

Implementing Character Building and Nationalism at Inclusive Early Childhood Education Institutions

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Abstract

This study aimed to describe the importance of instilling noble characters and nationalism to the children with special needs to grow their awareness and foster their characters and nationalism through the appreciation of diversity in their environment. Since many cases of bullying against children with special needs happened at school, the teaching of characters and nationalism was considered urgent to grow the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and patriotism. The idea could be implemented through simple activities, including by introducing the country, culture, and regional customs. This research was performed at four schools in Semarang City, Indonesia; in which the institutions admitted special needs children. It utilized a qualitative method through a case study approach. The findings revealed that the cultivation of character building and nationalism to the children with special needs was mainstreamed with the normal children. A couple of aspects were emphasized, especially regarding characters and nationalism according to their needs, such as responsibility and care to their peers. The cooperation among parents together with the institutions could develop support system in implementing the character building and nationalism values to the children with special needs. Teachers who are not used to work with the children with special needs might experience hindrance. So, they should enhance their openness, knowledge, and attitude to optimally adjust the education needs of those children.

Keywords:

Implementing character, nationalism, children with special needs.

1. Introduction

Education aims to grow and foster individuals' independence, responsibility, creativity, knowledge, health, and noble characters (Istiningsih, 2016). Based on the notion, education accommodates the process of character establishment. The development of characters and nationalism currently is the core of education from pre-school to Higher Education level. It basically emphasizes that schools should not only deal with the transfer of knowledge but also character development. Rokhman mentioned: Education institution is no longer a place to transfer knowledge only. It is also a place to foster attitude, behavior, characters, and leadership. It is justifiable to reflect some basic values and characters of Indonesia and cultivate them to all young generation in the form of national character building through education (Rokhman et al., 2014).

Character building and nationalism have become the concern of education process at Early Childhood Education (ECE) institutions. According to John *et al.* (2012), a number of countries exclude character education from their teaching priorities. Private schools are the active actors that perform the understanding as part of their institutional missions. Through the cultivation of characters and nationalism, Indonesian citizens are expected to fortify themselves from foreign influences and defend the country with its diversity. The number of children with special needs increases every year. The United Nations (UN) estimated at least 10 percent of school-age children had special needs (Harnowo, 2013). The increasing number of children with special needs each year requires ECE institutions to deal with the limited services for children with special needs. They expect a certain standardized curriculum for children with special needs in order to achieve the success of inclusive ECE program launched by the government by assisting teachers with proper programs.

Curriculum development has become part of the education system in Indonesia. At every education level, its organization should consider equality for formal and informal channels, for public institutions and special needs institutions, including ECE institutions. ECE institutions with the increasing numbers of students should also take care of their quality education services. Many children with special needs have not been optimally served during their learning process. They have just been accepted in certain institutions but have gained a maximum learning experience due to the lack of teachers' management in dealing with them. The inclusivity of ECE can facilitate them and protect them from harm, such as bullying.

Teacher should design certain design learning activities by instilling character building and nationalism to the children to foster their awareness in respecting the diversity in their environment. Even if there is no official curriculum that emphasizes on character building and nationalism for ECE, the following quote from Formen could justify the urgency of the issue: The emphasis on nationalism is not the sole concern of Indonesian contemporary education. It is the urgency of the ECE policy (Formen, 2011).

Teachers can utilize numerous methods to instill character building and nationalism to children in the form of certain activities. Variety of teaching and learning methods for character building can include a number of approaches. Althof & Berkowitz (2006) proposed that newer approaches could incorporate children's thoughts and emotions through expressing, learning, and appreciating. Parents should also put concern to children's moral reasoning by listening to their perspectives and encouraging them to promote character development (Mei-Ju, Chen-Hsin, & Pin-Chen, 2014). The development of characters and nationalism should be pursued since the early years, which is not an easy thing to deal with, especially for teachers that teach at inclusive ECE institutions. Remarkable differences of children with special needs should be the main problem to deal with during the learning activities. The current study formulated the following questions: (1) How is the implementation of character building and nationalism to the children with special needs at inclusive ECE institutions?; and (2) What are the factors that support and hinder the implementation of character building and nationalism to the children with special needs at inclusive ECE institutions in Semarang City?.

