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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVENESS IN THE BORDER REGION OF EAST NUSA TENGGARA FROM A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the limited responsiveness of local governments in implementing top-down policy mandates by focusing on inclusive education in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency, a cross-border region in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Situated at the intersection of governance structures and socio-cultural realities, the study explores how national policy intentions are translated, reinterpreted, or neglected within a peripheral local context. Although inclusive education has been formally mandated at the national level, its realization at the local level remains uneven and fragmented, revealing a complex interaction between political authority, institutional capacity, and cultural meaning. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with local government officials, educators, legislators, community leaders, and civil society actors. The analysis reveals that weak policy responsiveness is shaped by multiple interrelated dimensions. Politically, limited awareness and commitment among local elites constrain agenda setting and regulatory support. From a public management perspective, the absence of local legal instruments, insufficient dissemination of policy information, inadequate human and financial resources, and weak data infrastructures undermine implementation processes. At the level of implementers and stakeholders, misunderstandings of inclusive education persist, reinforcing administrative inertia and limiting practical engagement. Beyond institutional factors, the study highlights the significance of socio-cultural environments in shaping policy outcomes. Deeply embedded cultural perceptions and stigma toward children with special needs contribute to their social invisibility and discourage parental engagement with formal education. These findings suggest that policy implementation failures cannot be understood solely as technical or administrative shortcomings but must be interpreted within broader cultural frameworks that influence how

disability and inclusion are socially constructed. By foregrounding the interaction between governance and cultural context in a cross-border region, this study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on policy responsiveness, cultural marginality, and localized interpretations of national mandates. The findings offer insights for future comparative research on inclusive education and governance in both border and non-border regions of Indonesia and similar socio-cultural settings.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Education, Local Government Responsiveness, Socio-Cultural Context, Cross-Border Regions, Policy Implementation, Disability Stigma, Governance and Culture, Eastern Indonesia.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most critical issues in understanding governance in contemporary public administration is the responsiveness of local governments in actualising top-down policy pressures, particularly when policies intersect with diverse social and cultural contexts. Responsiveness has long been recognised as a key condition for ensuring the effective implementation of policies formulated at higher levels of government (Bolukbasi & Yıldırım, 2022; Steunenberg, 2019). In a top-down policy context, local government responsiveness refers to the extent to which local authorities are willing and able to enact centrally mandated policies while simultaneously interpreting and adapting them to the specific social, cultural, and institutional realities of their local populations (Davidovitz et al., 2021; Meng & Su, 2021). Examining responsiveness therefore becomes essential for understanding how national policy objectives are translated into local practices, especially in regions characterised by complex administrative structures, socio-economic disparities, and strong cultural particularities. In this study, the terms inclusive education, children with special needs, and children with disabilities are used consistently to refer to educational inclusion policies targeting learners with physical, intellectual, sensory, or developmental differences, in line with Indonesian inclusive education policy discourse.

Nevertheless, existing studies on top-down policy implementation have predominantly focused on administrative processes, strategic instruments, and institutional arrangements within relatively stable governance settings (Berchin et al., 2021; Homsy et al., 2019; Imperial, 2021; Kuhlmann & Heuberger, 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights into implementation dynamics, they tend to underemphasise the socio-cultural dimensions that shape how policies are understood, negotiated, and enacted at the local level. Consequently, limited attention has been given to contexts where local governments exhibit weak or selective responsiveness to central mandates, particularly in non-urban and cross-border regions. In such areas, policy implementation challenges are not only administrative but are also deeply intertwined with cultural norms, social perceptions, and local meaning-making processes that influence governance practices (Elliott et al., 2022; Wong, 2025).

This gap in the literature constrains the development of more comprehensive models of policy implementation that adequately account for diverse regional and cultural realities. Without incorporating socio-cultural perspectives, analyses of

policy responsiveness risk overlooking how local beliefs, values, and social relations shape institutional behaviour and policy outcomes. This limitation is especially evident in the study of inclusive education policies, where implementation is closely linked to societal attitudes toward disability, education, and social inclusion. Although several studies have examined inclusive education in Indonesia, most have concentrated on urban areas, higher education institutions, or national-level policy frameworks, with limited attention to local government responsiveness in peripheral regions (Hosshan et al., 2020; Riswari et al., 2022; Sari et al., 2022; Yasin et al., 2023).

