

CHALLENGING STIGMA: A STUDY ON SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN NON-INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the forms of social discrimination experienced by children with disabilities in non-inclusive educational settings in Indonesia, particularly in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Despite global efforts promoting inclusive education, such as the CRPD and Education for All, many children with disabilities still face systemic and cultural barriers, especially in traditional and religious educational environments. These institutions often lack inclusive policies and pedagogical approaches, resulting in stigmatization, bullying, and social exclusion. Using a qualitative exploratory case study method, the research was conducted in two *pesantren* in Malang City, selected for having disabled students but lacking inclusive practices. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation involving nine informants: disabled students, teachers, caregivers, and peers. Thematic analysis was applied using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. Findings show three dominant forms of discrimination: negative labeling and derogatory nicknames, verbal and non-verbal bullying, and absence of structural support. Children with disabilities are often marginalized, excluded from group activities, and left to adapt without institutional assistance. Some educators expressed dismissive attitudes, reinforcing the notion that these children are burdensome. This research highlights how *pesantren*, as value-based institutions, may inadvertently perpetuate exclusive norms and cultural stigma. It argues that inclusive education should not merely ensure physical access but must transform cultural attitudes and social structures to respect diversity and uphold children's rights. The study contributes new insights by contextualizing the lived experiences of disabled children in faith-based educational settings and calls for adaptive policy reforms, teacher training, and community awareness to foster inclusive values.

Keywords: social discrimination, inclusive education, children with disabilities

1. Introduction

Disability issues have garnered global attention within the frameworks of human rights and inclusive development. However, in many developing countries—including Indonesia—children with disabilities continue to face various forms of social discrimination, particularly in non-inclusive educational settings such as **pesantren** (Islamic boarding schools) or traditional community-based schools. This discrimination manifests not only through verbal and emotional bullying but also through systemic exclusion that hinders equal access to education, social support, and personal development.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of inclusive education in fostering disability-friendly environments (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Global initiatives such as "Education for All" and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) have encouraged governments to adopt more inclusive policies. Yet, most studies focus on formal education systems or macro-level policies, paying scant attention to non-formal and faith-based educational settings. Furthermore, there is limited research explicitly examining the dimensions of stigma and social bullying from the perspectives of individuals with disabilities themselves within the Indonesian cultural context.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring the forms of social discrimination experienced by children with disabilities in non-inclusive educational settings and examining how the perceptions of the surrounding community reinforce such stigma. It offers a novel scholarly contribution through a contextual approach grounded in lived experiences, aiming to broaden the discourse on educational inclusion—viewing it not merely as a policy issue but as a social transformation rooted in cultural awareness. By critically identifying the realities of persistent social

discrimination, this research is significant for promoting inclusion policies that are adaptable to local contexts and for strengthening advocacy for the rights of children with disabilities across diverse educational settings in Indonesia.

2. Literature Review

Discrimination faced by individuals with disabilities—particularly children—remains a significant issue in Indonesia's education sector, especially within non-inclusive institutions such as **pesantren** (Islamic boarding schools). As faith-based educational institutions, **pesantren** ought to prioritize values of humanity, empathy, and equality. However, recent research reveals that bullying and stigma directed at children with disabilities persist in various forms.

Azizah and Sa'adah (2023) found that bullying in **pesantren** encompasses verbal, physical, and emotional abuse, driven by rigid social structures, a lack of understanding regarding empathy, and an aggressive masculine culture. Stigma against children with disabilities is often reinforced by misconceptions of religious teachings and local beliefs that view disability as a source of shame or a curse. Furthermore, Faizah and Sulfiana (2023) emphasize that children with disabilities who are targeted by bullying experience a significant decline in self-confidence. They feel they have no place in society, a sentiment that negatively impacts both their psychosocial well-being and academic performance.

This situation is exacerbated in non-inclusive educational settings by teachers' lack of understanding regarding disabilities and the absence of systematic measures to support these children. Although some community-based interventions—such as support group therapy within **pesantren**—have shown positive results in bolstering the resilience of children who have been bullied (Cahyani & Widodo, 2022), fundamental issues like collective stigma and the normalization of discrimination remain inadequately addressed.

Research by Mazaya et al. (2024) highlights the importance of building resilience in children with disabilities. Their study revealed that children capable of persevering and maintaining a positive attitude amidst discriminatory treatment demonstrated high levels of altruism. However, such an approach cannot succeed in isolation; it requires support from the education system and the broader community. Consequently, Prasetyo et al. (2024) emphasizes the importance of adaptive and integrative educational management in addressing bullying within religious-based schools. This entails teacher training, the implementation of positive discipline, and the establishment of student protection policies grounded in children's rights.

While various studies have examined the dynamics of bullying and its management in educational settings, there remains a gap in research that explicitly addresses the experiences of children with disabilities in **pesantren** (Islamic boarding schools) from a local socio-cultural perspective. Most studies focus on general policies or formal education contexts, without delving into the specific experiences of marginalized groups within religious-based institutions. This research aims to bridge that gap by exploring how children with disabilities experience and perceive social discrimination within an environment that is supposed to provide them with spiritual and moral support.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing an exploratory case study method. This approach was selected as the most relevant for deeply exploring the experiences of children with disabilities regarding social discrimination within non-inclusive educational settings—specifically, Islamic boarding schools (**pesantren**). The researcher seeks to understand, within a specific context, how stigma, stereotypes, and discriminatory actions emerge and impact the lives of these children within the social environment of religious-based education.

The study focuses on the forms of social discrimination occurring in the daily lives of students with disabilities, encompassing interactions with both peers and educators. It also examines how social systems, cultural values, and the **pesantren** community's understanding of disability contribute to either reinforcing or mitigating discriminatory practices.

