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Teaching Agility in Inclusive Education: A Phenomenological Study of Assistant Teachers in Indonesia

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Abstract

Inclusive education aims to guarantee equal educational rights for children with special needs in regular schools. In its implementation, assistant teachers are required to have teaching agility, namely the ability to adapt quickly and flexibly to the diverse learning needs of students. Empirical studies that specifically explore how teaching agility is developed and experienced by assistant teachers, particularly from their own lived experiences, remain limited. This study aims to explore the experiences of assistant teachers in developing teaching agility in the context of inclusive education. The study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. The research subjects consisted of two assistant teachers. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, then analyzed through reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study indicate that teaching agility develops through understanding student character, teaching experience, school environmental support, curriculum flexibility, and teacher personal motivation, despite still facing limitations in training and facilities. This study contributes by providing in-depth insights into the practical formation of teaching agility, which can inform teacher development programs and inclusive education policy implementation.

Keywords

Children With Special Needs, Inclusive Education, Inclusive Teaching Practices, Qualitative Research, Teaching Agility.

1. Introduction

Children have the opportunity to learn alongside their peers. Education is a basic right for every Indonesian citizen, including children with special needs. As stipulated in Article 5, paragraph 1 of Law Number 20 of 2003, every citizen has the same right to receive a quality education. The government provides equitable education for children with special needs, which is very influential and crucial in educational development. The government established Special Needs Schools (*Sekolah Luar Biasa/SLB*) with complete facilities to provide equal education for children with special needs and regular children. However, these separate schools create a barrier, resulting in a lack of interaction between them (Darma & Rusyidi, 2015). As a result, children with special needs are marginalized in society.

The number of children with special needs increases annually, and the limited availability of special schools for them has prompted the government to establish inclusive schools. Inclusive schools are a form of equality and a form of education without discrimination between children with special needs and children in general, with the hope that they will receive the same education and receive equal treatment, with no differences in their rights and obligations. According to Darma and Rusyidi (2015), inclusive education is an educational service for students with special educational needs in regular schools (elementary, middle, high, and vocational schools) who are classified as exceptional, whether in the sense of having disabilities, slow learners, or other learning difficulties. Data from the Ministry of Education and Culture shows that there are still approximately 62 districts or cities that do not have SLB. Only 18% of the 1.6 million children with special needs receive inclusive education services. A total of 115,000 children with special needs attend special needs schools. A total of 299,000 children with special needs attend regular schools with inclusive education programs (Mukti, 2023).

Inclusive education is a form of the government's commitment to providing education for all children without discrimination, including children with special needs (*Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus/ABK*). As stated in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System states that every citizen has the right to a quality education, including children with special needs (Darma & Rusyidi, 2015). Inclusive education is expected to create an inclusive learning environment where children with special needs and regular children can learn together and interact with each other.

The role of assistant teachers in an inclusive education system is crucial. They are tasked with ensuring that the educational needs of children with special needs are met without neglecting regular children. However, in practice, assistant teachers face various challenges, such as differences in student learning needs, limited facilities, and limited time (Asari, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires special skills known as teaching agility. Teaching agility, or agility in teaching, refers to a teacher's ability to adapt quickly to changing situations, including the diverse needs of students in the context of inclusive education (Wijayanti & Suryani, 2021). Assistant teachers in inclusive schools must possess these skills to ensure that each student receives the support they need, both academically and socially.

The phenomenon of teaching agility is increasingly important in inclusive education because assistant teachers not only act as learning facilitators but also as mediators between students with special needs and regular students. Their ability to adapt and make appropriate decisions in dynamic situations significantly impacts the effectiveness of inclusive education (Mardiana & Khoiri, 2021). However, numerous studies indicate that this teaching agility skill has not been fully developed in most assistant teachers in Indonesia, due to a lack of adequate training and guidance (Ramadhanty, 2024).

Despite its importance, there is limited empirical research exploring how assistant teachers develop teaching agility in inclusive education, particularly from the perspective of their lived experiences. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by exploring the processes through which assistant teachers enhance their teaching agility, as well as the factors that influence it. By doing so, the study contributes original insights into the practical formation of teaching agility, which can inform teacher development programs and improve the quality of inclusive education in Indonesia. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the question: how do assistant teachers develop teaching agility in the context of inclusive education. Through this exploration, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges, and strategies of assistant teachers, thereby offering evidence-based guidance to strengthen inclusive teaching practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teaching Agility: Concept and Influencing Factors

Teaching agility is a student-centered approach that enables educators to respond reciprocally to diverse learning needs (Krehbiel et al., 2017). Defined by DeRue et al. (2009), it refers to a teacher's ability to adapt quickly and effectively to changes, challenges, and dynamic classroom situations. Agility allows teachers to identify student needs, apply solutions, and make timely decisions, which is particularly important for inclusive teacher assistants who must accommodate varied student characteristics, adapt teaching materials, and design appropriate assessments (Kamilah et al., 2025). Phenomenology, as a research approach, helps explore how assistant teachers experience and interpret their teaching practices, revealing the meaning of lived experiences and their influence on actions and decisions (Moustakas, 1994). Such research can provide in-depth insights into the challenges, strategies, and reflections of teachers in implementing teaching agility, which has been shown to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments and highlights the importance of professional training.