Similarly, research by Mukhibat et al. (2024) and Oktadiana and Wardana (2019) has contributed to the understanding of inclusive education policy, yet these studies do not sufficiently explore how local governments in cross-border regions interpret and respond to centrally mandated inclusive education policies within their specific socio-cultural environments. As a result, there remains limited understanding of the factors that shape policy responsiveness in peripheral and border areas, particularly regarding the interaction between institutional capacity and local cultural contexts.

In the Indonesian context, this issue is particularly salient. Despite the adoption of a decentralised governance system, local governments have shown uneven responsiveness to top-down policy mandates. One prominent example is the national inclusive education policy, as stipulated in the Minister of National Education Regulation Number 70 of 2009, which requires public schools to accommodate children with special needs. In practice, the implementation of this policy varies significantly across regions. Local governments in eastern Indonesia, where many cross-border areas are located, have demonstrated lower levels of responsiveness compared to their counterparts in western regions such as Java and Sumatra, where stronger institutional capacity and resource availability support more consistent policy execution (Hutahaean & Pasaribu, 2022; Talitha et al., 2020; Ediyanto & Kawai, 2023).

Within this broader context, Timor Tengah Utara Regency in East Nusa Tenggara represents a particularly relevant case for examining local government responsiveness to inclusive education policy. Located in a border area adjacent to Timor-Leste, the region faces persistent challenges associated with its peripheral position, including limited infrastructure, administrative capacity constraints, and strong socio-cultural traditions that

shape public perceptions of disability and education (Atikawati *et al.*, 2024; Nalle, 2018). Preliminary evidence indicates that inclusive education has not been implemented across primary, middle, and high schools in Timor Tengah Utara Regency, leaving many children with special needs outside the formal education system (Darmawan, 2024). This condition reflects not only institutional and resource limitations but also the influence of socio-cultural meanings that affect how inclusive education is perceived and prioritised at the local level.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to investigate the factors underlying the limited responsiveness of local governments in implementing top-down inclusive education policies in cross-border regions of Eastern Indonesia. The study focuses on how political dynamics, public management capacity, implementers and stakeholders, and the broader socio-cultural environment interact to shape local government responsiveness (Baldwin-Edwards *et al.*, 2019; Pierre, 2022). By adopting a socio-cultural perspective, this research seeks to contribute to public administration scholarship by highlighting how cultural meanings and social perceptions are embedded in governance practices and policy implementation. In contrast to studies that emphasise policy success in urban or institutionally stable contexts, this research foregrounds the barriers to responsiveness in a resource-limited, culturally distinct border region.

Overall, the paper is structured as follows. Section I presents the research background, identifies the research gap, and outlines the research questions and objectives. Section II reviews relevant literature to establish the analytical framework. Section III explains the research methodology. Section IV discusses the findings in relation to existing academic debates. Section V concludes the study by summarising the key findings and outlining their implications for policy and future research.

2. METHODS

To clarify, this study applied a qualitative research approach using a qualitative case study

design to investigate the implementation of inclusive education policies within a specific socio-cultural and governance context. Drawing on Creswell and Báez (2020), the researcher plays an essential role in facilitating analysis that is closely aligned with the research problem, with interpretation grounded in empirical data to generate meaningful understanding without manipulating the social setting under study. This approach allows the research process to capture how policy responsiveness is constructed and understood by local actors within their everyday institutional and cultural environments.