Character refers to the certain individual trait, which is judgeable based on their obedience to the social norms and values. Koesoema (2011: 79) explained that characters should be perceived as an individual anthropological structure with processual upper approach that emphasized the dimension of growth towards perfection. Character is an individual dialectical movement that covers dynamic consolidation process to produce a stable personality. In educational and the environmental context, character is also associated as psychosocial temperament. The objectives of character education should be placed within the framework of dynamic dialectical movement in the form of individual responses to the physical, psychological, social, and cultural stimuli to forge the potential of human beings. Character education prioritizes individual moral growth through formal institutions (Koesoema 2011: 135).

According to Schweinhart in Megawangi (2009: 75), character education at schools should start from kindergarten level to boost the positive impacts on the next development. Early childhood learning should be conducted gradually. The Guidelines of Character Education for ECE (2012: 5) highlights the values of character education that should be inculcated since early childhood period (0-6 years), including spiritual aspects, personal aspects, social aspects, and environmental aspects. Character education involves the cultivation of knowledge, affection, and noble manner as a habitual pattern.

Children with special needs are different compared to the normal children, especially in terms of physical, mental, and social behavior. They will certainly face various problems related to their specificities. Proper education, guidance, and training are required to resolve these problems. Therefore, teachers and parents should understand their needs and potentials to optimally develop their specialties (Abdullah, 2013).

Children with special needs are the individuals with different characteristics compared to the normal in general. They tend to show special physical, intellectual, and emotional characteristics, which are lower or higher than normal children of their age or are outside the normal standards prevailing in the community. Due to the problems, they experience difficulties in achieving success in terms of social, personal, and educational activities (Tentama, 2010). The definition of children with special needs has a broader meaning compared with the definition of extraordinary child. Children with special needs require specific and different education services since they

experience barriers in learning due to their lack of or excessive potentials. They need proper education services based on their special needs (Nuraeni, 2013).

To sum up, children with special needs are those children with certain physical, intellectual, or emotional limits that tend to have a different development pattern compared to normal children of their age. Children with special needs show weaknesses in terms of their specialties. They need proper media to assist them in maximizing their development. Children with special needs are categorized from moderate to mild since the inclusion of ECE institutions have limitations in educator resources to support their learning process.

Inclusive education brings together children with special needs with normal children to learn. Education programs must be modified to meet the needs of the children with special needs through individual teaching programs and support the teachings for normal children. The mainstreaming of a proper education model should not just put children with special needs in ordinary classes and let cope with the situation themselves.

Kauffman & Hallahan (2005) mentioned that inclusive education programs should solve the following key problems: (1) children with special needs, regardless of the types or levels of their severity, only attend classes in general education with no classification of special education classes; (2) children with special needs attend schools close to their residence or schools where they will participate if they do not have special needs; (3) public education or regular education that is responsible for children with special needs (Mangunsong, 2011).

Education system must promote interaction among students by upholding the values of diversity and encouraging compassion and care through the spirit of tolerance in everyday life. The international juridical basis for the implementation of inclusive education is set in the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) by a number of education ministers around the world. The declaration contains the reassessment of the UN Declaration on Human Rights in 1948 and various declarations that led to the 1993 UN Standard Regulation on equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities to obtain education, as an integral part of the existing education system. The Salamanca Declaration emphasizes that all children should learn together regardless their difficulties or differences.

The implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia is set forth in the Education and Culture Ministerial Decree No. 70 of 2009. Article 1 of the decree mentions that inclusive education as a system that provides opportunities for all students who have abnormalities and potentials of intelligence and/or special talents to attend education or learning activities in an educational environment together with other students in general. In other words, inclusion is the system that enables all children with cultural diversity to gather in the same class. These constitutional foundations affirm that there should be no differentiation of the treatment and opportunities to obtain education for all students, either those who have special needs or those with special talents to attend education. Pranoto (2014) mentioned that character and education should be developed earlier to equip the children with outstanding capabilities, knowledge, moral, and personalities. Character building and nationalism can provide them with strong knowledge and characters to play their roles in the society.

