

Identifying Children with Special Needs in Inclusive Schools: A Sociology of Education Perspective

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Abstract

- Purpose** : Indonesian education regulations have progressively expanded the definition of children with special needs (ABK), from a physical-deficit basis in Law No. 4/1997 to include mental and psychosocial disabilities in Law No. 8/2016. However, school identification practices still rely largely on teachers' informal observations rather than standardized assessment. This study examines the social mechanisms underlying ABK identification in inclusive primary schools and explains why the gap between regulatory expansion and school practice persists.
- Method** : Data were collected through structured observations using a checklist instrument in inclusive primary schools in Makassar City and Bantaeng Regency, South Sulawesi, from January to April 2026. The analysis was supported by regulatory document analysis and a literature review, drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction, and Goffman's concept of stigma.
- Results** : Students identified through structured observation as showing indicators of special needs had generally neither received professional assessment nor been formally identified as ABK by their schools. Identification focused primarily on visible physical impairments and disruptive behaviour, while less visible conditions, including specific learning difficulties, emotional disorders, and giftedness (CIBI), were rarely recognised despite being acknowledged in national regulations. This gap reflects limited teacher training, the absence of standardized identification procedures, and a socially constructed habitus of normality.
- Conclusion** : The study is limited to two locations in South Sulawesi and a cross-sectional design, restricting generalizability and causal inference. Nevertheless, it highlights the need to strengthen identification systems while addressing the social processes that shape how schools recognize ABK.

Keywords: special needs identification; inclusive education; habitus; stigma; sociology of education

1. Introduction

Inclusive education in Indonesia already rests on a fairly strong regulatory foundation. Permendiknas No. 70/2009 requires district and municipal governments to designate at least one regular school in every subdistrict as a provider of inclusive education. Even so, a school's administrative status as inclusive does not necessarily reflect its actual readiness to identify and

provide appropriate services for children with special needs (ABK) (Permendiknas no 70 tahun 2009, 2009). Putra & Neviyarni S (2023), stress that early identification is a necessary step in delivering inclusive education, so students' needs can be recognized systematically. In line with this, various studies show that identification practices in schools still face several obstacles, such as teachers' limited competence in identification and assessment (Wibowo et al., 2022), as well as the absence of special assistant teachers (Guru Pembimbing Khusus, GPK, referred to in the most recent regulation as Guru Pendidikan Khusus), identification teams, and ABK identification instruments in inclusive schools (Putri et al., 2026). This also helps explain why formal education access for children with disabilities remains relatively low. Based on data from the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Cultural Affairs (Kemenko PMK) and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek), summarized by Syarifah (2023), an estimated 12.26% of school-age children with disabilities have gained access to formal education through special needs schools (SLB) or inclusive schools.

A similar institutional gap appears in ABK categories beyond disability. Indonesian regulation also classifies students with high intelligence and special talents (CIBI) as part of the definition of special education (Article 127, Government Regulation No. 17/2010), meaning identification problems are not confined to disability alone (Peraturan Pemerintah (PP) Nomor 17 Tahun 2010 Tentang Pengelolaan Dan Penyelenggaraan Pendidikan, 2010). A series of observation reports from four primary schools in Makassar City (hereafter referred to as School A, B, C, and D) shows a pattern consistent with findings for other ABK categories: almost none of the schools observed had a policy or official decree (Surat Keputusan, SK) specifically governing services for CIBI students, and identification was carried out informally by teachers through direct observation without a standardized assessment instrument. The services provided depended entirely on individual teachers' initiative, with no systematic referral system to more competent institutions or specialists. This pattern strengthens the indication that ABK identification problems in primary schools cut across categories: for both students with disabilities and CIBI students, the absence of formal instruments and institutional policy is consistently the same weak point.

The gap between policy mandates and identification practice on the ground is not a new issue in Indonesian inclusive education research. Various studies show that implementing inclusive education still faces challenges in terms of institutional readiness, teacher competence, and system and policy support for inclusive schools (Alfikri et al., 2022; Rafah et al., 2025). These findings are reinforced by Putri et al., (2026) who report that 70% of teachers in inclusive schools in Gowa Regency had never received training on ABK, while 80% reported having students suspected of being ABK in their classrooms. The same study also found that teachers had not used specific assessment instruments in the identification process, that schools lacked both a special assistant teacher (GPK) and an identification team, and that teachers still faced limited competence and training in carrying out accurate identification.