Moreover, the research was conducted in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency, which was selected as the primary case due to its location in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Indonesia, a cross-border region, and the local government's noted lack of responsiveness in executing inclusive education mandates issued by the central government. The case study approach enabled an in-depth examination of how local government actors interpret and respond to inclusive education policies within the specific socio-cultural conditions of a peripheral border area. In addition, purposive sampling was employed to collect qualitative data through in-depth interviews with 23 informants who were directly involved in or knowledgeable about inclusive education policy implementation. These informants included political figures, bureaucratic staff, representatives of non-governmental organizations, community members, and academic experts. Hence, the researcher conducted the interviews, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, until information saturation was reached, with most of the interviews being recorded and transcribed (see Table 1). To enhance data credibility, interview findings were triangulated with relevant policy documents, national and regional regulations on inclusive education, and secondary data from official government reports. This triangulation process allowed the researcher to compare interview narratives with formal policy frameworks and institutional records, thereby strengthening analytical validity.

Table 1: Research Informants.

Category	Agency	Informants
Politic	Regional Head	1 informant
	Regional People's Representative Assembly	2 informants
Bureaucracy	Department of Education and Culture	2 informants
	Department of Social Services	2 informants
	Central District Statistics Agency	2 informants
	School Teachers	3 informants
	Sub-District Head	2 informants
Stakeholder	Public Figure	2 informants
	Non-Governmental Organization	2 informants

	Parents of children with special needs or disabilities	3 informants
	Academics	2 informants
	Total	23 informants

Data credibility was strengthened by incorporating perspectives from diverse stakeholder groups, allowing for the comparison of interpretations across institutional and social positions. This strategy supported the identification of convergent and divergent meanings related to inclusive education and local government responsiveness.

For data analysis, content analysis was applied through a structured process of coding, categorization, and interpretation using NVivo 12 software. The analytical process proceeded in three stages, beginning with initial coding to identify recurring patterns and issues emerging from the interview data, followed by the organization of these codes into thematic categories, and culminating in the interpretation of themes within broader theoretical and socio-cultural dimensions. Rather than treating coding as a purely technical procedure, this process was guided by an interpretive orientation aimed at understanding how local actors construct meanings around policy mandates, institutional responsibilities, and inclusive education practices. Through this analytical process, the study developed a conceptual understanding of local government responsiveness to top-down policy mandates within a culturally specific border context (Dodgson, 2017; Goodman & Cyr, 2024).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

This section presents the findings of the study by explaining the reasons behind the limited responsiveness of local government in enacting top-down policy mandates, with a specific focus on inclusive education for children with special needs in formal non-special schools in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency, a cross-border area in East Nusa Tenggara. In line with the interpretive and socio-cultural orientation of the study, the analysis identifies key factors shaping local government responsiveness as they are understood and experienced by local actors. These factors are derived from four interrelated dimensions, namely political dynamics, public management practices, implementers and stakeholders, and the broader external socio-cultural environment.

3.1.1. Political

From the political dimension, the findings reveal

a clear pattern of limited responsiveness among local political actors in implementing inclusive education in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency. This condition is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of inclusive education among both legislative and executive elites, particularly regarding its scope, significance, and relevance to local government responsibilities as mandated by the 2009 Ministerial Regulation.

Interviews with the Chairman of the Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency House of Representatives and the Chairman of Commission I indicate that inclusive education had never been part of formal policy discussions. Both actors assumed that responsibilities related to children with special needs were delegated to the East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Provincial Government through the provision of special schools (Interview on 25 July 2023). This assumption reflects a narrow interpretation of inclusive education and a limited engagement with the substance of national policy directives at the local political level.

Similarly, executive officials, including the Heads of the Social Service and the Education Service, stated that inclusive education was not included in their policy agenda, further reinforcing the perception that the issue fell outside their institutional jurisdiction (Interview on 24–26 July 2023). As a result, inclusive education was systematically excluded from local development planning, leading to the absence of dedicated programs, supporting infrastructure, and trained teachers for students with special needs.

Rather than indicating deliberate resistance, these findings point to a broader pattern of institutional silence shaped by limited awareness, weak policy discourse, and the absence of sustained political engagement with inclusive education. Within this context, the needs of children with special needs remain largely invisible in local educational priorities. This situation suggests that strengthening political awareness and policy engagement is a critical step in repositioning inclusive education as a legitimate and shared responsibility of local government.

