer targeted professional development, and integrate GPKs into formal planning structures. These findings offer valuable insights for school leaders and policymakers aiming to strengthen inclusive education in multicultural and international environments.

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