The development of teaching agility is influenced by several factors. Skills and knowledge of inclusive pedagogy enable teachers to implement flexible learning strategies and respond effectively to diverse student needs (Serrat, 2017; Mahmutoglu et al., 2024). Teaching experience enhances pedagogical sensitivity and intuition in addressing classroom dynamics (Huang & Liao, 2022). Collegial support and a collaborative school environment encourage knowledge exchange and cooperation between regular and assistant teachers, while access to resources and ongoing professional training supports innovative teaching and technology integration (Friend & Cook, 2021; Montalbano et al., 2024). Curriculum flexibility allows adaptation to individual student needs, increasing engagement and reinforcing teaching agility (Elliott & Harris, 2023). Teachers' motivation and commitment foster proactive efforts to develop competencies and implement innovative practices by Carter et al. (2023), and a school culture that values inclusion and collaboration creates conditions conducive to responsive and effective teaching by Roberts et al. (2022).

2.2. Teaching Agility: Challenges, Strategies, and Reflection

The implementation of teaching agility in inclusive education faces several challenges, including limited professional training and adequate resource support for assistant teachers, which can hinder their ability to implement adaptive and responsive learning to the diverse needs of students (Smith & Tyler, 2011). Furthermore, the demands of meeting high academic standards often force teachers to focus on a rigid curriculum, thereby reducing flexibility in providing appropriate support for students with special needs (Stornaiuolo et al., 2023). Another challenge arises from differences in understanding and application of inclusion principles

between regular teachers and assistant teachers, which emphasizes the importance of collaboration, effective communication, and shared perceptions in creating an inclusive learning environment that meets the needs of all students.

To address the challenges of implementing teaching agility in inclusive education, a number of targeted strategies are needed, including providing ongoing and comprehensive professional training on inclusive education practices, encompassing flexible learning strategies, technology utilization, and developing teachers' interpersonal skills (Rowland, 2025). Furthermore, establishing communities of practice is crucial as collaborative platforms for assistant teachers to share experiences, challenges, and learning strategies, thereby supporting the collective development of teaching agility (Wenger, 1998). The integration of technology into the learning process also plays a significant role in enhancing teaching agility, as it allows for more adaptive adaptation of teaching materials and encourages active student engagement through interactive learning experiences (Bennett & Maton, 2010).

Reflection is a crucial element in teaching practice, especially for assistant teachers. Reflection allows teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching methods and identify areas for improvement. Schon (1983) explains that reflection in action helps teachers adjust their approaches in real time, while reflection on action provides an opportunity to reflect on experiences after the teaching process. Through reflection, teachers can identify how they can improve their teaching agility and provide better support for students with special needs. Furthermore, reflection can also foster ongoing professional development and raise awareness of the importance of inclusion in education.

2.3. Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a philosophy and educational policy that allows children with special needs (*Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus/ABK*) to learn alongside children in general in one educational environment to support the achievement of developmental tasks more optimally (Mukti, 2023). The interaction of ABK with peers in regular classes is expected to increase developmental stimuli and more positive social and emotional functions, so that the opportunity for social acceptance and better treatment is greater than in segregated education. However, data from the Ministry of Education and Culture shows that there are still around 62 districts/cities that do not have SLB, with only around 18% of the 1.6 million ABK receiving inclusive education services, while 115 thousand ABK attend SLB and 299 thousand ABK are in regular schools with inclusive programs. In line with Law Number 8 of 2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities, inclusive education is expected to provide equal access and educational services, emphasizing acceptance and adaptation of the learning environment so that students with special needs can develop optimally in regular classes (Florian, 2014). Therefore, Minister of National Education Regulation Number 70 of 2009 emphasizes that assistant teachers must have the qualifications and adaptive skills appropriate to the conditions and needs of each student.