3.1.2. Public Management

Second, the public management dimension reveals a key theme related to the institutional prioritization of non-inclusive education, which has significantly constrained the implementation of inclusive education policies in Timor Tengah Utara

(TTU) Regency. The findings indicate that local education management systems have concentrated their efforts on general educational priorities, including infrastructure development, curriculum implementation such as the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka program, increasing the number of teachers, and addressing the welfare of contract teachers, while the inclusion of children with special needs has remained outside the core management agenda. This condition is shaped by a prevailing perception that responsibility for special needs education rests solely with the East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Provincial Government through the management of special schools. As a result, inclusive education has little connection to district-level planning and budgeting processes.

This perception is reflected in statements from key education officials. The Head of the Education Service explained, “Our focus has been on improving School Operational Assistance fund distribution, teacher quality, and infrastructure. Inclusive education has not emerged as a significant issue yet” (Interview on 05 August 2023). Similarly, the Head of the Basic Education Development Division emphasized, “We work on what is urgent, such as school repairs and contract teacher salaries, but inclusive education has not been part of the main agenda” (Interview on 24 July 2023).

Compounding this situation is the absence of a clear legal framework at the regional level to support

inclusive education. Although national policy, including the Minister of National Education Regulation Number 70 of 2009, provides a general foundation, Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency lacks specific local regulations or policy instruments that translate national directives into operational plans. This legal gap leaves local bureaucrats without clear references for planning budgets, allocating staff, or designing services tailored to inclusive education needs. One official from the Basic Education Development Division stated, “There is no legal reference we can use to justify budget proposals for inclusive education. Without that, we cannot allocate resources specifically for children with special needs” (Interview on 24 July 2023).

The lack of regulatory clarity generates institutional inertia, limiting the ability of the education department to integrate inclusive practices into routine planning processes. In this context, regulatory frameworks are perceived as insufficiently actionable, leaving inclusive education positioned as a normative aspiration rather than an operational priority. Ambiguity in roles, guidelines, and accountability mechanisms contributes to fragmented implementation, inconsistent resource allocation, and a limited sense of urgency among decision-makers. As a result, inclusive education remains marginal within public management practices, despite its formal recognition at the national level.

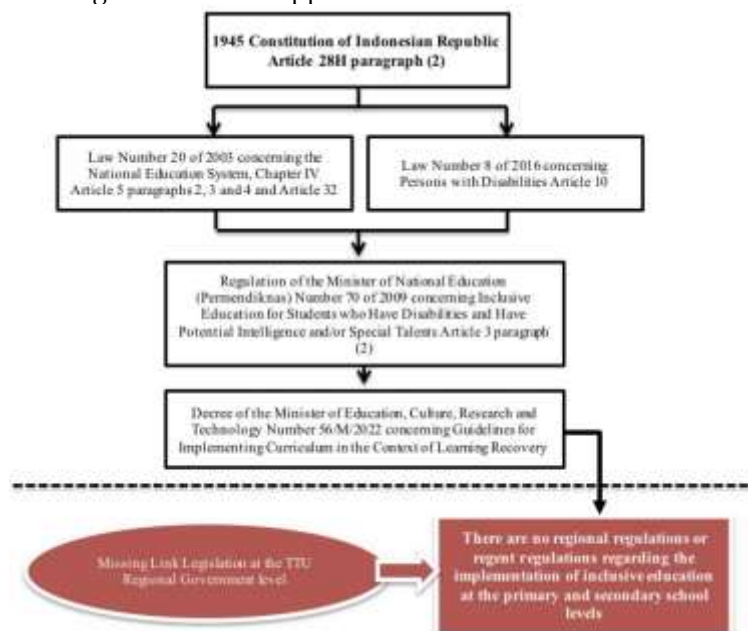


Figure 1: Structure Of Inclusive Education Legal Instruments.