The more basic problem is not simply whether a school has an identification instrument, but how teachers in the field decide who counts as a child with special needs (ABK) and who does not. This process does not happen in a vacuum. It is shaped by teaching experience, norms that develop within the school environment, and perceptual schemas formed through teachers' professional practice. Berger & Luckmann (2011) explain that social categorization is a product of construction

formed through everyday interaction, which then becomes institutionalized until it is seen as objective reality. In a school setting, this construction operates through habitus: dispositions formed by social experience that unconsciously guide how teachers perceive, classify, and respond to students (Bourdieu, 1990).

Building on this framework, the study aims to examine the social mechanisms behind ABK identification practices in primary schools providing inclusive education in South Sulawesi. Specifically, it addresses three research questions: (1) how has Indonesian regulation defined and expanded the ABK category over time; (2) what is the actual condition of ABK identification practice in the field; and (3) what social mechanisms cause some ABK to go unidentified even though their existence is recognized in regulation.

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach combined with an analytical-critical perspective grounded in the sociology of knowledge, to unpack the social mechanisms behind ABK identification practice. Data were gathered from two main sources. First, a diachronic analysis of regulatory documents covering national policy (Law No. 4/1997, Law No. 20/2003, Government Regulation No. 17/2010, Law No. 8/2016, and Permendiknas No. 70/2009) was conducted to map the trajectory of the ABK definition's expansion over time. Second, a field study was carried out at five primary schools providing inclusive education or holding excellent-school status in South Sulawesi. To protect institutional identity, the five schools are referred to by initials: Schools A, B, and C (representing urban contexts in Makassar City), School D (a private, faith-based school in Makassar City), and School E (representing the context of Bantaeng Regency).

Research subjects were selected through purposive sampling, targeting classroom teachers and school principals who interact directly with students showing characteristics of special needs or giftedness. Field data were collected through structured observation using a checklist instrument, to observe indicators of special needs in teacher-student interaction and classroom learning processes, and to compare these against each school's recorded identification and formal assessment status. The data were then analyzed using a sociology of education framework, drawing on the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), typification by Berger & Luckmann (2011), and Goffman's concept of stigma (Goffman, 1963).

3. Result

Regulatory Expansion: The Trajectory of ABK Categorization in Indonesia

Table 1 maps changes in the definition and scope of ABK categories in Indonesian regulation from 1997 to 2016. This expansion reflects a paradigm shift away from a medical model centered on physical deficit, toward a broader social model.

Tabel 1. The Development of Regulatory Recognition of Children with Special Needs Categories in Indonesia (1997-2016)

Regulation	Term	Category Scope	Notes
Law No. 4/1997 on	Handicapped persons	Physical handicap, mental handicap, combined	Categorization rested on visible physical

Handicapped Persons		physical and mental handicap	deficit. Did not yet cover learning difficulties, emotional disorders, or giftedness.
Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System (Article 32)	Students who have a level of difficulty following the learning process due to physical, emotional, mental, or social impairment; and/or who have high intelligence or special talent	Physical, emotional, mental, or social impairment; and/or high intelligence and special talent	First major expansion: gifted students enter the ABK category. Emotional and mental impairment explicitly recognized.
Government Regulation No. 17/2010 on the Management and Provision of Education (Article 127)	Students with impairments and students with high intelligence and/or special talent	Visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, intellectual disability, physical disability, emotional/behavioral disorder, learning difficulty, slow learner, autism, motor impairment, drug-abuse survivors, other impairments, multiple disabilities	Second expansion: learning difficulties and autism explicitly included. The "other impairments" category opens considerable room for interpretation.
Law No. 8/2016 on Persons with Disabilities (Article 4)	Persons with disabilities	Physical, intellectual, and mental disability (psychosocial: schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, personality disorder; developmental: autism, hyperactivity),	Furthest-reaching expansion: mental-psychosocial disorders officially recognized as a form of disability protected by the state.

sensory disability, multiple
disability

Source: Regulatory document analysis, compiled by the researcher, 2026

Table 1 shows that the scope of student categories requiring special education services in Indonesian regulation expanded considerably over the 1997-2016 period. Regulation that initially focused on physical and mental impairment later came to recognize learning difficulties, developmental disorders, mental and psychosocial disability, and students with high intelligence and special talent. This shift is also reflected in changing policy orientation, moving from the concept of handicapped persons toward recognition of students requiring special education services, and eventually toward the concept of persons with disabilities. This change aligns with the growing human-rights-based approach and the social model of disability, which locates barriers to participation in the interaction between the individual and the social environment (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2006). Yet this expanded recognition at the regulatory level has not been matched by a comparable change in identification practice at the school level.

