



## Special Assistance Teachers Learning Strategies for Slow Learner Students in Inclusive Elementary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the learning strategies of Special Assistance Teachers (Guru Pendamping Khusus/GPK) for students with slow learner barriers of inclusive elementary school age. A qualitative case study approach is used to answer research questions. Summersari 1 public elementary school in Malang City was chosen as the research location for two main reasons, namely as the official inclusion primary school for the education office and at the same time as the oldest inclusive primary school and as a reference in Malang City. Six students with slow learner barriers and one special accompanying teacher became research participants for three months. The results showed that the learning strategies used were visual media, drill methods, remedial, teaching everyday life, and approaching slow-learning children with special needs through intense communication. The inhibiting factors of this strategy are learning that requires high reasoning, making slow learners with special needs often feel difficult, low self-confidence, insufficient number of GPK, and less cooperative parents. The supporting factors for this strategy are adequate facilities, appropriate methods, and smooth communication between slow learners, special assistance teachers, and children with special needs.

**Keywords:** *Learning Strategies; Special Assistance Teachers; Slow Learners*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The latest data from Unicef (2022) shows that around 1 in 10 children worldwide are indicated to have special needs. As for 49% of the total, they need to get the proper education. Indonesia reported that statistical data from the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Culture (Kemenko PMK) found that the range of children aged 5-19 years with special needs in Indonesia reached 3.3% of

66.6 million (Novrizaldi, 2022). This means that more than 2 million children in Indonesia have obstacles in growth and development and need an education that can accommodate these obstacles. Referring to data from the Central Statistics Agency, there was an increase in the number of children with special needs (Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus/ABK) in 2017, ranging from 1.6 million people (Purba, 2019).

Not all children with special needs can access education according to their needs and abilities in special schools. Referring to the 1945 Constitution Article 31 Paragraph (1), it is mandated that every Indonesian citizen has the right to receive a proper education. This article is strengthened by Law no. 39 Article 60 related to Human Rights, and it is explained that every child has the right to receive education and teaching to develop his personality according to his talents, interests, and level of intelligence without exception. The two articles aim to provide comprehensive education for all groups without distinction.

The rights of children with special needs to obtain education in Indonesia are contained in Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System and Minister of National Education Regulation No. 70 of 2009 concerning Inclusive Education for Students who have Disabilities and have Potential Intelligence and Special Talents. In addition, the Indonesian government has also issued Government Regulation No. 13 of 2020 concerning Adequate Accommodation for Students with Disabilities as a technical derivative of Law no. 8 of 2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities. The government initiated the concept of inclusive education as an effort to equalize access to education that is tailored to each student's needs and abilities while reducing the high number of people who are not in school as a Sustainable Development Goal in 2030 (Yusria, 2013).

Starting from the idea of social justice, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 1989), and the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, 1994), the issue of inclusive education was born. Several European and American countries then developed policies and implemented inclusive education practices (Arcidiacono & Baucal, 2020; Nelis & Pedaste, 2020). As a result, many children with special needs in Europe and America study with their peers in public schools, and the number of special schools has decreased (Leijen et al., 2021). Inclusive education has also become a pedagogical reform concept and a project that is discussed intensively and empirically investigated worldwide, even when education systems are very different (Richardson & Powell, 2011). Until 2006, as many as 175 countries have stated that they were ready to bear the mandate of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations. General Assembly, 2007).

Many developing countries in Asia have implemented the concept of inclusive education by carrying out transformations through increasing knowledge for all teachers in inclusive education practices (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2015). Inclusive education has the principle of comprehensive education, unites regular students and students with special needs in the same learning environment, instills the value of mutual respect and appreciation, and recognizes that people's lives are very diverse

in conditions (Sunanto, 2015; Yuwono & Mirnawati, 2021). As part of an Asian country, Indonesia is said to have 35,802 inclusive schools with a total of 127,541 students (Aurelia, 2021). The problem of inclusive education in Indonesia broadly boils down to three main things, namely (1) there is no standard inclusive curriculum; (2) the limited number of Special Assistance Teachers (Guru Pendamping Khusus/GPK), and (3) there is no qualified provision for school institutions designated as inclusive schools (Aurelia, 2021; Nurani & Mukhlis, 2020).