These findings suggest that the education system in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency operates within a management culture that prioritizes visible

and immediate needs, often defined by infrastructure provision and general service delivery indicators. At the same time, deeper systemic concerns such as

inclusion and educational equity receive limited institutional attention. Inclusive education is not actively opposed but is passively excluded through misaligned policy priorities, constrained resource planning, and unclear legal authority. This condition reflects a broader administrative mindset shaped by rigid policy frameworks and limited exposure to inclusive education paradigms. Addressing this situation requires the issuance of clearer policy direction from higher levels of government, the development of localized legal instruments, capacity-building initiatives, and a reorientation of public management culture toward recognizing inclusive education as a shared and integral responsibility of local governance.

3.1.3. Implementer And Stakeholder

Admittedly, within the implementer and stakeholder dimension, the findings indicate that limited comprehension of inclusive education among key actors, particularly teachers and mid to high level bureaucrats, is compounded by the absence of systematic data collection on children with special needs. Although some educators expressed familiarity with the concept of inclusion, their understanding remains superficial and largely theoretical. One teacher acknowledged this condition by stating, "Yes, we have heard about inclusive education during trainings, but we are still unsure how to apply it in the classroom, especially when dealing with children who need more attention" (Naebenu Elementary School Teacher, interview on 24 July 2023).

This statement highlights a significant gap between policy discourse and classroom practice, especially in rural settings where resources and continuous professional training are limited. On the administrative side, a persistent misconception frames inclusive education as equivalent to placing children with special needs in Special Schools (SLB). The Head of the Primary Education Development Division explained, "Children with special needs are usually sent to SLB because that is where they belong. We have not really discussed placing them in public schools" (Interview on 24 July 2023). This view reflects a narrow interpretation of inclusive education and contradicts national regulations that promote educational access for all children within regular school environments.

Beyond conceptual misunderstandings, the study also identified a substantial administrative gap related to data systems. Effective implementation of inclusive education requires accurate and disaggregated data on children with special needs,

including information on type of disability, age, and educational background. However, such data is either unavailable or outdated across administrative levels in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency. An official from the Social Service noted, "We only collect data on children with disabilities when it is needed for social aid distribution, not for education planning. We do not organize it by age or school level" (Interview on 23 July 2023).

This siloed approach illustrates a broader systemic pattern in which children with special needs are primarily framed as recipients of social welfare rather than as students entitled to equitable educational opportunities. Similar limitations were observed at the district level. The Head of Naebenu District stated, "We do not collect separate data on children with special needs because there has never been a request for that. Population reports only focus on general data" (Interview on 23 July 2023). This response reflects a reactive data culture, where information is produced solely in response to directives from higher administrative levels.

Taken together, these findings point to more than gaps in knowledge and data availability. They reveal a condition of systemic invisibility of children with special needs within local educational governance structures. Teachers feel inadequately prepared, officials remain anchored in outdated assumptions, and administrative data systems fail to recognize or represent these children. This invisibility is not driven by overt resistance but by institutional routines and long-standing practices that have historically excluded children with special needs from policy conversations. Without a shift in the perspectives of frontline educators and bureaucrats, alongside the development of more responsive data infrastructures, inclusive education in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency is likely to remain an abstract policy ideal rather than a lived educational reality.

3.1.4. External Environment

The findings show that the implementation of inclusive education in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency is strongly shaped by conditions within the external socio-cultural environment. Deeply embedded beliefs and social norms create significant resistance that limits local government responsiveness, despite formal commitments to uphold the educational rights of children with special needs. One of the most dominant themes emerging from the data is the perception of disability as a source of shame or as a consequence of supernatural misfortune. As explained by the Chairman of Commission I of the Regional People's

Representative Assembly (DPRD) of Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency, many families continue to interpret disability through cultural and spiritual frameworks, often associating it with punishment or moral failure.

“In our communities, children with disabilities are sometimes believed to be the result of supernatural punishment or family shame. It is not easy to convince people otherwise. They do not see these children as capable of benefiting from education” (Interview on 24 July 2023).