1.1 Objectives

The study aims to explore the importance of the implementation of character building and nationalism to the children, so they will have awareness in nourishing good characters and nationalism to appreciate the diversity in their environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Character Building and Nationalism

The purpose of the National Education of Indonesia is to foster character development. The Article I verse 1 and 3 of the Law of National Education System of 2003 mentions that education is the attempt to develop the learners' potentials intelligence, personalities, moral, knowledge, agility, creativity, independence, and responsibility. Character refers to one's behavior that defines a particular trait. Gray (2010) stated that character reflected the individual's comprehension, care, and attitude based on the ethics, values, and social norms.

Sudirman (2019) recognized character education as an important component to improve the quality of human resources, in which its teaching should be endeavored through cultural approaches and tolerance in line with the presence of plural society. Harun *et al.* (2020) stated that multicultural education aimed to grow the values and ways

of life that promote respect, sincerity, and cultural tolerance amid the plural society. Education should uphold the values of tolerance, ethnocultural and religious diversity, discrimination-free, resolution and mediation, human rights, democracy and pluralism, universal humanity, and other relevant aspects that promote peace and diversity. ECE is the foundation to establish the learners' characters and nationalism. The implementation of noble characters and nationalism should be pursued through customization and daily routines during their learning period.

2.2. Children with Special Needs

Susan & Rizzo (1979) explained that children with disabilities significantly are different in a number of dimensions and humanity functions. Humanity functions regard their incapability to do activities like physically normal people. People with physical, psychological, cognitive, and social hindrance consist of those with hearing impairment, sight impairment, speech delay, physical disability, mentally retarded, emotional disorder, and excessive intelligence (Mangunsong, 2014).

2.3. Inclusive Early Childhood Education

Education for children with disabilities is inseparable from common education. Children with disabilities are specifically classified based on medical mind map and social mind map (Yusuf *et al.*, 2018). Medical mind map believes that they should be separated from common education system to provide them with proper medical, psychosocial, and educational intervention. Meanwhile, social mind map mentions that children with disabilities should not be excluded from common education system.

Oswald (Vislie, 2003) recognized inclusivity as a process, in which schools attempted to accommodate every learner as an individual of an inclusive and supportive community. Inclusivity is a process in handling and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners, teenagers, and adults through an active participation that removes discrimination from the learning environment, culture, and communities (UNESCO, 2009).

The aforementioned definitions imply that inclusivity is the acceptance of diversity from every individual by eliminating discrimination in the education environment. Braunsteiner *et al.* defined inclusivity as the fundamental rights of all children to fully participate and contribute their potentials, as part of the education culture which is dedicated for the learners (Braunsteiner & Mariano, 2014). To sum up, an inclusive education is a process to provide education services for all children regarding their diversity, uniqueness, and various differences without discrimination.

According to *The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN)*, children with special needs have the following characteristics: "...restrictions in their capacities to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health, or learning disabilities, or any other conditions which result in a person learning differently from a person without that condition" (NCSE, 2014)

Based on the parameter, children with special needs require special education services to help them cope with their hindrance during their growth. Their specialties may consist of sensory, physical, cognitive, emotional, communication problems, and other issues. Special need education is currently part of all education stage, including ECE that serves as an early detection for children growth.

3. Methods

The study utilized a qualitative method. The first stage of the research was conducting a descriptive study to find out the learning process regarding the implementation of character building and nationalism at the inclusive ECE institutions to facilitate the children with special needs. A survey regarding the case was conducted in Semarang City. It was the first research to obtain the data related to the cultivation of character building and nationalism at a number of inclusive ECE institutions. In the previous study conducted in 2018, the researchers started by obtaining the information related to the application of character and nationalism values for special needs children at ECE institutions.

3.1 Participants

A total of five participants involved in this research. They consisted of teachers and principals at four inclusive ECE institutions in Semarang City.