Teachers are the most important factor in education and are a primary concern in inclusive education, given the differing needs of regular and inclusive schools. The guidelines for implementing inclusive education include classroom teachers, subject teachers, and special guidance teachers (Directorate of PPK LK Elementary Education, 2011). The duties of special or inclusive guidance teachers include coordinating between parents and the school regarding child development, developing learning programs, providing guidance for students with special needs, and developing evaluation instruments (Directorate of PPK LK Elementary Education, 2011). According to Brownell et al. (2005), assistant teachers are responsible for providing additional support to students in need, whether academically, socially, or emotionally. This includes collaborating with the

classroom teacher, adapting the curriculum, and providing personal support to students. In addition to assistant teachers, classroom teachers also play a crucial role in learning in inclusive classroom programs. Classroom teachers and subject teachers do not have specialized skills. Therefore, the role of assistant teachers is crucial in inclusive education to ensure that students with special needs receive the services they deserve.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of assistant teachers in implementing teaching agility. This approach was chosen because it enables researchers to interpret and make sense of individual experiences within their real-life educational contexts (Martha & Kresno, 2016; Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). The research was carried out at BLC Al-Irsyad Cilacap between November 2024 and January 2025, focusing specifically on assistant teachers as the main participants. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting those who had direct experience teaching in inclusive classrooms and who were actively engaged in addressing the diverse needs of students with special needs, ensuring that the collected data accurately reflected relevant and meaningful experiences. To enhance the credibility of the findings, data collection continued until saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews no longer produced new themes or insights.

Primary data were obtained through direct observation of classroom learning activities and semi-structured in-depth interviews, while secondary data were gathered from relevant literature and supporting documentation (Satori & Komariah, 2009; Moleong, 2010). The observation process allowed the researchers to capture real-time teaching practices, while interviews provided opportunities to explore teachers' perspectives on the application of teaching agility and inclusive education in practice. Documentation was used to supplement and validate the findings collected from the field.

The positionality of the researcher was carefully considered, acknowledging how their own background, experiences, and perspectives as an educational practitioner could influence the interpretation and analysis of the data (Schön, 2017). By maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process, potential biases were minimized, and the analysis remained grounded in the authentic experiences of the participants. Data analysis followed a systematic process involving data reduction through repeated reading and filtering, presentation of findings in structured narrative form, and verification of conclusions, ultimately enabling the researchers to extract the core insights from the study in a manner that is both factual and contextually relevant (Kahija, 2017).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Teaching Skills Development and Adaptation

The in-depth interviews conducted with assistant teachers at BLC Al-Irsyad revealed several important findings regarding the development and implementation of teaching skills in inclusive classrooms. One key finding is the ability of assistant teachers to adapt teaching methods to the unique needs of students. Teachers demonstrated flexibility in adjusting instructional approaches, lesson content, and learning activities to accommodate the diverse abilities of students, particularly those with special needs. For example, in classrooms where students had varying levels of understanding, teachers tailored their explanations and materials to ensure that all students could engage meaningfully in the learning process. This adaptive

approach was seen as essential in creating a more responsive and student-centered learning environment (Sari et al., 2023).

Despite their strengths, assistant teachers also reported facing several challenges in the development of their teaching skills. One of the most frequently cited barriers was the lack of formal training specifically focused on inclusive education and teaching agility. Teachers expressed the need for more professional development opportunities to enhance their pedagogical strategies and better address the varied needs of students. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that many inclusive teachers in Indonesia still lack adequate training and structured support to develop their teaching agility (Ramadhanty, 2024). Additionally, limited support from colleagues was noted as a challenge, as collaboration and knowledge sharing are crucial for refining teaching practices and implementing inclusive strategies effectively.

Another key finding is the positive impact of teaching skills on student engagement and learning outcomes. Teachers who were able to adapt quickly and respond to the specific needs of their students reported observing higher levels of student participation, improved comprehension of learning material, and greater overall enthusiasm for classroom activities. This supports the notion that teaching agility not only facilitates adaptation but also directly enhances student motivation and academic involvement (Wijayanti & Suryani, 2021). The findings suggest that the ability to adjust teaching methods and maintain a flexible approach contributes significantly to fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

This research indicates that assistant teachers at BLC Al-Irsyad are highly capable of adjusting their instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of their students. While challenges such as the lack of formal training and peer support remain, the application of adaptive teaching skills demonstrates measurable benefits in terms of student engagement and learning outcomes. The significance of such adaptive practices is further emphasized in the literature, where teaching agility has been linked to improved instructional responsiveness and student-centered learning in inclusive settings (Krehbiel et al., 2017). These results highlight the critical role of teaching agility in enhancing the effectiveness of inclusive education and provide a foundation for identifying areas where additional support and resources may further improve teaching practices.