The existence of educators with particular expertise in the process of fostering and learning with special needs has been referred to as an essential component and a weakness of inclusive education in Indonesia. Besides being called GPK, some parties often call it a shadow teacher. Based on Government Regulation Number 17 of 2010 Article 171 concerning the management of education, it is stated that GPK is a professional educator who guides, teaches, assesses, and evaluates students with disabilities in general and religious education units (Rahmaniar, 2016; Wardah, 2019).

In various countries, the successful implementation of inclusive education depends on the quality and quantity of GPK because GPK has a higher intensity with students with special needs (Hui, 2015). GPK's most important role is as a facilitator for students with special needs with teachers and parents (Lailiyah & Jihan, 2015). GPK has different tasks from class teachers, including carrying out administration for specific students, conducting assessments, compiling Individual Learning Programs (PPI) with class teachers, modifying the curriculum, intensely fostering students with special needs, and conducting counseling with families of students with special needs (Heikka et al., 2022; Wardah, 2019; Kemenristekdikti, 2022).

As for the types with special needs that can be accommodated, one of them is a slow learner. Slow learners can be defined as children with limited intelligence functions. Slow learners are also often classified as borderline intelligent in the DSM-IV, usually obtaining intelligence scores ranging from 69-89 on the WISC test (Fauman, 1994).

A slow learner is a learning obstacle characterized by difficulty concentrating, having lower memory, thinking abstractly, and socializing with the surrounding environment (Watson & Rangel, 1989). The slow learner is a condition in which students have intellectual functioning difficulties in understanding instructions and material as a result of cognitive development, which is below average at their age (Amdany et al., 2018). Slow learner students are not included in mental retardation (Mansyur, 2022), so it is recommended to take inclusive education rather than attending particular institutions (Lambros et al., 1998; Shaw, 2010). Slow learners do not have any unique physical characteristics, so it is often difficult for classroom teachers to identify them (McLeod, 1960; Stott, 1960).

In general, Shaw (2010) mentions several general characteristics of slow learners, including: (1) difficulties in understanding learning techniques with abstract concepts; (2) difficulties in changing or generalizing skills, knowledge, and learning strategies, adapting new concepts to new situations; (3) cognitive difficulties in organizing the new material, including the assimilation of new information over

previous information; (4) difficulty setting long-term goals and managing time; (5) needing more time to do assignments and develop academic skills with extra practice; and (6) need help building academic motivation and achievement motivation.

Causes of slow learners include heredity, congenital disabilities, and other external factors such as infection, trauma, and low learning motivation (Hartini et al., 2017; Lambros et al., 1998). In intellectual abilities and coordination of the five senses, slow learner students tend to be slower than their age's standard of developmental achievements. Therefore, slow learner students often close themselves to the social environment because they are considered different from the majority. The lousy attitude shown by slow learners requires full support from GPK, class teachers, school principals, parents, and stakeholders.

Class teachers cannot focus on just one student, so GPK assistance is needed in accompanying slow learners during the learning process at school. For the learning process to get maximum results, GPK requires a clear strategy for assisting slow learners. Learning strategies are the teacher's ways or tactics in conveying subject matter to students to achieve learning goals (Borah, 2013; Dermawan, 2013; Hartini et al., 2017).

In practice, learning strategies for students with special needs can be different from regular students. This is because students with learning disabilities require different approaches and needs in understanding learning material (Dash, 2018; Haug, 2017; Leijen et al., 2021; Lewis & Norwich, 2007). Learning strategies for students with special needs that are arranged as well as possible will maximize the learning process.

The learning strategy contains three essential stages, namely the initial stage (pre-instructional), teaching (instructional), as well as assessment and follow-up stages (Akpan & Beard, 2016). The pre-instructional stage begins the teacher's learning and teaching process, such as filling in attendance, simple discussions with students, and recalling material. The instructional stage, or the core stage, is the process of transferring knowledge prepared beforehand. Meanwhile, the stages of assessment and follow-up are the process of knowing the level of success of the previous stages to determine the appropriate follow-up for each student.

These three stages are an integrated series and cannot be separated from each other. Teachers and students are expected to be able to go through these three stages in their entirety in order to achieve maximum learning objectives. A teacher's pedagogical and professional skills are also expected to stand out in carrying out the three stages of the learning strategy (Widodo et al., 2020).

Another learning strategy that can be used for slow learner students is Student Center Learning (SCL) which has been proven to improve learning outcomes for junior high school students (Andiwatir et al., 2021). The SCL strategy provides an opportunity for each student to recognize and explore their potential and find the knowledge that can be adapted to the experiences of each student. Developed and developing countries have often used this learning strategy (Akpan & Beard, 2016).