Table 1. Participant’s Characteristics

Characteristics	n	%
Gender:		
Male	1	20
Female	4	80
Job Position:		
Headmaster	2	40
Teacher	2	40
Curriculum Developer	1	20
Teaching Period:		
< 5 years	-	-
5 - 9 years	1	20
10 - 19 years	3	60
20 - 29 years	1	20
30 - 39 years		

4. Data Collection

The study adopted observation, interview, and documentation during the data collection. The data were analyzed descriptively. The participants’ responses were recorded through an open-ended questionnaire and classified into a number of themes. Data analysis techniques were taken using qualitative data analysis models. Where this model is an activity of analyzing qualitative data in an interactive way and takes place continuously until it is complete until the data is saturated. Researchers collect data through observation and interviews, then researchers reduce data by selecting the data needed. Then, the researcher presents the data in narrative form. In data analysis, the thing to do is to draw conclusions. Valid conclusions are accompanied by tangible evidence. The steps of the analysis carried out in qualitative research according to Miles & Huberman (2014) can be seen in the following chart:

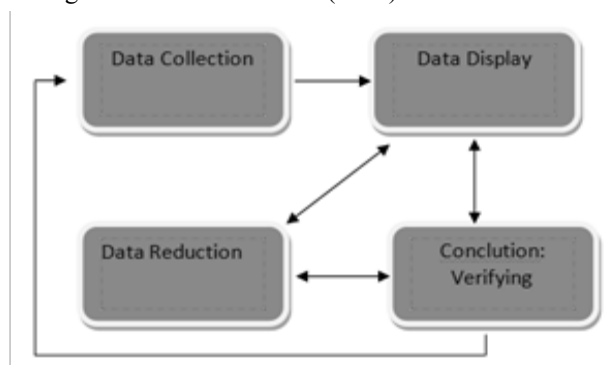


Figure 1. Chart of Qualitative Analysis of Miles and Huberman

5. Results and Discussion

The values of character building and nationalism are fostered through a habituation, such as activity programs at every educational institution, especially ECE institutions. The cultivation of character building and nationalism requires the teachers to have a certain capacity of understanding related to the character values and nationalism in designing all activity programs. Nationalism development is part of character formation. Therefore, implementing characters will also foster nationalism. “With regards to the nationalism, children understand their nationality, cultures, and customs that become their national characteristics and should be in their souls.” (An interview with Muis). “Nationalism means being faithful to the country.” (An interview with Elly).

The efforts in developing the values of character building and nationalism through ECE institutions should adapt with the visions and missions of the institutions, so the cultivation of character values and nationalism can be well implemented during the learning process. Elly said, “The character education at Bintang Juara School is an example of a noble character that we uphold.”

Characters and nationalism should be intertwined through the teaching at ECE level. The values should be adjusted to the development needs of the children regarding the teachers' considerations. Elly added, "There are a lot of noble characters that we embrace and teach the children with, including manners, religious values regarding the existence of God and His creations, respect, and discipline. To strengthen their nationalism, we teach them with the values of diversity, it is like telling them that we have different homes, different tribes, and different traditional clothings. Muis answered, "A lot of values of character and entrepreneurial education we teach the children. We teach them how they should behave, develop their potentials and knowledge in daily cultural life; how they should act to the elderlies, teachers, friends; and how they should socialize with each other."

Sorooshian (2016) recognized cultural diversity as the existence of different ethnicities, races, languages, and culture that would potentially bring a positive contribution to the children. The values of character building and nationalism which were fostered during the activity programs taught the children a number of examples on how they should behave to their friends, elderlies, and their surrounding environment. The school society give a tremendous support in implementing the values of character and nationalism to the children. Regarding the implementation of characters in the school environment, Hani suggested:

"We've got a guideline of characters that we can use to direct the children on what they should do on Mondays for instance. There is a service officer with them. They should report their attendance on the routine ceremony. It contains ten national anthems, the Youth Pledge, Pancasila, and the symbol of Pancasila. We introduced the guideline in 2016."

The implementation of characters and nationalism to the children can start with the smallest of things, such as being responsible for what they do and plan for their next activities. Children with special needs are guided by certain partners during the implementation of the character building and nationalism. Cubuku (2012) explained that additional activities related to social and cultural circumstances can improve the quality of character education pertaining to interpersonal communication, such as respect, equality, care, trust, and honesty. The implementation of the character building and nationalism utilized certain methods or strategies. Teachers should focus in providing services for the children with special needs. They should make certain arrangements to facilitate all children by considering a number of development aspects regarding the values of characters and nationalism.