These beliefs strongly influence how children with special needs are treated within their communities and frequently lead to their exclusion from formal education and social interaction. Social stigma surrounding disability contributes to the widespread invisibility of children with special needs in the public sphere. According to both former and current heads of the Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency Education Office, it is common for these children to be kept at home and away from public activities. One former head of the Education Service noted:

“We found that most of these children are still at home. They do not play with other children, and their parents do not bring them to community events. It is like they are invisible” (Interview on 25 July 2023).

This practice of isolation is reinforced by a prevailing belief that sending children with special needs to school will not significantly improve their lives. As a result, their development is constrained by limited access to education, minimal social interaction, and the absence of peer engagement. This invisibility further sustains public misunderstanding, creating a cycle in which lack of exposure reinforces stigma and legitimizes continued exclusion.

Cultural resistance also emerged during the research process itself. Researchers frequently encountered reluctance from families when attempting to engage with children with special needs. Many parents were unwilling to discuss their children, reflecting deep discomfort and internalized stigma. A village administrator explained:

“Parents were hesitant to talk to us. Some refused outright when they realized we were asking about their children with disabilities. There is a fear, a deep discomfort, in acknowledging the presence of special needs in the household” (Interview on 26 July 2023).

This reluctance illustrates broader social pressures that encourage families to conceal disability in order to avoid judgment or social rejection. Consequently, children with special needs remain marginalized not only in educational settings

but also within everyday community life and broader development initiatives.

Despite these challenges, local government officials recognize the central role of social attitudes in shaping the success of inclusive education. The Head of the Primary Education Development Division emphasized that the challenge extends beyond logistics and infrastructure to deeper ideological issues:

“It is not just about classrooms or teachers. We are trying to change how people think about disability. That is the real work, and it is the hardest part” (Interview on 24 July 2023).

Similarly, a member of the Regional People’s Representative Assembly (DPRD) acknowledged the government’s commitment while recognizing the limits of policy without community support:

“We are committed to ensuring the rights of these children, but without community support, our policies can only go so far” (Interview on 25 July 2023).

Taken together, these narratives depict children with special needs as living in conditions of social and cultural marginalization. Their exclusion is not merely a consequence of limited resources or inadequate infrastructure, but is deeply rooted in long-standing beliefs and social attitudes that frame disability as a problem rather than a shared social responsibility. Inclusive education in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency therefore emerges not only as a technical policy agenda but as a profoundly human and cultural challenge that requires shifts in perception, values, and collective consciousness. Without broader societal acceptance of children with special needs as equal and valued members of the community, efforts to implement inclusive education are likely to continue facing resistance, regardless of policy intent or resource allocation.

3.2. Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study by situating them within broader debates on local government responsiveness and inclusive education in cross-border contexts. The analysis demonstrates that responsiveness in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency is shaped by interconnected political, managerial, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. Drawing on the empirical results, the study identifies four main dimensions that influence local government responsiveness in implementing inclusive education policies, namely political dynamics, public management practices, implementers and stakeholders, and the external socio-cultural environment (see Table 2 and Figure

2).

Table 2: Critical Factor Behind the Implementation of Inclusive Education.

Critical factors behind the implementation of inclusive education			Informants		References	
			Count	%	Count	%
Politic	(1)	Lack of understanding and willingness of political officials regarding the issue of inclusive education	5	41,7	45	24,1
Public management	(1)	Focus on non-inclusive education policies	5	41,7	30	16
	(2)	There is no legal instrument/ inclusive education policy yet	7	58,3	67	35,8
	(3)	There has been no socialization regarding inclusive education	3	25	22	11,8
	(4)	There is no availability of resources, both human resources and budget resources	4	33,3	48	25,7
	(5)	Data support regarding inclusive education is not yet available from the Central Statistics Agency.	6	50	33	17,6
Implementors and stakeholders	(1)	Lack of understanding by the bureaucracy and stakeholders regarding inclusive education	2	16,7	38	20,3
Social environment	(1)	There is a negative understanding and stereotype of children with special needs.	8	66,7	56	29,9
Total			12	100	187	100

Note(s): ^aPercent frequency for the informants corresponds to the count of themes reported in the category/ subcategory over the total of 12 informants that participated in the research.
^bPercent frequency for the references corresponds to the count of references over the total of 187 references. References include the themes informed by the informants.