The primary subjects of the study are children with disabilities who are part of the **pesantren** community, alongside the caregivers and teachers involved in their care and instruction, as well as other students who interact with them. To clarify the research scope, social discrimination is defined here as treatment that demeans or restricts the rights and participation of children with disabilities in social and educational activities. Meanwhile, "non-inclusive education" refers to an educational system that lacks the structural support, policies, and practices conducive to diversity—specifically regarding individuals with disabilities.

The research was conducted at two *pesantren* in Malang City, East Java; these institutions accommodate students with disabilities but have not yet systematically implemented an inclusive education approach. The locations were selected purposively based on these characteristics. Informants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique, taking into account their roles and direct involvement in the social dynamics under study. There are nine key informants: four children with disabilities, two *pesantren* teachers/caregivers, and three regular students. All informants possess direct experience or knowledge regarding social discrimination against children with disabilities within their environment. To obtain valid and in-depth data, the researcher employed several data collection techniques, including semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation of social interactions within the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) environment, and the review of documentation such as caregiving records and internal documents, where available. The researcher also utilized tools such as audio recordings, field notes, and informed consent forms to uphold research ethics.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive analysis technique developed by Miles and Huberman, which comprises three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and simplifying relevant data. The data were then presented in the form of narratives and quotations that authentically reflect the informants' experiences. Conclusions were drawn iteratively and verified through source and method triangulation, as well as "member checking" with informants to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

This study was conducted at two Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Malang City that accommodate students with disabilities but have not yet formally implemented inclusive education principles. Through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, the study identified several patterns of social discrimination experienced by students with disabilities in their daily lives within the boarding school environment.

First, most informants revealed that they frequently faced negative stigma in the form of labeling and derogatory epithets—such as "disabled child," "burden on the *pesantren*," or "useless." These labels came from both peers and some caregivers, occurring during everyday interactions. Some students with disabilities expressed feelings of shame and low self-esteem, preferring to withdraw from social interaction because they felt they were targets of ridicule.

Second, various forms of bullying—both verbal and non-verbal—were identified. Verbal bullying took the form of mockery or harsh taunts, while non-verbal bullying manifested as social exclusion, refusal by others to collaborate on tasks, or exclusion from religious and social activities. One student even admitted never being allowed to participate in group memorization sessions because they were perceived as slowing down their peers.

Third, a lack of systemic support from the boarding school environment was clearly evident. There were no specific policies or adaptive teaching approaches in place for students with disabilities. Caregivers and teachers generally left the burden of adjustment entirely to the students themselves. In one interview, a teacher even stated, "If the child cannot keep up, it is better for them to just go home."

4.2 Discussion

The results of this study confirm that social discrimination against children with disabilities within *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) environments is not merely a personal issue but is structurally embedded in the social and cultural systems of these educational institutions. The stigma attached to these children is not simply an expression of individual attitudes; rather, it reflects a social construct that fails to recognize disability as a facet of human diversity. The negative labeling experienced by these children indicates a severely limited understanding of disability. Within a *pesantren* culture that strongly emphasizes homogeneity and collective discipline, any deviation from established norms is often perceived as a weakness. Yet, as Booth and Ainscow (2011) emphasize, inclusive education is not solely about providing physical access; it is about fostering an environment that values difference. In this context, the *pesantren*—as a religious educational institution—actually contributes to reinforcing stigma through the tacit acceptance of, or even indirect involvement in, discriminatory practices.

The bullying that occurs is also a product of a social structure that does not yet support inclusion. The absence of protective mechanisms or social guidance allows deviant behavior to become normalized and even socially accepted. These findings align with research by Faizah and Sulfiana (2023), which demonstrates that children with disabilities

who are victims of bullying suffer from diminished self-confidence and social isolation. While some children exhibit resilience—as noted by Mazaya et al. (2024)—this resilience cannot justify maintaining an exclusionary system.

A lack of awareness regarding inclusion among teachers and caregivers further complicates the issue. Inclusive education should not place the burden of "fitting in" solely on the child; the institution also bears the responsibility of providing adaptive, equitable learning spaces and strategies. Prasetyo et al. (2024) highlight the importance of child-rights-based educational management, which encompasses training for educators, anti-discrimination policies, and psychosocial support mechanisms. Thus, this discussion demonstrates that discriminatory treatment toward children with disabilities not only reflects a systemic failure to grasp the principles of social justice but also highlights the need for a cultural transformation within non-inclusive education. *Pesantren*—as institutions that shape values—should stand at the forefront of building a society that is more accepting of difference and diversity.

5. Conclusion

This research reveals that social discrimination against children with disabilities in non-inclusive educational environments, especially Islamic boarding schools, still occurs systemically and culturally. The forms of discrimination that emerge are not only stigma and negative labeling, but also bullying and social exclusion that occur in everyday life. Children with disabilities are positioned as those who have to adapt to a system that is not friendly to diversity, without structural support or a fair and adaptive pedagogical approach.

The stigma attached to them—both verbally and attitudinally—shows a low collective awareness of the meaning of disability as part of human diversity. The bullying they experience, both in the form of ridicule and exclusion in social and religious activities, is a reflection of the failure of institutions to build a safe, supportive and inclusive environment. The absence of protective policies, training for educators, and a child-centered approach makes the situation worse, so that children with disabilities are not only marginalized physically, but also psychosocially and spiritually.

This conclusion emphasizes that inclusive education is not limited to physical access to educational institutions, but is a shared commitment to building systems, culture and social relations that uphold equality, respect differences and protect the rights of every individual. Islamic boarding schools, as educational institutions based on religious values, should be pioneers in instilling the values of justice and humanity. Therefore, transformation of culture, policies and educational practices in the Islamic boarding school environment is absolutely necessary so that they no longer reproduce injustice towards children with disabilities.

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