Conditions of ABK Identification in the Field

Table 2 summarizes field findings from the two research locations. Data were collected through structured classroom observation carried out at primary schools providing inclusive education.

Tabel 2. Conditions of ABK Identification in Inclusive Primary Schools in Makassar City and Bantaeng Regency

Location and Period	School Context	Structured Observation Findings	Formal Assessment Status	Teacher Identification Practice
Makassar City (March-April 2026)	Primary school providing inclusive education	Students were found showing indicators of special needs based on structured observation using a checklist instrument	Never received a formal assessment. Not registered as ABK by the school.	Teachers identify based on informal observation. No assessment instrument is used systematically.
Bantaeng Regency (January 2026)	Primary school providing inclusive education	Students with indicators of special needs were identified through structured observation using	Most had not been formally assessed. The school admits ABK due to regulation, without adequate preparation.	Limited availability of special assistant teachers (GPK). Classroom teachers handle ABK without specific training.

a checklist
instrument

Source: Field data, January-April 2026

Table 2 shows that at both locations, students were found who, based on structured observation, showed indicators of specific special needs, yet had never received a formal assessment and were not registered as ABK by their school. This pattern held in both Makassar City and Bantaeng Regency, even though the two locations differ in context: Makassar City is an urban area, while Bantaeng Regency shows a more pronounced shortage of special assistant teachers (GPK). This consistency across two different contexts suggests that the gap between indicated special needs and formal identification status is not confined to a single school or district, but a recurring pattern in how teachers identify students more broadly.

This finding aligns with Putri et al., (2026) who show that teachers in inclusive schools still face various obstacles in the ABK identification process, including limited competence, the unavailability of special assistant teachers (GPK), the absence of identification teams, and the lack of identification instruments in schools. The same study also reports that around 40% of teachers were unaware that identification or assessment instruments for ABK even existed. Meanwhile, Wibowo et al. (2022) show that building teacher capacity through identification and assessment training is one important precondition for strengthening identification practice in inclusive schools. This reinforces the importance of early identification emphasized by Putra & Neviyarni S (2023) as a basis for providing appropriate educational services.

The Gap between Regulation and Practice

Table 3 contrasts the ABK categories recognized in regulation with their identification status at the school level, based on field data.

Tabel 3. The Gap between Regulatory Recognition and Identification Practice in Schools

ABK Category	Recognition in Regulation (Document Analysis Results)	Identification Practice in Schools (Field Data Analysis Results)
Mental- psychosocial disability (e.g. depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder)	Recognized as part of the range of mental disabilities under Law No. 8/2016, entitling the student to educational services suited to their needs.	Almost never identified at the primary school level. Teachers lack a framework for recognizing signs of mental health conditions, so these students are more often perceived as “withdrawn,” “lazy,” or “unsociable.”
Specific learning difficulty (e.g. <i>dyslexia</i> , <i>dyscalculia</i>)	Recognized as part of the group of students requiring special education services under Government Regulation No. 17/2010.	Often not identified because symptoms resemble those of a student who is simply less diligent or inattentive. Without adequate

		identification and assessment, teachers struggle to tell the two apart.
Slow learner	Recognized in Government Regulation No. 17/2010 as a category distinct from intellectual disability, requiring services suited to the student's characteristics.	Generally treated the same as a low-achieving student. Teachers struggle to distinguish a slow learner from mild intellectual disability without professional assessment support.
Students with high intelligence and/or special talent (CIBI)	Recognized under Article 32 of Law No. 20/2003 and Government Regulation No. 17/2010 as students entitled to special education services suited to their potential.	Almost never identified as part of the group requiring special services. Identification happens informally and without structure, and talent-development services are almost entirely unavailable.