The results of other studies show that the strategies used by teachers in educating slow learners can trigger changes in behavior and learning motivation (Misky, R., Witono, A. H., & Istiningsih, 2021). In addition to mature learning strategies, motivation, social support, and good communication in assisting slow learner students have also been shown to improve learning outcomes (Hamid et al., 2020; Machrus & Desmita, 2019).

In addition, Shaw (2010) also suggests that schools can work with teachers to help slow-learner students develop their academic resilience by using concrete instructions, generalization activities, advanced organizational strategies, increasing instructional efficiency, and motivational strategies.

Many learning strategies for slow learners in inclusive education implementing institutions have been carried out. The learning strategies in previous research varied and were carried out by class teachers and GPK. However, research has yet to be found regarding learning strategies that discuss the three main stages (pre-instructional, instructional, evaluation, and follow-up) conducted by GPK as the party closest to slow learners at school.

Malang City, known as the "City of Education," has one of the Elementary Schools that has applied the principles of inclusive education for more than ten years, namely Sumbersari 1 Public Elementary School, Malang City. Sumbersari 1 Public Elementary School in Malang City has a prevalence of students with special needs of approximately 5% of the total students in the 2021/2022 academic year. Twenty-two students with an age range of 6-12 years have learning difficulties, and 6 of them are slow learners. SDN Sumbersari 1 Malang City facilitates students with special needs with competent and adequate GPK. Institutions also contribute to maximizing the implementation of inclusive education by building a resource room as a unique learning facility for students with learning disabilities.

Based on this background, an in-depth study of the learning strategies carried out by GPK for slow-learner students is an essential matter for discussion. The research focuses on elementary school (SD) students who are studying in institutions implementing the concept of inclusive education. This study also discusses the supporting and inhibiting factors for GPK in implementing learning strategies for slow learner students.

## **2. METHOD**

Researchers used a qualitative approach to the type of case study research. The research focuses on the learning strategies of Special Assistance Teachers (GPK) for students with special needs and slow learners (Poerwandari, 1998). SDN Sumbersari 1 Malang was chosen as the research location for two main reasons; firstly because it is an official inclusion primary school in the data from the Department of Education and Culture of Malang City. The second reason is that it has been Malang's oldest inclusive school and pilot institution for more than ten years.

A total of 6 students with slow learning disabilities were selected to participate in the research and follow three stages of learning strategies together with GPK, namely the pre-instructional, instructional, and follow-up fund evaluation stages. Research data collection was carried out within three months. In the first and second months, there are three weekly meetings between participants and GPK. In the third month, GPK evaluates the strategy and provides an assessment to research participants.

Research data were processed using three stages, namely open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Triangulation is carried out concurrently with selective coding using the triangulation model of sources and techniques. The results data are presented based on the research objectives, namely the three stages of GPK learning strategies.

### 3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. The Pre-Instructional Stage of Learning for Slow Learner Students

Of the 22 students with special needs at Summersari 1 Public Elementary School, Malang City, there were six students who were confirmed to have slow learner barriers. In maximizing learning strategies, GPK provides additional learning schedules for slow learner students to study in the resource room for three days a week. The division of the day is based on the class schedule of each slow-learner student. Slow-learner students are spread over several classes, and there is a maximum of 1 student with special needs in 1 class.

**Table 1. Slow Learner students at Summersari 1 Public Elementary School, Malang City**

Class level	IQ score	Number of Student
Grade I	70	1
Grade III	72	1
Grade IV	72, 73, 75	3
Grade V	77	1

In starting the pre-instructional stage, GPK takes an approach in the form of introductions and building communication with slow learner students. Based on the results of interviews and observations, this was done to build interaction between GPK and slow learner students as well as to train communication skills. This is because slow learner students have lower social skills than their peers, given their limited ability to understand instructions and perform mutual communication (Shaw, 2010). This is why GPK has to carry out more intense initial communication with slow learner students than other students.

In carrying out the pre-instructional stage, GPK starts learning activities by getting slow learner students to tell stories in front of regular students about the experiences they want to tell. GPK also provides positive affirmations and appreciation for each slow learner who dares to appear in front of the class. This is intended to train courage and self-confidence (Coyne et al., 2010). In addition, discussions and stories before learning train other students to respect their peers.