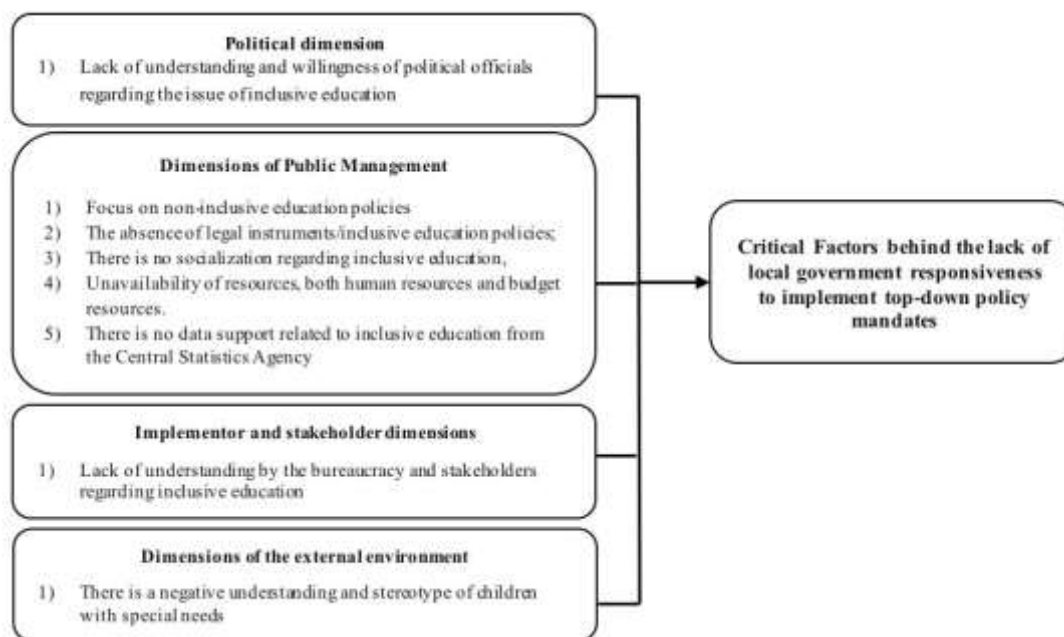


Figure 2: Critical Factor Behind the Implementation of Inclusive Education.

The findings indicate that the implementation of inclusive education in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency is constrained by the interaction of political, managerial, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers. From a political perspective, limited comprehension of inclusive education among high-ranking officials, particularly within the legislative body, emerges as a significant constraint. This knowledge gap weakens policy formulation and budget allocation, as decision-makers fail to recognize inclusive education as a long-term developmental necessity rather than a

marginal social issue (Ahmad & Islam, 2024; Grindle, 2017). This condition aligns with Grindle’s concept of policy adoption gaps, where political processes shape how policy ideas are cognitively understood and prioritized. When political actors lack substantive engagement with policy objectives, inclusive education remains peripheral within legislative agendas, resulting in weak regulatory frameworks and insufficient financial support at the regional level (Ejrnæs et al., 2024; Peckham et al., 2022).

From the perspective of public management, the study identifies several interrelated issues, including the prioritization of conventional education agendas, the absence of local legal instruments, limited socialization efforts, resource constraints, and inadequate data availability. These findings resonate with institutional theory, which emphasizes that organizations lacking formal structures, incentives, and regulatory clarity struggle to internalize new norms such as inclusivity (Singun, 2025). The absence of specific local regulations undermines bureaucratic accountability and limits administrative initiative, while resource scarcity reflects broader systemic unpreparedness to address the complex demands of inclusive education (Rollan, 2024). Moreover, the lack of reliable data, particularly from the Central Statistics Agency and local information systems, signals a fundamental weakness in planning and evidence-based decision-making.