Source: Synthesis of regulatory document analysis and field data, 2026

Table 3 shows that the gap between regulatory recognition and identification practice tends to widen as a condition becomes less physically visible. Conditions that are directly visible are relatively easy for teachers to recognize without special instruments. By contrast, conditions such as dyslexia, anxiety disorder, or being a slow learner go almost entirely unidentified because they require more specific assessment. This study's findings show that failing to identify these conditions leads to mislabeling, students seen as “lazy,” “unserious,” or “unsociable,” so they do not receive the services or interventions they need. This finding aligns with Putri et al., (2026) who show that limited teacher competence, the unavailability of special assistant teachers (GPK), identification teams, and identification instruments are the main obstacles to ABK identification. This also reinforces the view that inclusive education requires accurate identification and assessment by personnel with specific competence, so that educational services can be tailored to each student's needs (Meka et al., 2023). At a broader level, Alfikri et al. (2022) stress that implementing inclusive education in Indonesia still faces challenges in terms of system readiness, educator competence, and organizational support.

4. Discussion

Social Mechanisms Behind Identification Practice

Field data and the literature point to three social mechanisms that jointly shape the identification pattern found in the field. The first mechanism is typification based on physical appearance and disruptive behavior. Berger & Luckmann (2011) explain that typification is how humans manage social complexity by categorizing others according to the characteristics that are easiest to access. Within the constraints of a demanding classroom, what is easiest to access is what is directly visible. Goffman (1963) shows that stigma arises when a person's attributes are judged to

deviate from a group's normative expectations. Here, ABK whose behavior does not disrupt the class receive no stigma, but by the same token receive none of the services they should be getting either.

In observations carried out in Makassar City and Bantaeng Regency, this pattern recurs. Observation using a checklist instrument successfully detected a number of children showing indicators pointing toward particular special needs. Yet when confirmed with teachers, these children were not registered as ABK and had never undergone a formal assessment. Some were even described by teachers as children with no problems, simply because they did not disrupt the class.

The second mechanism is teachers' habitus regarding normality. Bourdieu (1990) describes habitus as a system of dispositions acquired through experience and operating unconsciously, guiding a person's perception and action without requiring explicit calculation. Teachers develop a habitus about what a normal student should look like, built up over years of teaching experience. Without training that contests this habitus, the same identification pattern keeps reproducing itself.

The third mechanism is the absence of formal knowledge at the school level. ABK identification instruments exist at the ministry level, but do not reach teachers systematically. Wibowo et al. (2022) note that improving teachers' identification and assessment skills in inclusive schools requires structured training and workshops. When formal knowledge is not available as a usable working tool, teachers fill the gap with informal knowledge that relies heavily on what is visible to the naked eye.

Implications for Inclusive Education

The findings and analysis above suggest that the most pressing agenda is not to further expand the regulatory definition of ABK, but to build identification capacity at the school level. Based on the literature and field data, at least three things need to happen at once.

First, the identification instruments already available at the ministry level need to be actively and systematically disseminated to teachers, rather than simply uploaded to a digital portal. Rafah et al. (2025) recommend strengthening early ABK assessment as one of the most pressing policy reforms. Second, ongoing training for regular teachers on ABK identification is needed. Putri et al., (2026) show that understanding the obstacles teachers face in the identification process is a precondition for designing effective solutions. Third, the presence of GPK in inclusive schools should be prioritized, since a GPK serves not only as a companion to students but also as a source of technical knowledge for regular teachers in the identification and intervention process (Wibowo et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

This study examined the social mechanisms behind ABK identification practice in primary schools providing inclusive education in South Sulawesi. The findings show that although Indonesian regulation has progressively expanded the definition of ABK to include mental-psychosocial disability, identification practice on the ground still relies on teachers' informal, unstandardized observation. Students showing indicators of special needs based on structured observation had generally never received a formal assessment and were not registered as ABK by their school. Three social mechanisms were identified as the structural causes of this pattern:

typification based on physical appearance and disruptive behavior, teachers' uncontested habitus of normality, and the absence of formal knowledge as a working tool at the school level. These three mechanisms reinforce one another and produce an identification pattern that keeps reproducing itself, regardless of regulatory expansion. The consistency of this pattern across two different locations in South Sulawesi, Makassar City and Bantaeng Regency, suggests that the problem is not confined to a single school or a single regional context. This study's implications point to three things: actively disseminating ABK identification instruments down to the teacher level, ongoing training for regular teachers in inclusive schools, and prioritizing the presence of GPK as a source of technical knowledge in schools. Relevant follow-up research includes studies on the effectiveness of different ABK identification training models for regular teachers, as well as comparative studies between schools that have a GPK and those that do not, in terms of ABK identification accuracy.

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