Before entering the instructional stage, GPK has prepared a particular Daily Learning Plan (RPH) for slow learner students, modified according to certain conditions. The learning material planned for slow learner students is not much different from regular students; it is just that the planned learning outcomes are slightly modified. GPK also links learning materials to everyday life and the closest things to students to maximize stimulus for slow learner students so that the thinking process does not require much time. This aligns with previous studies that state that slow learners need more linkages between material and real-life experiences (Snow, 2010; Coyne et al., 2010; Sari et al., 2023). Special RPH is prepared and discussed with class teachers to achieve the same learning objectives.

The pre-instructional stages carried out by the GPK align with the theory of inclusive learning management, where the GPK prepares RPH according to the abilities and needs of students and implements the approach as a first step before starting learning for slow learner students (Natalia, 2019). The pre-instructional stage should also include identifying student learning difficulties so that the learning methods and media to be implemented are right on target so that the delivery of material runs optimally.

### **3.2. Learning Instructional Stage for Slow Learner Students**

Learning activities for slow learner students are carried out in 2 places: the resource room for three days a week and the classroom every day. Learning in the GPK shared resource room is felt to be more effective and efficient because it is more intense than in the classroom. The majority of slow learner students feel more focused when studying in the resource room because there are fewer distractions. The scheduling of learning in the resource room is adjusted to the student schedule in the classroom that has been agreed upon between the class teacher and the GPK.

In the implementation of learning, GPK uses the drill method to make the learning material more meaningful. In addition, repetition of the drill method can trigger stronger memory in slow-learner students. The learning media prepared by GPK mainly use visual learning media in the form of pictures and videos. Audio learning media is minimal because slow learner students prefer to visualize learning material rather than just remembering sounds that are difficult to imagine. Practice in learning is also essential, considering that the main principle for slow learners is meaningful learning. Students are given direct experience to make it easier to understand the material they want to teach (Coyne et al., 2010; Shaw, 2010).

This is not in line with the learning principles for students with special needs, where methods and media are expected to be more varied to attract students' interest (Widodo et al., 2020; Melindawati et al., 2021). This is because learning in inclusive education is expected to accommodate the needs and abilities of students, where each individual has different strengths and weaknesses (Shaw, 2010; Bubpha et al., 2012).

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### 3.3. Evaluation and Follow-Up Stages for Slow Learner Students

The learning evaluation stage for slow learner students differs significantly from regular students. The learning evaluation given by GPK is in the form of problem-solving in which each item is simplified than what has been prepared for regular students. Simplifying the question criteria will make it easier for slow learner students to understand and work on. The questions given also contain more illustrations in the form of pictures, so that slow learner students can easily read long questions because the majority of slow learner students' interest in reading and writing is lower than regular students.

In making practice questions and exams, GPK collaborates with class teachers. GPK also affirms slow learner students to work on questions carefully and adequately to foster a sense of responsibility for each student. The minimum standard criteria for assessment for slow learner students are also set lower. Based on GPK information, there are three main components in assessing students with special needs: the original achievement value, emotion, and independence. GPK takes additional values from the emotional and independence components to support the original achievement scores so that the final grades of slow learner students are okay in influencing the average student grades.

GPK also provides remedial methods for slow learner students as a follow-up strategy to provide more understanding for students to keep trying and learning. The remedial method is usually carried out one week after the exam. This method also applies to regular students. GPK will take the best grades for students after remedial to increase the scores that will be recorded in each student's progress report. From the results of the report, GPK can determine and make improvements related to learning strategies for slow learner students at a later time.

GPK is also required to repeat learning material that slows learners to find it challenging and simplifies the vocabulary in each explanation to make it easy to understand. This step is taken to evaluate the learning methods implemented, find the favorite and most challenging material, and give appreciation for the best achievements of slow learner students. In general, these steps can increase the learning motivation of slow-learner students, considering that they need special instructions and appreciation (Shaw, 2010; Coyne et al., 2010).

### 3.4. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of Learning Strategies

Based on the research results, the main supporting factor for the successful implementation of the GPK learning strategy for slow learner students at SDN Sumber Sari 1 Malang City is the existence of adequate resource room facilities. The resource room is an intensive learning place for slow learners and other special needs students because there are fewer distractions during learning than in the classroom. In addition, the learning method used by GPK in the form of drills and visual learning media is another supporting factor. This is because the lack of slow learner students is most visible regarding intellectual, memorizing ability, and reasoning, so the media is suitable for overcoming these deficiencies.