Informant 1: "Some children are still comfortable to engage with their friends. Yet, we only provide one teacher. So, the teacher should figure out a strong strategy to resolve it." Informant 3: "If the children with special needs show no huge difference, it implies that we may regard them in the same way. The equity of the activity is in accordance with the guidelines from our Ministry. The equal activity, for instance is the attendance to the routine ceremony or expressing greetings. We teach them. Yet, our Ministry provides more specific guidance through some special wording."

Nevertheless, there were a number of institutions that did not implement special programs for children with special needs due to a set of obstacles. Such condition required them to prepare special planning to adapt with the children's development level.

Informant 2: "There is a lesson plan for children with special needs. We are now in a class group, children with special needs can go along with their friends. However, in terms of lesson plan, we set them in the lower level of development." Lara said, "They have individual programs for children with special needs, which is integrated with therapy." The combination of characters and nationalism establish a sense of tolerance for the children at the inclusive classes. They can respect and share support to each other.

Informant 5: We've got another child to help, but at first, there's a kid here who doesn't have a way of believing in himself, always down, and then we plant that we all love you, your dear friends, it's every day, and a few new months of lyrics until now they can believe in themselves.

Character education provides benefits from various aspects of real life to encourage someone become a good and responsible citizen (Almerico, 2014). Support from peers and teachers is a form of a positive reinforcement for normal and special needs children. Confidence will also make them feel secured and appreciated in a positive learning environment. In this case, parents can potentially appear either as a support system or the reason of demotivation. The values of character building and nationalism should be endeavoured by parents, teachers, and

through psychological therapy. Therapy helps children to focus on what they want to do and can control their negative attitude. It can also encourage them to nourish responsibility and discipline. Informant 3 said, "Parents rarely admit the lack of their children. It makes us confused. Kaisar is a huge challenge for us. We predicted that he got a psychologist, yet his parents refused to tell."

Parents and teachers have important roles in putting characters and nationalism. Schooling programs will be effective, as long as parents positively support their children. The relationship between children, parents, and teachers creates a connection between school and home. So, teachers can develop cultural awareness that children bring into the classroom to support their learning activities (Allen and Steed, 2016). Accepting the children's conditions can be a key factor in setting forth the consistent implementation of character building and nationalism.

Regarding the previous study about character building and nationalism of children with special needs, a substantial theory had been produced: The implementation of noble characters and nationalism should consider that children with special needs have their rights get equal education as the normal children, including for their learning activities.

The findings revealed that the children education institutions in Semarang City are legally formal, even if they have not been recognized inclusive. However, they have admitted children with special needs and provided them with learning activities together with the normal children. Regarding the cultivation of character building and nationalism, each institution has rendered a number of services based on a cultural approach, in addition to a special program related to nationalism. Gunawan (2017) affirmed that an early reinforcement of children's characters would positively contribute to their future and the future of their Nations. To achieve the target, proper curricula and schooling programs should not only prioritize cognitive aspects but also affection and psychomotor aspects, as the foundations of character education. Patriotism will also encourage them to respect and protect their national identity from the invasion of foreign cultures. They should be supported with activities that promote pluralism to grow their patriotism, such as through national anthems, traditional dances, and local cultures (Somitca and Stan, 2019). A support system from their peers will also protect them from intimidation. Cooperation among teachers, parents, and peers can foster their tolerance, friendship, empathy, in addition to prevent violence, as an attempt to create more secured and inclusive schools for children with special needs.

6. Conclusion

ECE institutions in Semarang City admit the children from diverse backgrounds, including the children with special needs. The implementation of character building and nationalism to the children with special needs should be endeavored through the inclusive ECE institutions. Characters and nationalism reflect the unity that they have to foster since their early age. Children with special needs have equal rights of education as the children with the adjustment of learning activities based on their needs. The implementation of character building and nationalism to the children with special needs is more than just a responsibility for themselves. Parents' support will facilitate the teachers to consistently proceed the proper activity programs for the children during at school and home.

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Biography

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