In public administration, data-driven governance is central to effective policy design, resource allocation, and monitoring. Without accurate and disaggregated data, implementation processes become fragmented and reactive. In line with this, the study further reveals limited understanding of inclusive education among implementers, including bureaucrats, educators, and district-level officials. This finding corresponds with street-level bureaucracy theory, which highlights the role of frontline actors' discretion, capacity, and interpretation in shaping policy outcomes. Limited comprehension among implementers weakens bottom-up advocacy and inhibits alignment with national regulations on inclusive education, reinforcing policy inertia at the local level (Hollings, 2021; Panday & Chowdhury, 2020).

Finally, the external socio-cultural environment plays a critical role in shaping local government responsiveness. Social stigma and negative perceptions of children with special needs, often rooted in cultural beliefs and moral judgments, discourage community participation and parental support for inclusive education. These findings reflect social constructivist perspectives on disability, which emphasize how cultural narratives and shared meanings shape exclusionary practices. Such perceptions not only marginalize children with special needs but also limit the effectiveness of formal policy interventions by discouraging families from seeking educational access or institutional support. Taken together, the findings suggest that progress in inclusive education requires simultaneous attention to political commitment, institutional capacity, implementer competence, stakeholder engagement,

and broader societal attitudes toward disability.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of inclusive education policies in Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency reflects a complex and multidimensional challenge faced by local governments in responding to top-down policy mandates, particularly in the eastern region of Indonesia. As a cross-border area adjacent to Timor-Leste, Timor Tengah Utara presents a unique governance context where national policy objectives frequently encounter localized constraints shaped by structural, institutional, and socio-cultural conditions. The findings demonstrate that limited local government responsiveness is not attributable to a single factor but emerges from the interaction of political, managerial, institutional, and societal dimensions.

From a political perspective, the study highlights that limited awareness and commitment among local political leaders constitute a significant barrier to inclusive education implementation. This condition suggests that top-down mandates alone are insufficient to generate effective policy outcomes in the absence of meaningful political engagement at the local level. Without cognitive and normative alignment between national objectives and local political priorities, inclusive education remains peripheral within regional policy agendas.

In the sphere of public management, the findings reveal persistent challenges, including the absence of local legal frameworks and operational guidelines for inclusive education, limited dissemination of policy information among bureaucratic actors, and constraints in both human and financial resources. These challenges are compounded by the lack of reliable administrative data from institutions such as the Central Statistics Agency of East Nusa Tenggara Province and other local information sources, which undermines evidence-based planning and policy execution. Together, these conditions reflect a public management environment that has not fully internalized inclusive education as a core governance responsibility.

The study also identifies significant barriers among implementers and local stakeholders. Limited knowledge and understanding of inclusive education among bureaucrats, educators, and community actors impede practical implementation at the operational level. In the absence of systematic training, sustained awareness initiatives, and active stakeholder engagement, bureaucratic routines tend to reproduce existing practices that exclude children

with special needs from mainstream educational planning. As a result, inclusive education struggles to gain legitimacy as a local priority.

At the societal level, entrenched negative stereotypes and cultural perceptions of children with special needs continue to shape parental decisions and community responses to inclusive education. These social attitudes contribute to the reluctance of families to enroll their children in formal education and illustrate how cultural meanings surrounding disability remain largely unaddressed by formal policy instruments. This finding reinforces the argument that inclusive education is not solely a technical or administrative challenge but also a deeply socio-cultural issue that requires shifts in perception, values, and collective understanding.

Despite its focused scope, this study contributes

empirical insights into the relationship between national policy directives and local government responsiveness in under-researched cross-border regions. While acknowledging the methodological limitations associated with interview-based qualitative research, efforts were made to enhance reliability through data triangulation and the inclusion of diverse informant perspectives. The geographical focus on Timor Tengah Utara (TTU) Regency also limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the case provides a critical lens for understanding policy localization and the disjunction between national ambitions and local capacities. Future research is encouraged to examine inclusive education implementation in non-border and western regions of Indonesia to further test and refine the insights generated by this study.

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