Meanwhile, the main inhibiting factor is the psychological characteristics of slow learner students, especially self-confidence, learning motivation, and achievement motivation. Slow learner students seem reluctant to answer questions or express opinions if asked first by the GPK. Therefore, GPK makes every effort to build continuous interaction with slow learner students. In addition, the formation of small groups with peers of regular students has yet to be carried out by GPK. Peers are said by many researchers to help slow learner students understand the material and increase self-confidence (Carnine et al., 2005; Coyne et al., 2010; Shaw, 2010)

The next inhibiting factor, reasoning ability, which still needs to be at a higher level for abstract learning, makes it difficult for GPK to teach certain learning materials. Weaknesses of slow learner students in subjects related to the memorization process also make GPK use more drill methods in the instructional stages of learning strategies so that repeated material can stick more. Cognitive and intellectual development factors require more time, effort, and patience for GPK and slow-learner students.

The GPK ratio, which still needs to be following the needs of students with special needs, is also another inhibiting factor in implementing instructional learning strategies. GPK often finds it difficult because they have to share their focus in assisting many slow learner students. At the same time, GPK also had to make administrative reports which took work.

The last inhibiting factor is the student's guardian. Some parents of slow learner students are considered uncooperative, so learning does not go beyond the sustainable principle. The approaches and materials provided by the GPK only continue when the slow learner is at home: Busyness and lack of understanding regarding the unique needs of slow learner students. Parents should accompany students studying at home so that slow learners can better understand the material studied while at school.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

There are three critical stages of the learning strategy carried out by GPK for slow learner students in inclusive elementary schools: pre-instructional, instructional, and evaluation and follow-up. At the pre-instructional stage, GPK approached slow learner students through discussions related to students' daily lives before entering the learning material. GPK also arranges daily study plans, modified from RPH, for regular students with different learning outcomes. At the instructional stage, GPK teaches in the resource room 3 times a week. GPK uses the drill method and more visual learning media to provide a maximum stimulus for slow learner students based on an analysis of the student's deficiencies. GPK also interacts a lot to train slow learner students' communication skills. As for the evaluation and follow-up stages, GPK held remedial for slow learner students who still needed to meet the minimum grade standards. Practice questions and exams are arranged more simply than for regular students. The results of slow learner student progress reports, become a reference for follow-up in subsequent learning. Suggestions for future researchers are expected to be able to find and analyze other learning strategies

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that can minimize inhibiting factors in learning and teaching activities for slow learners in inclusive elementary schools and other educational levels.

Slow learner students learn almost as quickly and thoroughly as other general students. However, because they cannot understand abstracts and draw conclusions well, it takes them longer to thoroughly learn, master, and apply broad concepts. They need to learn more concrete facts than other students of average intelligence to understand concepts fully. By increasing instructional efficiency, teachers can close the academic skills gap between slow learners and their peers of average intelligence.

There are three critical stages of the learning strategy carried out by GPK for slow learner students in inclusive elementary schools: pre-instructional, instructional, and evaluation and follow-up. At the pre-instructional stage, GPK approached slow learner students through discussions related to students' daily lives before entering the learning material. GPK also arranges RPH, modified from RPH, for regular students with different learning outcomes. At the instructional stage, GPK teaches in the resource room 3 times a week. GPK uses the drill method and more visual learning media to provide a maximum stimulus for slow learner students based on an analysis of the student's deficiencies. One of the critical variables in teaching is speed. However, there is a common misconception that slow learners need to be taught at a slower pace than other students. At the same time, slow learner students need more practice opportunities. A paced classroom is a well-organized classroom that uses clear, concrete instructions. This type of environment allows slow learners to learn the concrete facts they need to know to overcome their limitations in generalization. GPK uses the drilling method to instruct slow learner students in improving their main weaknesses, namely abstract understanding, and generalization. GPK also interacts a lot to train slow learner students' communication skills.

As for the evaluation and follow-up stages, GPK held remedial for slow learner students who still needed to meet the minimum grade standards. Practice questions and exams are arranged more simply than for regular students. Apart from that, GPK also helps slow learner students to provide understanding regarding problem instructions and problem abstractions. The results of slow learner student progress reports become a reference for follow-up in subsequent learning.

This research is limited to one GPK strategy model in assisting slow learner students. Future researchers are expected to develop other strategies with various learning methods to help slow-learner students face obstacles in learning activities, especially in their difficulties in setting long-term goals, managing time, and developing achievement motivation.

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