4.2. Factors and Impact of Teaching Agility

Based on the findings, the implementation of teaching agility by assistant teachers at BLC Al-Irsyad demonstrates that the ability to quickly and effectively adapt is crucial in creating an inclusive learning environment that is responsive to students' diverse needs. Teaching agility, as described by Krehbiel et al. (2017), is a student-centered approach that promotes reciprocal learning, while DeRue et al. (2009) define teaching agility as an educator's capacity to adjust rapidly to changes, challenges, and diverse learning needs. Assistant teachers at BLC were able to adapt their teaching methods according to students' abilities, including adjusting content for students with special needs to ensure that all students could engage meaningfully. For instance, in mixed classes of grades four and five, teachers tailored both content and teaching methods to match the students' capabilities. For younger classes, teachers focused on foundational skills such as reading and writing before moving on to more complex materials.

Several factors influence teaching agility among assistant teachers, and these factors are interrelated, contributing to effective classroom management. Professional skills and knowledge in inclusive pedagogy are key, as teachers who are proficient in diverse teaching methods and understand students' individual needs can implement more flexible strategies (Sari et al., 2023). Teaching experience also plays an important role; teachers with prior experience in inclusive settings develop pedagogical intuition, enabling them to respond promptly to student needs (Lapidot,

2025). Assistant teachers often drew upon their prior experience as regular classroom teachers or school counselors to guide their strategies in inclusive classrooms. Support from colleagues and the school environment further strengthens teaching agility. Teachers who work in collaborative teams can share knowledge and best practices, which enhances their adaptability (Friend & Cook, 2021). Assistant teachers learned from colleagues with more experience in inclusive teaching, applying observed strategies to their own classrooms.

Access to teaching resources and ongoing professional training is also critical. Teachers with sufficient learning materials, appropriate facilities, and continuous training are better able to implement innovative and effective teaching strategies (Montalbano et al., 2024). The teachers expressed the need for additional learning media to better support students with special needs and enhance participation. Curriculum flexibility allows teachers to tailor instruction to students' needs. A strict curriculum can limit adaptability, while a flexible one, supporting project-based and personalized learning, increases student engagement and strengthens teaching agility (Elliott & Harris, 2023). Teachers adjusted materials for each group of students and emphasized mastery according to individual needs, ensuring that all students could follow the lessons.

Personal motivation and commitment to inclusive education also influence teaching agility. Teachers who are highly motivated and committed are more proactive in developing new skills and implementing creative teaching strategies (Sharma et al., 2021). They derive satisfaction from seeing students succeed and understand the material, which encourages continuous improvement in teaching practices. School culture plays a significant role in reinforcing teaching agility. Schools that value inclusion and collaboration create a positive environment for teachers to develop adaptive skills. Regular communication with classroom teachers regarding lesson content, student understanding, and instructional strategies helps assistant teachers adjust their approaches so that students with special needs can fully participate in learning activities (Roberts et al., 2022).

However, the implementation of teaching agility faces challenges. A lack of professional training and resources, along with the pressure to meet high academic standards, can constrain teachers' ability to adapt teaching methods effectively. Teachers often experience a tension between following a rigid curriculum and providing appropriate support for students with special needs (Smith & Tyler, 2011; Davis, 2016). Therefore, continuous professional development, access to adequate resources, and a supportive school environment are critical to enabling teachers to implement teaching agility successfully. These findings emphasize that teaching agility is a core competency for assistant teachers in inclusive education. The ability to adapt teaching methods, utilize resources effectively, collaborate with colleagues, and maintain a strong commitment to inclusive education directly impacts student engagement and learning outcomes. Moreover, developing teaching agility can foster a classroom culture that is inclusive, collaborative, and responsive to diverse student needs, supporting more equitable and effective educational practices.

5. Conclusion

In the context of inclusive education, this study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how assistant teachers develop effective teaching skills. The findings highlight the critical role of teaching agility, which enables teachers to respond flexibly and effectively to the diverse needs of students, particularly those with special needs. Assistant teachers employ various adaptation strategies, such as understanding individual student characteristics, developing learning materials tailored to students' needs, and utilizing appropriate learning aids to ensure all students can engage meaningfully in the learning process. However, teachers face several challenges, including limited facilities, lack of formal training, insufficient

access to educational resources, and the need to collaborate closely with regular classroom teachers. The presence of a supportive school environment including encouragement from colleagues and school management was found to be essential in fostering inclusive practices and strengthening teaching agility. Furthermore, teachers engage in continuous evaluation and reflection, regularly assessing student progress and adjusting their teaching strategies to enhance learning outcomes.

This study demonstrates that teaching ability, underpinned by agility, is a vital skill for assistant teachers working in inclusive education settings. The implications of this study suggest that schools should prioritize professional development and resource provision to strengthen teaching agility, thereby improving student learning experiences. A limitation of this research is its focus on a single institution, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the study to multiple schools, explore the long-term effects of teaching agility on student outcomes, and examine additional factors influencing teacher adaptation in inclusive settings.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



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